Riding into Myth: Manifest Destiny, Nietzschean Ethics and the Creation of a New Western Frontier Mythology in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

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Abstract

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* is a provocative evocation of the American West that has attracted a wide range of critical responses. This study has three foci: the novel as epic myth, McCarthy's critique of Manifest destiny, and the influence of Nietzschean philosophy on the judge and McCarthy's portrayal of the human condition. These concerns conduce to an alternative reading of the conclusion of the novel.

Blood Meridian is a unique textual enterprise as it both conforms to and subverts mythic conventions associated with both Classical epic and the American West. Recognition of the resonances between *Blood Meridian* and these mythologies helps the reader to engage with McCarthy's ambitious creation of a powerful literary allegory in the tradition of Twain and Faulkner.

Having situated McCarthy's enterprise within these co-ordinates, the study then moves on to examine the novel's stunning critique of Manifest Destiny, in the context of the implications that such thinking has had on American foreign policy over the past two centuries, and that continue to inspire American involvement in military conflicts well into the twenty-first century.

The final area of focus is the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy on the character of the judge and the *weltanschauung* that the novel presents. McCarthy's ultimate objective is to demonstrate that humankind's most basic condition is an inherently violent one. The more critically accepted reading of the novel is challenged by postulating the kid's triumph over the judge as not only in keeping with the literary tradition of Melville and others but also a logical outcome of the novel's allegory of American military involvement in Vietnam.

The study concludes that whilst McCarthy has gone on to receive critical acclaim and public praise for works published after *Blood Meridian,* this work remains both his artistic masterpiece and his most far-reaching engagement with issues of eschatological and political importance. It is argued that, given the contemporary escalation in geo-political tensions, *Blood Meridian* may well continue to provide insight into the nature of American domestic and foreign policy for decades to come.

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Introduction

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* is now regarded as one of the greatest novels to emerge from the United States in the twentieth century. Universal recognition of its merit has not, however, been matched by unanimity or even general agreement as to its meaning. It has been read, for instance, as an unconventional Bildungsroman with an obscure but identifiable ethical core (Bloom 3), as an amoral exercise in writerly virtuosity (Hungerford 89), as a sustained critique of American Exceptionalism (Cant 32), as an exposition of the Gnostic vision of a flawed Creation (Daugherty 158), or as an extreme form of revisionism in which human history becomes indistinguishable from natural history (Philips 435). The reading that seems most in keeping with my own reading of the novel comes from Maria O'Connell, who describes it as depicting "an attempt to educate a kid about his role as a 'civilized' American man, [featuring] a mentor who fully justifies his 'mindless violence' and natural sense of superiority." (173). From among the many unresolved issues arising from the critical reception of the novel, I have selected three for close attention: *Blood Meridian* as epic myth, McCarthy's critique of Manifest Destiny, and the Nietzschean ideas that inform his representation of character, in particular that of the judge.

It must be remembered that the Western, as a genre, only became popular long after what might accurately be termed "the West" had changed irrevocably; by the time Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his "Frontier Thesis" in 1893 he was able to write: "the frontier has gone and with its going has closed the first period of American history" (9). The spread of commercial farming, urbanisation and more effective law enforcement resulted in the quite rapid disappearance of the "the Wild West." This is partly why so much nostalgia attaches to the genre: the West is gone and in its place is a panoply of narrative formulae and stock images all supported by a national mythology for which the phrase "Manifest Destiny" is the most convenient shorthand. Alan Bourassa, in writing about *The Crossing*, argues that a tension between authenticity and verisimilitude is created by what he terms "potential" and "virtual" uses of the Western genre. He notes that McCarthy "does not realize the possibilities of popular culture, but rather makes popular elements undergo a kind of ramifying problematic mutation, a transformation that must be characterised as 'virtual'" (434).

I would argue that this occurs in *Blood Meridian* to an even greater degree than in any of the Border Trilogy novels. No reader of the novel can fail to be persuaded by McCarthy's vivid evocation of the lawless South West of the United States in the 1840s. The characters and settings appear as convincingly, even overwhelmingly, "real." But McCarthy's "realism" is far from conventional. Although the basic plot and events in the novel are based upon a memoir by a member of the scalp-hunting Glanton gang, Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession*, McCarthy's use of rhetoric and figurative language imbues the bare facts of the narrative with a larger-than-life, mythical dimension. This is particularly the case in the descriptions of scenery, which one critic characterises as "hyper-realist" (Moos 24). Another way in which McCarthy memorably departs from the conventions of classic or critical realism is in his eschewal of interiority. The reader is intentionally denied access to the characters' thoughts, feelings and motives. The result is a grittily naturalistic but curiously opaque, impenetrable narrative surface.

There is a danger, however, in seeing this rich and complex work as simply "realist," because it has an allegorical dimension as powerful as that of any of its predecessors whose influence it displays: Melville's *Moby-Dick,* Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* In this study I shall argue that another, seemingly unlikely, influence on *Blood Meridian* is Michael Herr's account of the Vietnam War, *Dispatches*. According to Lucas Carpenter:

> Much of the force and texture of Herr's narrative derives from his realization that this was a war permeated by American popular culture and perceived by soldiers and correspondents suffering from a framework of consciousness almost indelibly stamped with various impressions, with mental and emotional constructs, shaped by long-term and repeated exposure to media versions of reality. (37)

The nineteenth-century American West has for over a century had a comparable life – through the conventions of the "Western" – in the media and popular consciousness, to the extent that it is arguably by now purely a creature of popular representations. The Wild West and the Vietnam War are collocated in Vince Brewton's argument that *Blood Meridian* may be seen as an allegory for American involvement in Vietnam. Brewton provides valuable insight into McCarthy's treatment of violence and the novel's critique of Manifest Destiny.

Blood Meridian shows just how Manifest Destiny could be used as a justification (or rationalization) for what are now regarded as crimes against humanity in the "taming" of the West. Critics like John Sepich and Sara Spurgeon maintain that the novel cannot be viewed

as simply about America in the 1840s, nor even as a comment on the Cold War, the context of the novel's composition. It should rather be read as an attempt to make plain the evils of *all* imperialism, American or otherwise. Jonathan Imber Shaw disagrees, yet concedes that while the novel's "amoral enactment of violence effects an intervention into Cold War culture, it is impossible to assert that the author intended such a reading" (220). McCarthy's novel cannot help but reflect the kind of foreign policy that was not only being accepted but *demanded* in the United States, both during the 1840s and the 1980s. Stephen Silliman writes about the use of "Indian Country" as a label for any dangerous or hostile territory, pointing out that "[t]he public first became aware of the 'Indian Country' military metaphor during the Vietnam War" (239).

Michael Herr confirms this by pointing out the use of similar kinds of Western terminology in Vietnam, including an invitation by a captain to "go play cowboys and Indians" (58). Although the use of this phrase is not officially sanctioned, as Silliman's research proves, the practice continues to this day. These historical parallels, I would argue, carry more weight than has previously been ascribed to them in critical appreciations of the novel.

The slaughter perpetrated by the Glanton gang is not confined to supposed enemies of the United States or of the Republic of Mexico (i.e. "Indians"). Historically speaking, the people who came to suffer most were mainly "indigenous peasant farmers whose interests had not been served by either the war [of 1847] or the subsequent forays of the scalphunters whose knives soon flayed many pates they had been hired to protect" (Shaw 211). One scalp cannot be distinguished from another, and hence those who are supposed to be brought into the safe fold of American democracy are murdered by the emissaries sent to protect them from the "heathens" – and all for commercial gain.

The wretched ironies of Manifest Destiny thus provide a perspective from which to view McCarthy's overtly Gnostic philosophical perspective in the novel. The overriding sense of humanity being abandoned and left to its own devices by an unfeeling or indifferent God is highlighted not only by acts of violence but acts of dispossession too. None of this would have been possible, however, without the justificatory impulse that the notion of Manifest Destiny evoked then and continues to evoke now.

McCarthy's realism – his relentless depiction of the unprincipled violence perpetrated by "the Americans" in the novel – is thus an important facet of his critique of Manifest Destiny. His critique also draws on Nietzsche's idea of the *Übermensch* or Overman, particularly with reference to the character of the judge. McCarthy uses Holden to express

provocative views on a vast range of topics, from philosophy to warfare, art and religion – and including a sustained critique of the ethics that Nietzsche dismissed as "slave morality."

I would argue, however, that the judge's presence is a foil, and that it is to how the kid *reacts to* the judge that one should pay greater attention. The kid appears to embody the implied authorial view of humanity at large. At several points in the narrative, the kid is seen to have a reaction that is at odds with not only that of the judge but the rest of the gang, too, for example his willingness to help remove an arrow from David Brown's leg (McCarthy 124). It is my contention that the entire novel may be summed up as the judge's failed attempt to dupe the kid into accepting and following his world view. According to Steven Frye,

> the kid unwillingly becomes the judge's protégé. [...] Each character becomes an interlocutor in a deadly verbal battle, one in which ethics and their absence frame the interchange, and even death stands pale against the potential decimation of human souls. (69-70)

McCarthy's intention is not to set the judge up as a model leader, his extraordinary charisma notwithstanding. The true function of the judge in the novel is to serve as a haunting reminder that "progress" is not without a cost. Bernd Magnus argues that the traditional, ideal-based understanding of *Übermenschlichkeit* misinterprets Nietzsche. He suggests that the idea of an Übermensch is "a representation only of a particular attitude towards life, that it articulates a certain form of life" (634). This, I would argue, is particularly important in order to distinguish between the judge's actions and what he symbolizes.

Frye argues that "the judge's assertion of pure self-determination and Nietzschean will to power is relatively unambiguous" (84), and that the Übermensch is one who "defines his own morality and asserts his indomitable will upon the world" (83). If one accepts an alternative reading of the end of the novel, one that rejects the idea of the judge as insuperable, then the judge's attempts to manipulate the kid ultimately succeed. By inducing the kid to kill him, the judge has finally confirmed that the kid is no different from the rest of the gang.

The first of my concerns is, however, to suggest why *Blood Meridian* should be considered as mythopoeic, and how it relies in this on not only the existing mythology of the American West but far more ancient myths as well.

Chapter 1: McCarthy and the American Age of Heroes: *Blood Meridian* as Myth

"Tell me Muse, the story of that resourceful man, who was driven to wander far and wide after he had sacked the holy citadel of Troy."

-The Odyssey(I.1-3).

"You call a star a star, and say it is just a ball of matter moving on a mathematical course. But that is merely how you see it. By so naming things and describing them you are only inventing your own terms about them. And just as speech is invention about objects and ideas, so myth is invention about truth."

-J.R.R. Tolkien

In this chapter, I will be examining the role that mythology, particularly Greek mythology, played in influencing McCarthy's creation of "the West" in *Blood Meridian*. I will also be discussing some elements of the mythology of the American West.[1] It is my intention to demonstrate that examining the links between mythology and *Blood Meridian* will enable a better understanding of how and why McCarthy's version of the American West is so captivating. Maria O' Connell writes that "Blood Meridian cemented McCarthy's reputation as a myth-builder, since it is archetypal in its construction" (172).

What exactly is meant by the word "myth"? What role does it play within society, and how does this role compare with that of other discourses? On the etymology of the word, David Sacks writes: "The Greek word *muthos* simply means 'a tale.' In modern use, that word has come to mean a popular tale, elaborated by generations of storytelling, that may contain a kernel of historical fact and that is significant for understanding a people's mass mentality" (151). Northrop Frye's definition of myth largely follows the same pattern of thought. Myth, according to Frye, is

> a story in which some of the chief characters are gods or other beings larger in power than humanity. Very seldom is it located in history: its action takes place in a world above or prior to ordinary time, *in illo tempore,* in Mircea Eliade's phrase. Hence, like the folk tale, it is an abstract story-pattern. The characters can do what they like, which means what the storyteller likes: there is no need to be plausible or logical in

[1] The words "west" and western" are capitalized when they denote a specific historical application of the cardinal point.

> motivation. The things that happen in myths are things that only happen in stories; they are in a self-contained literary world. Hence myth would naturally have the same kind of appeal for the fiction writer that folk tales have. It presents him with a ready-made framework, hoary with antiquity, and allows him to devote all his energies to elaborating its design. (132)

M. H. Abrams argues further that the term "myth" does not simply denote "a tale." He warns:

> A reader needs to be alert to the bewildering variety of applications of the term "myth" in contemporary criticism [...] its uses range all the way from signifying any widely held fallacy ("the myth of progress," "the American success myth") to denoting the solidly and detailed imagined realm within which a fictional narrative is enacted ("Faulkner's myth of Yoknapatawpha County," "the mythical world of *Moby-Dick*"). (232)

(It is telling that Abrams cites two of McCarthy's biggest influences, Faulkner and Melville, in his illustration of the wide application of the term "myth.") On the one hand, then, a myth is a story that has undergone many alterations or versions before a single version becomes the most generally accepted (or standardized, if you prefer). It may, as Sacks points out, contain some element of historical fact, but what is fact and what is the creative contribution of generations of storytellers eventually becomes almost impossible to discern, particularly in cases such as that of ancient Greece, where recorded history is incomplete or unreliable at best. Finally, and crucially for my argument, Sacks describes myth as an important guide to understanding the mass mentality of a people. Understanding the chief myth of the United States, the myth that was born out of the American West, is therefore key to understanding the prevailing attitudes of the period in which it was created, how representations of the period are to be constructed or subverted, and what their significance is for understanding our own times.

Whilst some might disagree with the idea that mythology from the distant past may be of significant use to scholars attempting to understand their own times, I would argue that mythology has a timeless power that few other forms of art may boast. Like studying the cave paintings of our long dead ancestors, myths invoke a sense of community and continuity, a shared bond of existence with a time that may only be reached through the exercise of the imagination. The very fact that we have the capacity to identify and empathize with figures of significance from long ago is reason enough to do so. Much mythology is also concerned with our relationship to the natural world, clearly a focus of McCarthy's in *Blood Meridian*:

his depiction of the border landscape as hostile and unforgiving mirrors his depiction of human interaction, which ranges from mutual indifference to extreme violence. I shall return to this, but first I wish to address the question of the roots and origin of the myth of the American West.

I. The Mythology of the West: Origins and Uses

The mythic allure of the west is not an altogether new phenomenon in human history. Loren Baritz, discussing the perennial human tendency to romanticize lands to the west, insists that the tendency "seems virtually constant in the human story: a yearning for a land of laughter, of peace, and of life eternal" (618). She points out the role that Homer and Hesiod played in establishing this myth. Of Homer she writes

> Homer's description of a happy land, because it was vague as to location, created a problem for those who came later. On his authority it could be assumed that the Elysian Plain existed. Where was it? After capturing the ever-changing Proteus, Menelaus asked this herdsman of Neptune to foretell his destiny. Proteus replied that Menelaus was not ordained to die, that the gods would take him "to the Elysian plain and the world's end, where is Rhadamanthus of the fair hair, where life is easiest for men". And then came a picture of Elysium: "No snow is there, nor yet great storm, nor any rain; but always ocean sendeth forth the breeze of the shrill West to blow cool on men [...]". As a son of Zeus, and not because of particular human qualities, Menelaus could be translated to Elysium. Could mere mortals go, could they get there themselves, and just where was this world's end on which the west wind blew? Resting on this fair plain, one may recall the song of the west as sung by those who dreamed and sailed after the fortunate Menelaus, those who followed in his wake, in the salt spray of a distant sea. (619)

These few lines from *The Odyssey* may well have inspired the desire to explore and conquer new land to the west. For as Baritz points out,

> Another important strand [aside from the location of Paradise] revolved around the concept of the destiny of nations, the notion that the secular sword must be taken by a nation to the west. From Troy to Greece, Rome, and England, "westward the course of empire takes its way". Sometimes eternity, happiness, and millennial themes were woven into one conception of the west; sometimes the imperial theme stood alone. At other times different arrangements and combinations were needed to serve the

> purposes of those who utilized some idea of the west, a west that might be either a place, a direction, an idea, or all three at once. (618–19)

Baritz also uses Hesiod to further her argument about "the idea of the west":

> Hesiod helped somewhat. When Zeus created the fourth race of men, "a god-like race of hero-men," those who fought at Thebes and Troy, the god gave them "a living and an abode apart from men, and made them dwell at the ends of the earth. And they lived untouched by sorrow in the islands of the blessed along the shore of deep swirling Ocean …." The land was still god-given and was still at the end of the earth, but it was now an island, on the shore of the ocean, probably to the west, where "the Hesperian nymphs … guard the beautiful golden apples." This was an ocean, however, that made men quake; "when they looked out upon the empty and spectral Atlantic," the otherworld seemed beyond man's reach. (619)

Thus it appears that the idea of reaching some kind of "promised land" in the west, a sanctuary that promised shelter and prosperity away from the evils of the world, is one that has existed since the very beginning of recorded Western civilization. What "the west" has meant for many different nations and peoples thus has its beginning in the work of two of the earliest known poets. But like other important facets of their works, the interpretation of this ideal has become flexible. The flexibility of what we mean when we say "the west" becomes particularly important when one considers just how the mythology of the Western genre has been used and abused. Don Bahr argues

> To me a myth is a believed but unprovable story of past individual actors who were caught up in the origin of things. For a story to be a myth, one must believe in the existence and the deeds of those individuals as a pure act of faith, or (which may be the same thing) because one has been told of them and asked to believe them by people whom one trusts. Otherwise the story is not myth, it is fiction; or if the story can be proved, or it is subject to debate over truth, it is history. […] I don't accept that there are any white myths about the American frontier. There are only fictions (including lies) and histories. "Frontier myth" is a misnomer. If by myth we mean unprovable, and by that we mean spared from the debate of factual accuracy, there are no frontier myths. (47)

Whilst it is fair to describe Bahr's perspective as decidedly pro-Native American and thus 'anti-"White" American', it does raise an interesting point about how best to go about

classifying and deconstructing the mythology of the West in *Blood Meridian.* Clearly, the myth of the American West is not universally accepted or admired.

II. *Blood Meridian* as Epic

Gareth Cornwell has argued that McCarthy's novel has been rightly classified as "epic" both due to "the magnitude of the text, especially the scope and sweep of its action" and "the influence of conventions deriving from classical epic" (531). Whilst Cornwell has chosen to use *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid* as the basis for his argument, I wish to add to his line of argumentation by interrogating *Blood Meridian*'s reliance upon other epics, most notably Homer's *The Odyssey* and to a lesser extent Hesiod's *Theogony*. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate the role that a consideration of mythology plays in the power and resonance of McCarthy's work. For it is only through an understanding of this that one able to appreciate his criticism of Manifest Destiny and notions of "progress."

Perhaps we should first interrogate the relationship between myth and history – a complex relationship, the nature of which scholars from different disciplines frequently disagree upon. The two are, in essence, just forms of narrative that often share similar concerns, such as the preservation of a record of significant events for posterity. Myth, like history, also serves as a tool to educate those who interpret it. As Sacks suggests,

> [s]ome myths have a moral, such as the need to be hospitable to strangers. Other myths are "aetiological"; that is, they attempt to explain local geographical features, religious rites, or other phenomena not fully understood by other means. Related to this type is the propagandistic "charter myth" which seeks to sanctify a custom or institution. (151)

The lessons that mythology provides us with are thus as timeless as the stories themselves: as long as they are seen to be relevant or necessary the mythology surrounding them will endure. This is important in explaining why, after nearly two centuries, during which time the world has so changed as to be virtually unrecognizable from what it was, the mythology of the American West is still so relevant to understanding the mass mentality of American society. (I would argue that this is part of the reason that McCarthy chose to move away from his Appalachian origins and begin writing novels set in the West.) "The West," as it is popularly understood, stands for an idealism that continues to influence both popular thought and public policy. If the reader is aware of the importance of this Western myth, not only to

late nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, but also to the America of the future, then McCarthy's novel emerges as one of the most significant works of fiction to be produced in the postmodern period.

Allowing the connection between myth and history, one is obliged to consider how best to separate them for the sake of clarity of exposition. Michael Finley has written extensively on the relationship among art, history and mythology. Discussing Aristotle's dismissal of history as a discipline, Finley argues

> History as a discipline has always been a great favourite with the coiners of *bons mots* – it is false, it is dangerous, it is bunk. But it has never been dismissed more peremptorily, in a serious way, than in the famous dictum in the ninth chapter of Aristotle's Poetics: "Poetry is more philosophical and more weighty than history, for poetry speaks rather of the universal, history of the particular. By the universal I mean that such or such a kind of man will say or do such or such things from probability or necessity; that is the aim of poetry, adding proper names to the characters. By the particular I mean what Alcibiades did, or what he suffered." Historians can comfortably ignore the jibes and doubts of Walpole or Henry Ford, or even Goethe, but Aristotle is another matter; Aristotle after all, founded a number of sciences and made all the others his own too, in one fashion or another – except history and economics. He did not jibe at history; he rejected it. (281)

This rejection, a significant moment in the development of Western philosophy, has arguably shaped all subsequent discussion of what we mean when we talk about "truth," in either a literary or a historical sense. Given that *Blood Meridian* is a literary work based upon a historical record that is often biased and unreliable, Finley's argument regarding the relationship among myth, history and memory will help us to understand how McCarthy's rendering of Western mythology manages to captivate his readership to the extent that it does. Finley's account of the relationship of the Greeks to their own mythology suggests that it was similar to the relationship of Americans to their national mythology: that beyond a desire to remember and engage with the past, mythology served as a means to foster and sustain patriotism in a deeply divided nation, one that was often involved in conflicts and required a strong symbolism in order to preserve a sense of unity.

Finley explains why, to the ancient Greeks, history and poetry were seen as polar opposites. He makes it clear that when Aristotle created this dichotomy of disciplines he was of course referring to epic poetry, the means by which mythology was transmitted from one generation to the next in a culture that relied largely upon oral tradition. It was only some five

or six hundred years *after* the Trojan War, for example, that either of Homer's poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were recorded in writing (at least no earlier copies have ever been found or are known to exist). Thus it has been argued that the works attributed to Homer may not have been the creative rendering of historical events by one single author but may have in fact been the work of several men who over time added or subtracted events or passages to suit their own inclinations. Yet Greek poetry had evolved considerably by the time that Aristotle was writing, as Finley points out:

> Why poetry? The answer, of course, is that poetry by Aristotle and the others meant epic poetry, late lyric poetry such as Pindar's, and tragedy, which portrayed the great figures and the great events of the past. The issue was not whether or not, or to what extent, such poetry was historically reliable, in the sense in which we ask that kind of question of the ancient epics today, but the deeper question of universality, of truth about life in general. The issue, in short, was that between myth and history. (282–83)

The conflict between myth and history is not unfamiliar to critics of *Blood Meridian*. Through painstaking work critics like John Sepich have been able to trace historical sources and research that McCarthy seems to have used in order to write the novel. This is whence the novel presumably derives much of its unique sense of authority. But *Blood Meridian* must be seen as a prototype for what was to follow in the Border Trilogy. *Blood Meridian* was McCarthy's first *Western* novel: a thought experiment that marked a dramatic shift away from his earlier Appalachian novels, in terms of both setting and content. In order to successfully continue to write his other Western novels, McCarthy first had to acquaint himself fully with the history of the region he had now chosen to focus upon; he was obliged also to confront the mythology that surrounds the West, for one cannot truly understand one without understanding the other. The relationship between mythology and history in our modern world is not dissimilar to the role that mythology played in Greece long ago. Finley writes

> The atmosphere in which the Fathers of History set to work was saturated with myth. Without myth, indeed, they could never have begun their work. The past is an intractable, incomprehensible mass of uncounted and uncountable data. It can be rendered intelligible only if some selection is made, around some focus or foci. In all the endless debate that has been generated by Ranke's *wieeseingentlichgewesen* ("how things really were"), a first question is often neglected: what "things" merit or require consideration in order to establish how they "really were"? Long before anyone dreamed of history, myth gave an answer. That was its function, or rather one

> of its functions; to make the past intelligible and meaningful by selection, by focussing on a few bits of the past which thereby acquired permanence, relevance, universal significance. (283)

If one applies this same principle to *Blood Meridian* then McCarthy's objective becomes clear: through a rigorous process of selection from the range of possible "historical" representations, he has chosen his subject material in order to create a new kind of mythology. Such a recognition must of course be tempered by the acknowledgement that McCarthy (like many postmodern writers) is quite happy to use the conventions of the genre in which he is writing whilst subverting or altering them as he sees fit. Linda Hutcheon has written extensively on historiographic metafiction and its relationship to postmodernism. She argues:

> In the nineteenth century, at least before the rise of Ranke's "scientific history," literature and history were considered branches of the same tree of learning, a tree which sought to "interpret experience, for the purpose of guiding and elevating man" (Nye, 123). Then came the separation that resulted in the distinct disciplines of literary and historical studies today, despite the fact that the realist novel and Rankean historicism shared many similar beliefs about the possibility of writing factually about observable reality. However, it is this very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art, and recent critical readings of both history and fiction have focused more on what the two modes share than on how they differ. They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. (830)

If one applies this observation to *Blood Meridian*, it is easy to see how the novel may be termed an exercise in postmodernism: the deconstruction of genre-appropriate language and form, the interrogation and subversion of convention, the intertextual nature of the work and the absence of any universal consensus regarding its true intentions, are all indicative of a profoundly postmodernist orientation.

However, in terms of the Aristotelian distinction between history and poetry implicitly challenged in Hutcheon's observations, McCarthy is decisively more of a "poet" than a "historian" and his imaginative rendering of Western mythology in both *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy has all but redefined the Western genre. In *Blood Meridian*, he is clearly not attempting a revisionist history or even an anti-Western; and despite his

often harrowing insistence on graphic verisimilitude, he repeatedly flouts the conventions of literary realism. Rather, he is using the incomplete historical record at his disposal to offer an alternative Western mythology that has allegorical power. This mythology is openly scornful of the notion that westward expansion in the nineteenth century constituted the "Age of Heroes" for the United States.

Mythologies generally cohere around the exploits of a handful of important figures. The events that feature these figures may have an element of historical truth to them: there was a city on the Aegean that may well have been Troy, for example. But such facts do not alter the relationship that the ordinary person had to the mythology at the time. According to Finley,

> When Herodotus was in his prime, the distant past was very much alive in men's [sic] consciousness, more so than the recent centuries or generations: Oedipus and Agamemnon and Theseus were more real to fifth-century Athenians than any pre-fifth-century historical figure save Solon, and he was elevated to their ranks by being transformed into a mythical figure. Annually the mythical heroes re-appeared at the great religious festivals in tragedy and choral ode, and they recreated for their audiences the unbroken web of all life, stretching back over generations of men to the gods; for the heroes of the past, and even many heroes of the present, were divinely descended. All this was serious and true, literally true. (283)

Instead of the great religious festivals that were (along with the Olympic Games and hunting) the chief sources of entertainment for the Greeks, today we have the cinema, the TV series and the video game to transmit versions of mythology. The past, just as it was for the ancient Greeks, is very much alive in our consciousness. This is perhaps especially true of a post-Vietnam United States. In pointing out the difference between folk tales and myths, Northrop Frye argues:

> Myths, as compared with folk tales, are usually in a special category of seriousness: they are believed to have "really happened," or to have some exceptional significance in explaining certain features of life, such as ritual. Again, whereas folk tales simply interchange motifs and develop variants, myths show an odd tendency to stick together and build up bigger structures. We have creation myths, fall and flood myths, metamorphosis and dying-god myths, divine-marriage and hero-ancestry myths, etiological myths, apocalyptic myths [...]. And while myths themselves are seldom historical, they seem to provide a kind of containing form of tradition, one result of which is the obliterating of boundaries separating legend, historical reminiscence, and actual history that we find in Homer and the Old Testament. (132)

Whether or not the acknowledged "facts" of western expansion were *literally true* was irrelevant during the Cold War and remains irrelevant to this day. The value of their poetic truth was and is incalculable to those who seek to foster patriotism and maintain control over an unhappy, divided and increasingly politically active populace. It is important to qualify this argument by stating that in creating a new Western mythology McCarthy is critical of the attitude and not the historical perspective that informs the traditional myth. As suggested above, in terms of Aristotle's dichotomy, McCarthy is more of a poet than a historian. The historical facts that he chooses to weave into his tale of blood and destruction may give the novel a certain authority but the novel is not a historical document.

It should, therefore, not be classed as "revisionist" as some critics have chosen to argue; mythologies may alter or change as the needs of the people who use them change, but the basic import of the story does not. In other words, the simple fact that McCarthy has written *Blood Meridian* does not mean an end to games of "Cowboys and Indians" across the globe, or the plethora of "conventional" Western movies and books that have been released even since the novel's publication in 1985. The "odd tendency" of myths identified above by Frye is perhaps more evident in the case of the mythology of the American West than any other mythology that has preceded or that informs it: its appeal is global and the structure upon which it rests has been built up to the point that, even with the publication of works such as *Blood Meridian*, it is largely immune to significant alteration, let alone outright dismissal. The fact that the boundaries Frye mentions are just as blurred in McCarthy as they are in Homer or the Old Testament is further proof that McCarthy is relying upon a much older form than the novel to advance his critique; there is indeed a distinctly pleasurable irony in the fact that the title of the work is *Blood Meridian* and that it is a work that deals largely with boundaries, both geographical and behavioural. This blurring effect is of crucial importance because it allows McCarthy the freedom to be as selective as he chooses; there is only one *Blood Meridian*, and it is as self-contained as the world of *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*. It is furthermore unlikely that McCarthy's alternative mythology will be added to by other authors: his unique style has ensured a virtual monopoly of the genre for decades to come.

This ability of myths to endure through significant changes in human society may largely be explained by their concern with humanity's relationship to nature. The question of humankind's place within the world, our struggles to both explain and endure natural phenomena far more powerful than ourselves, and our exaggerated sense of our very limited power in the face of the challenges that nature presents, have seemingly always been at the

heart of the perennial human quest for meaning. The Aristotelian distinction between poetry and history, however, means that the truths that emerge from these concerns are poetic ones. As Northrop Frye explains,

> As a type of story, myth is a form of verbal art, and belongs to the world of art. Like art, and unlike science, myth deals, not with the world that man contemplates, but with the world that man creates. The total form of art, so to speak, is a world whose content is nature but whose form is human; hence when it "imitates" nature it assimilates nature to human forms. The world of art is human perspective, a world in which the sun continues to rise and set long after science has explained that its rising and setting are illusions. And myth, too, makes a systematic attempt to see nature in human shape: it does not simply roam at large in nature like the folk tale. (133)

It is interesting that Frye chooses the sun as his example to demonstrate his point, as McCarthy also uses the rising of the sun to good effect (in an oft-quoted passage) in describing Captain White's filibusters embarking on their journey across the border and into Mexico:

> 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. The shadows of the smallest stones lay like pencil lines across the sand and the shapes of men and their mounts advanced elongate before them like strands of the night from which they'd ridden, like tentacles to bind them to the darkness to come. They rode with their heads down, faceless under their hats, like an army asleep on the march. (47)

The apparent malevolence of this particular sunrise is important: not only will it bring the heat synonymous with life in the desert but it is clear evidence that the filibusters (and the novel's readers) have entered the mythic world of McCarthy. Note the words "the edge of creation": we have crossed some invisible line into the unknown, and what follows in the rest of the novel bears this out. Note also the use of simile to describe both the dawn light ("a deeper run of color like blood seeping up in sudden reaches") and the shadows of the men and their mounts ("like tentacles to bind them to the darkness to come"). McCarthy's use of simile is well documented by Cornwell, who points out: "The preponderance of the simile in *Blood Meridian* is not only palpable but also statistically demonstrable: the 338 pages of the novel include no less than 292 similes (and far fewer metaphors, a ratio surely at odds with

the norm in modern literary prose)" (536). Cornwell argues that the similes in the novel "are generally not as extended and elaborate as the set pieces characteristic of classical epic" (536), but nevertheless, "some of McCarthy's similes form part of or are embedded in elaborate rhetorical structures that do have the calculated extension found in the epic similes of Homer, Virgil and Milton" (536). Cornwell goes on to make an important point germane to my argument:

> because of the logico-linguistic separation of vehicle and tenor intrinsic to the figure, every act of comparing is arguably also an act of contrasting, a reminder to the reader both how *like* and *not like*, how *unlike*, the thing or reality is to that with which it is being compared. (537)

This unsettling effect of McCarthy's style, the ability to invite comparison only to dispel any notion of such comparison's accuracy, is part of what makes the prose of *Blood Meridian* so fascinating. The puzzling nature of the imagery forces the reader to engage both intimately and critically with the novel's prose and imagery, beyond the customary recourse to imagination that is required to form a picture in the mind. One struggles to gain a purchase on the likeness evoked because one is reeling from the linguistic effects of the vehicle and the scandal of its remoteness from the tenor it ostensibly evokes. This further reinforces the idea that this mythic world is a hostile one. The description of the sun as a "great red phallus" suggests a sense of powerlessness in the face of such a display. One is inclined to recall the motto in Dante's *Inferno*, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here" as a comparison, not just for *The Divine Comedy*'s significance as an allegory, but for the sentiment those chilling words invoke.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that mythology often contains figures that seem to blur the distinction between mortals and gods and that these figures often captivate our collective imaginations in unique (and possibly dangerous) ways. Frye goes on to explain the role of gods in mythology, which, if applied to *Blood Meridian*, raises interesting questions about the role of the judge and the structure of the novel:

> The obvious conception which brings together the human form and the natural content in myth is the god. It is not the connection of the stories of Phaeton and Endymion with the sun and the moon that makes them myths, for we could have folk tales of the same kind: it is rather their attachment to the body of stories told about Apollo and Artemis which gives them a canonical place in the growing system of tales that we call a mythology. And every developed mythology tends to complete itself, to outline

> an entire universe in which the "gods" represent the whole of nature in humanized form, and at the same time show in perspective man's origin, his destiny, the limits of his power, and the extension of his hopes and desires. A mythology may develop by accretion, as in Greece, or by rigorous codifying and the excluding of unwanted material, as in Israel; but the drive toward a verbal circumference of human experience is clear in both cultures. (133)

No less so in the mythology of the American West, as the section on the writing of Frederick Jackson Turner, below, will demonstrate.

III. Narrative Structure and Form in Mythology and Their Impact on *Blood Meridian*

For now, a few words on the structure of *Blood Meridian*: the concern of a mythology to place in perspective "man's origin, his destiny, the limits of his power, and the extension of his hopes and desires" is, I would argue, an acceptable summary of the role of the novel's protagonist, the kid (barring his final destiny, which is ambiguous at best). The point is that the novel's structure is informed and to an extent determined by mythic tradition and convention; despite suggesting an alternative mythology, McCarthy is still very aware of the conventions that dictate its form. Thus it is how he chooses to subvert these conventions that becomes important. McCarthy's novel manages to capture the darker, less well-publicized parts of a story that is known throughout the world in one form or another. The process of "rigorous codifying and excluding of unwanted material" has been the foundation of the Western genre since the very first dime novels were published. *Blood Meridian*, contrarily, exposes this process as fraudulent and bred out of a desire for "a verbal circumference of human experience" that was designed to instil patriotism and compliance with unpopular government policies.

Frye argues that mythology requires conceptual principles in order to function:

> The two great conceptual principles which myth uses in assimilating nature to human form are analogy and identity. Analogy establishes the parallels between human life and natural phenomena, and identity conceives of a "sun-god" or a "tree-god". Myth seizes on the fundamental element of design offered by nature – the cycle, as we have it daily in the sun and yearly in the seasons – and assimilates it to the human cycle of life, death, and (analogy again) rebirth. (133)

These events within the cycle should, theoretically at least, take on added significance within storytelling. Not so in *Blood Meridian*. No significance is attached to any of the three events. The birth of the kid and the sparse information we are given about his early development is only significant in explaining how he comes to be in the West at all. Death throughout the novel is treated as an event that inspires little emotion or fear; it simply occurs. Some die to satisfy "a taste for mindless violence" (3), others for profit or, in the case of animals both wild and domestic, so that others may live. Some fall victim to the challenge presented by the desert; others fall by the bullet or the sword, knife, club or axe of those avenging the slaughter of their people by foreign invaders. Some are simply victims of circumstance. Death, therefore, has a paradoxical presence in McCarthy's text: slaughter advances the plot but does not hold any additional meaning or significance, except in a few isolated cases such as Glanton and the kid or the judge (depending on how you interpret the ending of the novel).

In order for rebirth to occur, there must be some kind of moral regeneration and the novel dismisses all notions of this; the kid may undergo some process of moral maturation in eventually opposing the will of the judge, but whether he dies or kills the judge, all of this moral maturation is undone. If the element of analogy in McCarthy's mythmaking is not established in conventional terms, then one is enjoined to conclude that it is based upon parallels between the United States in the post-Vietnam era and westward expansion in nineteenth-century North America. The question of identity, therefore, becomes more complex as the kid, the judge and other characters do not belong to their self-contained universe, in the way in which other mythic figures do. The kid's anonymity is proof of this, in that it confers upon him a certain representability or universality. "The kid" becomes an umbrella term for all the dispossessed, poorly educated victims that American expansionist capitalism has ever produced and continues to produce.

McCarthy's use of analogy and identity is further complicated by the tension between the real world and the world of mythology. As Frye explains: "At the same time the discrepancy between the world man lives in and the world he would like to live in develops a dialectic in myth, which, as in the New Testament and Plato's *Phaedo*, separates reality into two contrasting states, a heaven and a hell" (133). The world of *Blood Meridian* seems far closer to a version of hell than a version of heaven; this is perhaps where, along with stylistic matters, comparisons between McCarthy and Milton find their basis. The imbalance within the text arising from the mounting descriptions of violence and depravity, seemingly so out of place in a conventional Western, alert us to the fact that McCarthy's vision is largely dystopian. The romantic landscape associated with the Western has been replaced by a blood-

drenched wasteland that defies all notions of reality. As John Cant argues: "In my view too many critics have misread *Blood Meridian,* regarding it as a realist text when it is nothing of the kind. I have argued throughout that McCarthy is a creator of myth. [...] In short it is an intellectual exercise, almost wholly metaphorical in character" (161–62). McCarthy's undermining of the dialectic described by Frye is absolute: there does not appear to be any capacity on the part of any of the characters to change their surroundings for the better; nor are they on any journey towards a "Promised Land." If anything, the further we journey into McCarthy's West, the more unforgiving and indifferent the setting becomes. This is an important subversion of the myth of the American West, one that scours it of all romance. And if Cant is correct in saying that the novel is "wholly metaphorical," then the implications that the novel raises about the future of the United States are weighty indeed.

The question of legacy in *Blood Meridian* is important and will be dealt with in some detail in a later chapter. For the present, it will suffice to point out that claiming descent from a line of mythic figures worthy of reverence is of great importance to the American people, especially when one considers the nature of the national mythology. The idea of being a divine descendent of a god or a hero from a bygone age was a far more personalised form of identification in ancient Greece than it is in modern America; in the United States the victories of pioneers and scalphunters alike were turned into cultural capital that all Americans could share in by virtue of their citizenship. Thus, the achievements of Lewis and Clarke, Buffalo Bill or Custer became a source of pride for an entire nation, not just those who could claim direct descent from or even remote affinity with these figures of historical importance.

Finley also points out that mythology and myth-making played other roles in ancient Greece aside from establishing a connection to the past:

> Greeks did not love epic and tragedy, however, solely because they needed to be reminded about the origins of their rites, important as that function was for the individual – and even more for the community, which was rooted in divine patronage and ancestry. Myth was their great teacher in all matters of the spirit. There they learned morality and conduct; the virtues of nobility and the golden mean or the menace of *hybris*; and they learned about race and culture and even politics. Were not both Solon and Pisistratus accused of falsifying the text of the *Iliad,* interpolating two lines in order to have Homeric authority for the seizure of Salamis from the Megarians? (284)

The belief that myth can act as a great spiritual teacher is one that has persisted for generations in human society across a variety of cultures, geographical locations and political contexts. In my next chapter, I deal extensively with how the mythology of the West has sustained the idea of Manifest Destiny well into the twenty-first century. For now, it is sufficient to state that mythology has significant power in the transmission of ideals that are important to nation building. Just how effective this transmission is depends largely on how well grounded the particular mythology is in terms of historical fact. As Finley argues,

> With this background [of the accusations against Solon and Pisistratus] it is not surprising that history should have been discussed and judged in antiquity, should have been measured, against poetry. Fundamentally, one kind of retelling of the past was being measured against another. For there must be no misunderstanding about one thing: everyone accepted the epic tradition as grounded in hard fact. Even Thucydides. He tells us that right off, as soon as he finishes introducing himself. The Peloponnesian War, he argues, is more worthy of narration than any which preceded [it], "for it was the greatest movement thus far among the Hellenes and among a portion of the barbarian world", greater, specifically, than even the Trojan War. (284)

Aristotle's separation of history and poetry was not purely an individual preference on his part; the Greeks understood that whilst they relied implicitly upon epic poetry for accounts of their past, it was in itself not a historical record of the kind we understand and use today. Finley argues:

> Yet, whatever else it may have been, the epic was not *history*. It was narrative, detailed and precise, with minute descriptions of fighting and sailing and feasting and burials and sacrifices, all very real and very vivid; it may even contain, buried away, some kernels of historical fact – but it was not history. Like all myth, it was timeless. Dates and a coherent dating scheme are essential to history as exact measurement is to physics. Myth also presented concrete facts, but these facts were completely detached: they were linked neither with what went before nor with what came after [...] it all happened "once upon a time", flowing out of nothing [...] and leading to nothing. Even within the narrative the account is fundamentally timeless, despite the many fixed numbers (of days or years). (285)

Much of this applies to *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's rich prose style creating, in the manner of epic, a "detailed and precise" narrative, "all very real and very vivid." Each implicit criticism that McCarthy levels at Manifest Destiny (in both its past and present forms), at the idea of "progress" and the traits that we associate with it, depends for its effect entirely upon

his ability to make the narrative not only real-seeming but also engaging, captivating, inspiring. As Cornwell notes, "what appears to inform all the tributes to and attributions of narrative style in *Blood Meridian* is a sense of awe – a sense of rapture, a sense of being lifted out of and beyond the ordinary and familiar world of language" (534). It is this effect, this ability to remove the reader from the stable ground created by years of study, knowledge and experience, and immerse him or her completely in an unattainable and unreachable terrain, that allows distinguished critics like Harold Blood to say of *Blood Meridian:* "the book's magnificence – its language, landscape, persons, conceptions – at last transcends the violence and converts goriness into terrifying art, an art comparable to Melville's and Faulkner's" (1–2).

The issue of time is also important in relation to the epic form. To the ancient Greeks, as mentioned above, poetry that described events "long ago" did not require fixed dates, nor were these used in any precise way to calculate just how long their civilization had existed. There is also the question of what effect time had upon the characters themselves in the stories that are told. Heroes like Odysseus, for example, seemed to be beyond the ravages of time experienced by "ordinary" mortals: time has, by virtue of creative licence and willing suspension of disbelief, been subjected to alteration that may only be described as supernatural. Prophecy is another way in which this bending of time to suit the needs of the storyteller(s) would occur, and indeed it played a pivotal role not only in Greek tragedy but in religious matters as well. The interpretation of omens or often cryptic warnings was a common technique for teaching the folklore and wisdom so highly prized by the Greeks at the time. With all of this in mind (and given the frequent intervention of gods in human affairs), it is interesting to compare the timelessness of the judge with the kind of timelessness present in Greek epic. Finley, in writing about the conclusion of *The Odyssey*, states:

> Historical husbands and wives grow old, but the plain fact is neither Odysseus nor Penelope has changed one bit; they have neither developed nor deteriorated, nor does anyone else in the epic. Such men and women cannot be figures in history: they are too simple, too self-enclosed, too rigid and stable, too detached from their backgrounds. They are as timeless as the story itself. (286)

Thus the judge cannot exist outside the boundaries of the epic tale in which he is enclosed, unless it be symbolically. The kid is comparably unchanged by his experiences in the narrative, although in the final chapter the narrator refers to him as "the man." Even this

change does not alter the fact that these characters are best understood in their symbolic rather than literal presence in the narrative.

The Odyssey may have had some influence McCarthy, if only in allowing him to subvert the mythological conventions it proposes. At the conclusion of *The Odyssey*, further bloodshed is avoided, peace is proclaimed and Odysseus has finally gained what he has journeyed for so long to achieve: the return of his throne and time with his family. Unlike Odysseus, the kid can never return home. We are told at the very beginning of the novel that the kid has "become divested of his origins" (5), and he will seemingly continue to wander the West even after his triumph over the judge. This view further strengthens the idea that it is the kid who is the figure spoken of in the epilogue.

IV. Hesiod and the Age of Heroes

Whilst the Homerian epics provide ample material for comparison and may act as a useful guide in attempting to decode the epic form of *Blood Meridian*, I would argue that it is the work of Hesiod which provides even greater insight. Certainly many of the concerns that Hesiod himself describes have a ring of familiarity about them when one reads them with McCarthy's epic in mind. As Finley argues,

> [t]he opening of *Works and Days* contains one of the most famous of all primitivistic tales, the account of man's decline from a golden age of the past in several stages, each symbolized by another metal: after gold comes silver, then bronze or copper and finally iron (the present age). But Hesiod's vision is not one of progressive deterioration, of evolution in reverse. Each race of men (Hesiod speaks of races, *genê*, not of ages) does not evolve into the next; it is destroyed and replaced by a new creation. Each race exists in neither time nor in place. The races of man are as timeless as the Trojan War: for the future as well as the past. (286)

This idea of a "golden age" is in part what has led to *Blood Meridian* being described as Miltonic: the longing that Milton's Satan feels for the kingdom that has been forever denied to him and his kin is no different from the nostalgia that accompanies imaginative renderings of the West, be they revisionist or not. The absence of an overt system of authority to govern one's actions, the vastness of wide open spaces free of the poisonous symptoms of commerce, and the resilience required to survive without a host of modern conveniences, all combine in the long tradition of romanticising early frontier life. The idea that somehow life

was "better," "freer" and "more beautiful" than it is now is impossible to prove or disprove through measurement, and is thus just as timeless as the stories that created it. Simultaneously, the myth gives people something to strive towards: the values and virtues that were held in high esteem during the "age of gold" have ultimately become the values and virtues of the nation, long after pioneers are no longer required. Pioneers in other fields such as technological advancement and business have adopted these values to suit their own agendas and build their own "golden age." McCarthy's purpose is not to dispute such thinking: it is to reveal that such thinking is not without cost, either to those who are scalped or the ones doing the scalping.

The idea of the "age of heroes" was deeply embedded in Greek consciousness and, as mentioned above, many Greeks claimed direct descent from these heroes in order to gain and maintain status in society. On Hesiod's description of the "age of heroes," Finley writes:

> There was also a fifth age or race [...] the age of heroes injected between the bronze and the iron [...]. This is patchwork, unavoidable because the myths of the heroes were too deeply fixed in the mind, too indispensable to be passed by. Patchwork is the rule in myth, and it gives no trouble. Only the historically-minded see the rough stitches and the faulty joints and are bothered by them, as is abundantly evident in Herodotus. But Hesiod was not historically-minded. Here on the one hand were the four races and here on the other was the race of heroes. They were data, and his task was to assemble them. He did it in the easiest way possible, thanks to the total absence of the time element. There were no chronological problems, no dates to be synchronized, no development to trace or explain. The race of heroes had no beginning in history: it was simply made by Zeus. And it had no ending, no transition to the next, contemporary stage. (286)

Like Hesiod and all other mythmakers, McCarthy faced the task of assembling data in a captivating and intelligible way, and he succeeded brilliantly: the objections that may be raised against *Blood Meridian* are lessened by the interspersing of historical facts and the charisma of the judge. The need to know *why* the novel functions becomes less important than *how* the novel functions. In other words, the mechanics of the novel, the question of what makes *Blood Meridian* truly remarkable, become more compelling than any issue regarding the resolution of or satisfactory conclusion to the events described. Naturally, there are significant differences between Hesiod and McCarthy, particularly in the setting and the events described in each work. But the method of assembling raw data for a purpose beyond historical correction is what is interesting: McCarthy may have had a few "chronological

problems" to iron out, but in essence his project is not dissimilar from that of Hesiod or any other of the epic poets of ancient times.

Further evidence of this is revealed when one considers some of the fundamental questions that Hesiod seeks to answer in his work. Finley writes:

> Hesiod's poem deals, in its first part, with the problem of evil, and no blacker, more despairing indictment of the injustice of the world has ever been written. Why, he asks, why is the world so full of evil? His answer is mythical in the most traditional sense; he tells the story of Prometheus and Pandora: that is the answer, a typically mythical answer, the kind of answer the Greeks continued to give to explain rites and beliefs all through their history. (287)

The use of the Promethean figure in the epilogue of *Blood Meridian* becomes telling at this point. The object seems to be to highlight the timelessness of the tale that McCarthy has just told. We can only guess at the identity of the figure with the strange implement that creates holes in the desert ground. What is clearer, however, is the importance of the final words of the novel, describing this figure and the roving band of bonepickers that has featured in the novel: "Then they all move on again" (354). Where they are heading, exactly what they aim to do along the way, or when they arrive at their destination, becomes irrelevant: the fact is they are moving and for all we know, may still be moving. What McCarthy describes in the epilogue is a tale that stretches back thousands of years; a mythical founding pillar of Western culture, if you will. Harold Bloom argues

> Perhaps all that the reader can surmise with some certainty is that the man striking fire in the rock at dawn is an opposing figure in regard to the evening redness in the West. The Judge [sic] never sleeps, and perhaps will never die, but a new Prometheus may be rising to go up against him. (7)

The evil that McCarthy describes is timeless: if one considers the judge in symbolic terms, he has existed countless times across the length and breadth of the world. The Prometheus myth also has strong connotations of rebellion, building, growth and regeneration, all attributes of westward expansion and the birth of modern America. Simultaneously though, any hope that may be found in Prometheus is ultimately dispelled by the tragic punishment he receives for his defiance. The figure may well be seeking to defy the judge, but the cost may be just as terrible as the one Prometheus was forced to bear before his rescue by Heracles.

In attempting to understand the role that myth and history play in a society, one must be conscious of the fact that whilst these two renditions of the past may be ideologically and formally opposed to one another, they rely upon the same principle from their audience: an acceptance of what is "true" and what is "false"; or, recognition of what is the "accepted" version and what is not. In the case of the ancient Greeks, as Finley tells us, this distinction was tempered by a general ignorance of much of the history at the time: "The plain fact is that the classical Greeks knew little about their history before 650 B.C. (or even 550 B.C.), and that what they thought they knew was a jumble of fact and fiction, some miscellaneous facts and much fiction about the essentials and most of the details" (288). In outlining the role that this ignorance played in developing the social theory put forward by Thucydides, Finley states:

> One need only consider Thucydides' introduction [...] in which he justified his own effort by offering in twenty-one chapters (a dozen pages) a most remarkable interpretation of early Greek history. From Chapter Fourteen he was on pretty firm ground, established by Herodotus (whose book he had studied with great care) with the indispensable help of Egyptian, Persian and Near Eastern records. But in the first part he had nothing to go on other than Homer and the other "old poets", tradition, contemporary evidence, and a very powerful and disciplined mind. The result is a sweeping theory, namely, that Hellenic power and greatness emerged only in consequence of the systematic development of navigation and commerce, which were followed by an accumulation of resources, stable community organization, imperialism (to use an anachronistic word), and finally the greatest of all Greek power struggles, the Peloponnesian War. (288)

While I am "historically minded" and (like others who are so inclined) am able to "see the stitching and faulty joints" that Finley describes above, I would argue that, in the case of the American West, the historical record has been of little importance to those who use it as cultural currency. Hollywood producers and serial novelists (such as Zane Gray and Louis L'Amour) have a duty to entertain people, not to educate them. Again, McCarthy is not attempting to revise or "correct" anything; he is merely suggesting an alternative mythology. But even in so doing, he is banking upon the fact that many of his readers are ignorant of the literal truth and are only interested in the poetic truth that is familiar to them. Thus, like Thucydides, McCarthy may be on "firm ground" with some aspects of his tale (such as the existence of Glanton, Angel Trias, the places the gang visits, and so on), while other aspects are purely of his own invention. Just as Thucydides was forced to rely on Homer, so too is McCarthy reliant upon the older mythologies of the West that helped to create the generic

conventions that he uses and subverts in equal measure. The fact that his inventions blend so seamlessly into the mythology that he creates is simply testament to his skill as an author and the success of the experiment that he has undertaken in writing *Blood Meridian*. The fact that the judge and the kid seem no less alive to us than Glanton or any of the others confirms this success.

The writing of Thucydides is important for another reason, one that ironically closely mirrors both this study and one of the chief foci of *Blood Meridian*. As Finley relates, Thucydides' theory

> is a theory derived from prolonged meditation about the world in which Thucydides lived, not from a study of history. True, there is something here which is history in a conceptual sense: Thucydides has made the bold suggestion that there was a continuity and a development in Greece from the most ancient (mythical) times to his own. I do not underestimate this new conception, but its actual working out by Thucydides in his opening pages is not history in any meaningful sense of that word. Instead he has given us what amounts to a general sociological theory, a theory about power and progress, applied retrospectively to the past, and applied, one must add, with caution and hesitation, for, as Thucydides explains at the outset, one cannot achieve certainty about ancient times, one can merely say that this is what all the "signs" point to. (288–89)

Frederick Jackson Turner exhibited much the same kind of concern with "signs" when he developed his "frontier thesis," which I will deal with near the end of this chapter. For now, it is sufficient to suggest that the need for a unifying theory that both explains and projects the destined course of nations has existed for almost as long as the nations themselves.

Martin Winkler, in an article focussing on the links between ancient Greek mythology and Western films, writes:

> Greek myths, whose roots go back to the Bronze Age and the Mycenaean civilization of the third and second millennia B.C., show how heroes emerge. The exploits of several historical but anonymous warriors or kings might become embellished through repeated telling, thus taking on superhuman dimensions, and finally be attributed to one single figure which now also receives a name, often, but by no means always, in accordance with his heroic stature. (517)

He continues by pointing out that the mythology of the American West is similarly reliant upon such embellishment:

> Similarly in the American West, stories and legends arose out of historical events, such as the Civil War, the westward expansion, or the cattle drives, and attached themselves to historical figures. It need hardly be stressed that most, if not all, of the historical Western heroes were of rather dubious, even criminal, nature in real life. In a subsequent step, totally fictitious heroes take over with adventures only loosely grounded in any accurate historical situation. (517)

What becomes important in making such a connection is the need or the desire for such a mythology to become popularized and accepted by an ever-increasing number of people. For it is only by understanding how particular myths first became popular and then, over time, standardized, that one may assess their impact upon their societies. Here again there is a link to be found between ancient Greece and nineteenth-century America, as Winkler explains:

> In ancient Greece mythical tales about heroes were recited to musical accompaniment by rhapsodes, professional and often wandering singers who entertained royal courts at festive banquets. Demodocus in the Odyssey is our prime example of such a traditional singer-composer. With the introduction of writing, the long oral tradition of the composition of myths in epic poetry ends, and many of the archaic tales take their final shape in the poems of Homer and Hesiod. By this time the myths have become standardized. Numerous legends and myths of the American West can also be assumed to spring from an oral tradition. Campfire stories, for instance, easily lead to tall tales, but such legends achieve far greater popularity and gain wider-spread acceptance in the mass media of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Pulp magazines, dime novels, and partially or completely invented biographies or memoirs of famous Westerners or notorious outlaws supersede oral tales and in turn prepare the way for radio, film and television. Western filmmakers, or rather the advertising departments of their studios, have often claimed faithfully to portray actual events, but such claims are not to be taken too seriously. (518)

Some knowledge of the Western genre, in film or in fiction, is crucial to understanding the context in which *Blood Meridian* was written and the critical acclaim that it has achieved. The representation of the American West has its own unique conventions in respect of setting and action, and audiences expect certain elements to be present in a "faithful" or "accurate" rendering of the West. Yet Westerns have largely achieved the popular appeal they continue to hold for audiences because many of the challenges, conflicts and truths that they reveal about the human condition are universal. As Winkler suggests, "[f]rom the archaic Greek warrior to the medieval knight errant and the Japanese Samurai, to name only a few notable examples, hero myths exhibit certain constant features [...] [the Western hero] might well be

considered the chief representative of American hero myths" (516–17). In other words, heroic mythmaking exists in some form or another in virtually every human culture, as universal as the truth that the myths seek to convey. In the case of *Blood Meridian*, the lack of a clear heroic figure challenges the reader to reconceptualise the role of the hero within mythmaking itself. I will argue in a later chapter that while it is the judge that many critics prefer to see, if not as a heroic figure then ultimately a victorious one, it is in fact the kid who should be seen as victorious: his killing of the judge as the novel's penultimate act signalling, once and for all, McCarthy's dismissal of the notion of "progress."

V. The West as Heroic Setting, Black Jackson and McCarthy's Treatment of Race

For now it is sufficient for me to point out that heroes are inseparable from the myths that describe their exploits. In a metaphorical sense, therefore, one might argue that it is the setting, the West itself, which takes on heroic dimensions; that it (and not the characters that live and die in it) is the true hero. McCarthy seems to suggest something of this stature when he writes, early in the first chapter of *Blood Meridian*, "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" (5). Just as one could not travel to modern day Greece and expect to be transported into the world that forged the legends of figures such as Achilles, Odysseus, Jason or Theseus, one can hardly travel to Texas and expect to meet either the judge or the kid face-to-face. This is McCarthy's subtle acknowledgement of the fact that America's Age of Heroes has passed and that what we have left of these heroes is the stories that are told about them. In this regard, it is important not to underestimate the power of film: the tales of these American heroes, like their Greek predecessors, may well have first become standardized and popularized in written form, but film has undoubtedly become the medium with the greatest reach. McCarthy himself, as I shall discuss in my third chapter, may not have been entirely immune from this reach, as his depiction of the judge suggests.

It is of extreme interest that the very first "cowboy" dime novel ever produced closely mirrors part of the plot of *Blood Meridian*. As Marshall Fishwick states in an article in *Western Folklore:*

> The first man to utilize the cowboy in the dime novel had a single individual as a model. This writer was Prentiss Ingraham, Buffalo Bill's ghost writer, and the

> cowboy Buck Taylor, a feature attraction in Cody's Wild West Show for years. In 1887 Ingraham ground out the first cowboy novel to appear in a popular series; it depicts Buck Taylor as a youngster living in a Texas Ranger camp, and eventually "winning his spurs" with the famous outfit. Afterwards he indulges freely in his favourite outdoor sport of tracking down Mexicans. The hero is a Nordic and racialist of the first order, and carries the White Man's Burden around with him as he gallops through Texas. (83)

Thus it is clear that from the beginning, two things were of importance in the mythology of the American West as it came to be standardized and popularized in fiction: the protagonist is a young man who must learn to adapt to the rigours of Western life lest he fall victim to the myriad of dangers that surround him; in other words, he must display the "rugged individualism" so treasured by American audiences. Chief among all the dangers that he faces are the Mexicans and other "non-Nordic" races he encounters. In *Blood Meridian* this kind of out-and-out racialism seems absent within the Glanton Gang. While the rhetoric of Captain White is frankly racist, the Gang includes the Delawares and Black Jackson. Black Jackson decapitates White Jackson for racially abusing him without fear of retribution from the rest of the gang:

> The white man swung his head, one eye half closed, his lip loose. His gunbelt lay coiled on the ground. He reached and drew the revolver and cocked it. Four men rose and moved away.
>
> You aim to shoot me? said the black.
>
> You dont get your black ass away from this fire I'll kill you graveyard dead.
>
> He looked to where Glanton sat. Glanton watched him. He put the pipe in his mouth and rose and took up the apishamore and folded it over his arm.
>
> Is that your final say?
>
> Final as the judgement of God.
>
> The black looked once more across the flames at Glanton and then he moved away in the dark. The white man uncocked the revolver and placed it on the ground before him. Two of the others came back to the fire and stood uneasily. Jackson sat with his legs crossed. One hand lay in his lap and the other was outstretched on his knee holding a slender black cigarillo. The nearest man to him was Tobin and when the black stepped out of the darkness bearing the bowieknife in both hands like some instrument of ceremony Tobin started to rise. The white man looked up drunkenly and the black stepped forward and with a single stroke swapt off his head. (113)

Note how Black Jackson looks towards Glanton for permission to settle the dispute: Glanton chooses not to involve himself in the argument and simply allows violence to occur. This is hardly surprising given the extent of violent action that has preceded and will immediately

follow this incident, when the Gang is set upon by the Apaches. Yet the incident is important for another reason besides Glanton's casual indifference: one would assume that on a venture into hostile territory, the killing of a fellow member of the Gang would be cause for retribution. But allowing the members of the Gang to start killing each other over anything from unbridled racism to the division of spoils could lead to severe manpower shortages. Glanton and the other members of the Gang seem totally unconcerned with White Jackson's grisly end, as is evidenced by the final paragraph of the chapter: "Glanton rose. The men moved away. No one spoke. When they set out in the dawn the headless man was sitting like a murdered anchorite discaled in ashes and sark. Someone had taken his gun but the boots stood where he'd put them. The company rode on" (114).This is further proof of McCarthy's willingness to both use and subvert conventions of the mythology that he is writing within. At first, White Jackson's racism, while offensive to our more liberal minds in the twenty-first century, does not seem out of place in the novel. Yet, overall the Gang's identity as Americans holds far more value for them across the border than their race does. This may be McCarthy's attempt at showing just how arbitrary race actually is: the Gang's sense of solidarity is crucial to their survival when they are being hunted for their many crimes. Yet, whilst this kind of solidarity has often been a motif in Westerns, this has not always been the case. Fishwick quotes an editor of a pulp magazine as saying:

> It is understood by us, and should be understood by everyone, that we are dealing with the popularity of Western stories as concerns readers who are white, who may be called Nordics, using that term advisedly. The white race has always been noted for being hard-drinking, hard-fighting, fearless, fair and square. The heroes of Western stories have these characteristics. (84)

Whilst the "hard-drinking" and "hard-fighting" element is all too clear in *Blood Meridian*, the "fair and square" part is more difficult to discern. Of this particular incident, one might argue that White Jackson "had it coming" and his death, whilst leaving the Gang a man short, was no great loss. The "single stroke" used to remove White Jackson's head is interesting as Glanton himself, who chose to do nothing to prevent White Jackson's fate or in the very least dissuade Black Jackson from his bloody course of action, is similarly and somewhat ironically later himself killed by a single blow to the head, an episode I will deal with in some detail below, if for different reasons. Still, the similarity between the two events does create a resonance, and such small ironies are often part and parcel of the way in which mythology functions.

VI. The Codification of the Mythology of the American West

To conclude the point I raised earlier, the degree to which Western mythology was rapidly and quite rigidly standardized – codified – therefore makes McCarthy's mythmaking all the more interesting. If one thinks of *Blood Meridian* as a new, more startling version of the kind of mythology that began with Buck Taylor and others of his ilk, then the importance of the novel becomes even greater. By mirroring the plot of the first dime cowboy novel in even a limited measure (i.e. location, young protagonist, progression from apprentice to fully fledged "man of the West" and the hunting of Mexicans), is McCarthy attempting to sweep away all the mythology previously written and so widely disseminated? I would not go so far as to argue that. What I would suggest is that codification by its very nature requires a certain level of selectivity, and thus episodes like White Jackson's decapitation have been included for a reason.

Film adds a different dimension to the critical appreciation of the Western genre. While I do not wish to embark on a lengthy discussion of the merits and difficulties associated with critically appreciating Western films, any discussion of Western mythology would be incomplete without acknowledging that film and not fiction has become the primary medium for the transmission of the genre to audiences around the world. As Winkler points out, "just as the cinema marks the culmination point in the tradition of American mythmaking, the myths of the American West are forged most effectively in the Western film, particularly in the works of some of the masters of American cinema" (519). Western films have largely monopolized the role of mythmaking within the genre and thus in a sense they authorize and control many of the conventions. McCarthy's greatest challenge, therefore, lay in producing a work that simultaneously used and subverted these conventions without compromising its own appeal. Fortunately, his style is so rich in authority that, if anything, his subversion of these conventions serves to increase the novel's appeal.

One of the areas where McCarthy does submit to convention is in his portrayal of the kid. Not only is the "runaway Southerner" a well-used motif within the Western genre but the ambiguity of his character, be it morally or in any other sense, also has precedents. As Winkler explains:

> The gunfighter Shane, in the 1953 film of the same name, is a solitary man without past or future. After his shootout with the badman [sic] he twirls his six-shooter around his trigger finger before replacing it in its holster, although he has been a

> model of pacifism and restraint throughout the film. Far from being an idle display of dexterity as found in many a mediocre Western for the sake of pleasing a juvenile audience, this brief moment in *Shane* is a subtle characterization of the hero. It reveals that the Westerner, even if he is on the side of peace, progress, and order, is an archaic man of violence underneath – a side of his character which he cannot completely control. (521)

Such a sentiment seems to echo the description of the kid at the beginning of *Blood Meridian*: "He watches, pale and unwashed. He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence" (3). Thus, despite the fact that the kid will go on to show restraint at key points in the novel (including sparing the judge's life on two occasions), he is, like all heroes of the West, a killer at heart, a practitioner of the art of death. As Winkler points out, this ambiguity between restraint and violence is not uncommon, and he quotes from Robert Warshow's well known article, "The Westerner": "The Westerner at his best exhibits a moral ambiguity which darkens his image and saves him from absurdity; this ambiguity arises from the fact that, whatever his justifications, he is a killer of men" (Warshow, qtd. in Winkler 521). This moral ambiguity has been used by critics to suggest that the kid undergoes no development, and that due to his active participation in genocide for profit he cannot be seen as a heroic figure.

Discussing the kid's role in the novel, Harold Bloom writes: "though the Kid's [sic] moral maturation is heartening, his personality remains largely a cipher, as anonymous as his lack of a name" (3). If the kid's restraint at certain key moments in the narrative is insufficient to suggest this moral ambiguity, then where does this "moral maturation" come from? Other critics have pointed towards his defiance of the judge as an insufficient basis for allowing the kid ethical substance, but this argument is largely informed by a reading of the novel that sees the judge triumphant, an outcome that in itself embodies an amorality uncommon and possibly unprecedented in Western fiction. The "bad guy" winning is not unheard of but the judge's philosophical stance removes morality from all considerations of victory and survival. As Steven Shaviro points out, "the judge [...] knows that is impossible to transgress when there is no Law to violate" (13). As Conrad's Marlow comes to understand in his search for Kurtz, moral ambiguity seems to be an accepted part of life out on the fringes of civilization. The judge can only be seen to be morally ambiguous, therefore, if one applies an imported code of morality to his actions. His choice to refuse to do so compounds the kid's *need* to do so and ultimately fuels their final confrontation in Griffin.

Yet, if we apply the same Warshow quotation without reservation to the figure of the judge and accept that it is this conflict between morality and amorality which is responsible for generating much of the conflict between the kid and himself, is the judge nothing more than "a killer of men"? A reading that sees the judge kill the kid seems to support this idea. For if one can claim that the kid is nothing more than a "killer of men" despite his justifications and moral maturation, then the same is true of the judge, despite his refusal to accept a moral code that sets limits to his voracious and perverted appetites. One might even suggest that one of the central themes or concerns of the novel consists in the judge's providing justifications for his actions and the kid ultimately rejecting all of them with the chillingly simple phrase "You aint nothin" (349). This rejection (a rejection of a rejection – further irony) is what leads to their final confrontation in the jakes scene, a scene that (in an even *further* irony) ends ambiguously. This irony, arising from the discrepancy between the expected and the actual, and transferred to the reader through McCarthy's treatment of violence in the novel, is a reflection of an ancient concern, one with which the ancient Greeks who attended productions of Greek Tragedies would have been all too familiar. As Winkler explains:

> Suffering and violence are integral features of classical Greek tragedy. Aeschylus' *The Persians* deals with the suffering inflicted upon the Persians by Xerxes' haughty and wilful contempt of the limits imposed upon humans by the gods when he invaded Greece; hubris, which leads to violence, revenge, suffering, and divine retribution (nemesis), figures prominently in Greek drama and occurs even earlier in the Homeric epics. The concept of hubris is virtually omnipresent in archaic and classical Greek thought. (522)

VII. The Death of John Joel Glanton: The Price of Hubris

Of all the figures who demonstrate hubris within *Blood Meridian*, John Joel Glanton and the judge seem to stand out most prominently. Glanton in particular, who shows a vicious delight in his scorn for anything that is not American, revels in his right to be riding about Mexico leading the Gang on their bloody path. He is finally killed by the Yuma in an act of retribution. The description of his death seems to confirm Glanton's acceptance of his fate as proof of this:

> When they entered Glanton's chamber he lurched upright and glared wildly about him. The small clay room he occupied was entirely filled with a brass bed he'd appropriated from some migrating family and he sat in it like a debauched feudal baron while his weapons hung in a rich array from the finials. Caballo en Pelo mounted into the actual bed with him and stood there while one of the attending tribunal handed him at his right side a common axe the hickory helve of which was carved with pagan motifs and tasselled with the feathers of predatory birds.
>
> Glanton spat.
>
> Hack away you mean red nigger, he said, and the old man raised the axe and split the head of John Joel Glanton to the thrapple. (289–90)

There are several points to be made here. First, note the fact that Glanton, the master of death, a man who is, alongside the judge and the kid, probably the best shot in the Gang, does not meet his death in some heroic last stand or in some feted final charge for glory: he is instead butchered in a bed, like so many of the gang's victims have been butchered. Secondly, the bed that he is lying in has been "appropriated." This is sardonic in the extreme, considering the fact that the Gang have cheerfully slaughtered and pillaged their way across the borderlands for the preceding almost 300 pages. The use of the word "appropriated," I would argue, is meant both to be humorous and to reinforce the ridiculous irony of Glanton's end: a man who has stolen a great deal more than just a brass bed from the hundreds of victims he has left in his wake is now about to be brutally murdered whilst sitting comfortably "like a debauched feudal baron" in a stolen possession.

Thirdly, note the image of Glanton's weapons "hung in a rich array from the finials"; Glanton does not reach for a weapon, nor does he struggle in any way. He simply spits (an act no doubt of deep disgust) and submits to his death. Fourthly, we are expressly told that it is "Caballo en Pelo" who strikes the killing blow, thus increasing his own renown (as the man who killed Glanton) and writing himself indelibly into Glanton's own legend (as the one who finally killed him). This specificity is important as it reflects a concern within mythology, particularly Greek mythology, that retribution may not be seen to be anonymous. Paris is the one who fires the arrow that kills Achilles, in retribution for the murder and despoiling of the corpse of his brother, Hector. Odysseus is punished by the sea god Poseidon for the blinding of his son, the cyclops Polyphemus. Odysseus is then later allowed his revenge upon the suitors courting Penelope with help from the goddess Pallas-Athena. Whilst Odysseus's ability to outwit and out-manoeuvre the obstacles placed in his way through his cunning and guile was highly valued by the Greeks, he still could not escape them entirely. Thus, Odysseus was bound to the same fundamental principles as ordinary people: actions have

consequences. Mythology was, therefore, instructive as well as entertaining; from it the Greeks learned valuable lessons that helped to maintain social norms and mores within their society. In the West, this kind of retribution is contained within the concept of an individual being killed because "he had it coming."

Fifthly, note the description of the axe that is used to kill Glanton. It is worth quoting again as the description shows the level of detail that one not only expects of McCarthy but of moments of great significance in mythology in general: "one of the attending tribunal handed him at his right side a common axe the hickory helve of which was carved with pagan motifs and tasselled with the feathers of predatory birds" (289). Note the fact that we are even told what kind of wood the haft of the axe is made out of, the fact that there are tribal carvings worked into the wood (symbolic of the revenge of the indigenous peoples that make up the list of Glanton's victims) and the fact that the weapon is also "tasselled with the feathers of predatory birds" that are of great significance to many Native American tribes, including the Yuma. It is difficult to conceive of an animal that better signifies the notion of "swift justice" than an eagle. The axe is not referred to as a tomahawk, but it is clear from the carvings and the attachment of feathers that it is a weapon of special significance, one that is clearly fitting to end the life of such a notorious opponent of the Yuma people. Glanton is therefore not shot out of hand nor killed in a duel at noon outside a saloon in conventional Western fashion. His fate is no different from that of many of his victims and would be unremarkable were it not for the ironies that attend it.

Finally, note the final act of defiance as Glanton spits and then racially abuses his killer, in a language that his killer may or may not have been familiar with. Whether or not Caballo en Pelo understood Glanton's final instruction is immaterial: for as McCarthy demonstrates time and again in the novel, the power of language is moot when one is forced to consider the power of violence. Language may be considered a form of violence, but actual violence brings a finality that no amount of arguing or debate will ever bring. Glanton's silence both before and after the killing of White Jackson confirms this dismissal of language's power over violence, just as his own final words to his killer comprise an invitation to commit violence. It is also interesting that even this final instruction is ignored: the old man does not "hack away" at Glanton but neatly splits his head with a single strike. This subtle refusal to obey Glanton increases the mystique surrounding the entire episode: it may well be that the Yuma did, out of sheer anger, hack away at Glanton. McCarthy chooses instead to write that it was a single blow that "split the skull of John Joel Glanton to the

thrapple" (290), a heroic and entirely appropriate image. The word "thrapple" enhances the image as it is an archaism with which most readers would be unfamiliar.

Glanton's end may be said to be emblematic of the effect that violence in *Blood Meridian* has upon the reader. To return to classical Greece, the effect of Tragedy on the audience was famously explained by Aristotle, as glossed here by Winkler:

> According to Aristotle, suffering and violence on the tragic stage arouse both pity and fear (*elos* and *phobos*) in the spectator. These two powerful emotions, accumulated within the audience during the play, are released at the drama's climax. Such draining of emotions Aristotle calls catharsis – "purification". Catharsis leaves the spectator numb. If no purging like this occurred, the high-pitched emotions of pity and fear would have no outlet and would remain inside the spectator as harmful forces. Catharsis, then, is a psychological safety valve through which excessive emotions, including those of aggression and brutality, are neutralized and rendered harmless. (522)

One can see a similar process at work in *Blood Meridian*. But instead of catharsis only being a product of the climax of the novel, it is instead achieved by the continuous movement from one place to the next. The pace of the novel never slows appreciably enough for one to fully come to terms with any one single disaster: they simply become part of a continuum, the meridian of blood that gives the novel its title.

Naturally, the final confrontation between the kid and the judge, if convention were followed, should provide the ultimate catharsis in the novel and bring about some formal resolution of its concerns. Conventionally speaking, the good guy kills the bad guy in a shootout or in some cases a chase in which outright skill and courage triumph over evil. In *Blood Meridian*, however, this does not happen, and all we are finally left with is the haunting image of the judge dancing and proclaiming his immortality, together with the Promethean figure in the epilogue, who may or may not be the kid. This lack of catharsis may well be a reason why *Blood Meridian* received such mixed reviews upon its publication in 1985.

The judge's claim to immortality might also be illuminated by the links between ancient mythology and *Blood Meridian*. The idea of immortality has been of significance in mythology since the very beginning of human civilization. The finite nature of existence has always provided ample material for poets to suggest an alternative that far exceeds any sublunary triumph or reward. As Winkler explains,

> The hero's highest achievement is his conquest of death. Since death more than anything else distinguishes humans from gods, the transcendence of his mortal nature transforms the hero into a god. Gaining immortality, we may say, is the ultimate quest upon which the hero can embark, and represents the touchstone of his mettle. As early as in Near Eastern mythology – Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian – do we witness heroic attempts to overcome death, the bane of the human race. (527)

He then goes on to explain how and why the deaths of figures of historical significance for the American West have become inseparable from the mythologies that surround them:

> While not as immediately discernible as it is in ancient mythologies, conquest of death and the achievement of immortality are nevertheless an important motif in the mythology of the American West. Such prominent historical Westerners as Davy Crockett and George Armstrong Custer owe their fame largely to the remarkable circumstances of their deaths at the Alamo and at the Little Big Horn. (The same holds true for John Dillinger, whose death gave rise to the legend of the mysterious Lady in Red.) Like Heracles, and, for that matter Jesus Christ, the myths of Crockett, Custer and Dillinger reach their culmination with and after their deaths. (529)

Thus we can see that through their dying, these Western figures, who no doubt all had numerous faults and vices, acquire heroic status and mythic immortality. This raises an interesting question about whether or not the judge is in fact still alive at the end of the novel, one that I will deal with in a later chapter. The achievement of mythic immortality was undoubtedly not assured to these men: I doubt very much that Custer or Crockett believed that their deaths would be the subject of a myriad paintings, novels, films and even stage productions. Death, ironically, to these now venerated figures was no more than that: the cessation of their lives in a violent and terrifying way. Yet is not the choice of death in such unpropitious circumstances at least part of reason for the award of hero status to these figures? Their choice to die nobly in battle against impossible odds is what allows for the whitewashing of their characters, and grants others the right to defend their reputations as heroes long after the truth about their lives has become a matter of public record. In this sense, all the members of both the Glanton Gang and Captain White's filibusters have this in common: their choice to brave death (and some might argue, fates worse than death) rather than live quiet, unadventurous lives, earns them the right to be included in McCarthy's mythology. This pattern is most famously exemplified in the Iliad by the figure of Achilles, who is told in no uncertain terms that if he goes to Troy his fate is assured but that his name will live on through the ages. Winkler argues that

> the hero's glory derives not only from his exploits but also, and in equal measure, from the fact that the myths surrounding him form the subject of epic poetry, at whose centre the hero is situated. Achilles deliberately chooses a short heroic life as a warrior, culminating in death on the battlefield, in preference to a long and peaceful existence in obscurity, knowing full well that his heroism will make him eternally famous (*Iliad* 9.410–16). He is aware that in this way he will become the hero of the epic. In this context we may compare Diotoma's precepts to Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* (209c-e): Through his spiritual "children" i.e. his deeds and accomplishments, a man achieves the highest degree of immortality open to him; Diotima names Homer and Hesiod, whose children are their poems and Lycurgus and Solon, whose children are the constitutions they gave Sparta and Athens. (529)

Thus it is evident that the idea of a legacy, of attaining not a literal but a figurative or mythical immortality, was of great significance in Greek mythology. The quotation above may, in a sense, help to explain why the kid is called "the kid" to begin with; although I would argue that this may be more for the sake of artistic licence and on account of the novel's being a kind of Bildungsroman than a purely philosophical concern. Certainly, as Stephen Frye suggests, the kid is undoubtedly singled out by the judge and thus "unwillingly becomes the judge's protégé" (69–70).

VIII. Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" as a Unifying Theory

If one applies this general idea to the United States as a nation, then the formation of a national myth fell to men like Frederick Jackson Turner, a renowned historian and writer, who in the late nineteenth century developed his "frontier thesis" that was to transform the history of the West from an ordinary chronicle into a sacred history of national identity that endures to this day. Turner's writings themselves, as John Opie argues, contain more than their fair share of mythological references. Opie aims

> to suggest that Turner's historical writing is closely related to the classic narrative myths and historical sagas which were traditionally used to explain, defend, and predict the course of a nation's destiny. We have in Turner's work a form of "sacred history", containing superpowerful [sic] places, extraordinary heroes, and a critical sequence of events. This is a combination of absolute statements which is then used to describe how a people came into existence, what their primary characteristics are, and what significance they have in the course of human (and cosmic) events. (79–80)

One might well question why such a responsibility fell to a bluff traditionalist like Turner. This is partly explained by examining the historical context in which Turner was developing his thesis: the Reconstruction period (after the American Civil War), which was a time of great social upheaval and contradictions. As Opie argues, Turner was

> troubled by powerful new forces which were simultaneously changing the nation in the late nineteenth century – rampant industrialisation, uncontrolled urban growth, mass immigration, and the new global role of America. None of these was a product of the frontier experience, and seemed to stand in contradiction to it. (80)

The final point in the quote above is an important one: America was, just as it was during the latter stages of the Cold War a century later, a divided society searching for a fixed identity. Whilst men like John D. Rockefeller seemed to have limitless wealth, increasing numbers of immigrants from Europe struggled to survive in cramped, overcrowded and often violent conditions in the cities of the eastern seaboard. Added to this widening gap of inequality were the racial tensions that had arisen as a result of the Northern victory over the Southern Confederacy; it is no coincidence that both the Ku Klux Klan and the National Rifle Association were formed in the same year (1876). The parallels between the Reconstruction period and post-Vietnam America are striking. There was, however, more to Turner than just the prevailing socio-political landscape of his era, as Opie explains:

> Turner believed he had grasped something important; he had found a way to explain the American experience as a unique and important stage in human affairs. Americans had successfully invented a society which encouraged democracy, individual liberties, virtues of the common man, self-reliance, a kind of spiritual vitality, and optimism about the future. And these Americans with these qualities were produced out of an extraordinary frontier experience and its constant reduplication westward. (80)

Thus we return to Finley's argument about Thucydides and his unifying theory of Greek history: Turner was in effect undertaking a very similar project, only he believed that he was the first to do so and that his subject, the American frontier experience, was somehow unprecedented. Whether or not Turner was aware of Thucydides does not change the fact that he presented his argument as something unique, and more importantly still, *it was accepted as such*. McCarthy was no doubt aware of Turner's work; in fact, there is an echo of Turner in a line I have already quoted, if for a different purpose: "Never again, in all the world's turning, will there be terrains so wild and barbarous [...]" (5) bears a striking resemblance to

Turner's lament in *The Atlantic Monthly*: "The free lands are gone, the material forces that gave vitality to Western democracy are passing away [...]. *Never again can such an opportunity come to the sons of men*"(Turner, qtd. in Opie, 81; emphasis added). The kid is just one of millions of Turner's "sons of men" who rode out west believing that they too had a role to play in the great story of the West as it unfolded. Part of the reason the mythology of the American West continues to have such a hold over audiences everywhere, no matter the medium it is presented in, is because of the allure of conflict resolution as it existed in the lawless West. Winkler explains

> Most remarkable in this regard is the American obsession with firearms. In some quarters, the attainment of freedom and the pursuit of happiness appear to be inseparable from the possession and use of handguns by private citizens and the resulting absence of gun control. The constitutional right to bear firearms, originating in the American Revolution, has frequently been abused: the principle of defending home, family and self, invoked to legitimize the private possession of weapons, can easily lead to situations in which the gun seems a handy – or indeed the only – problem solver, the only "peacemaker." (533)

Thus, the "gunslinger" mentality endures. One could argue that violence, in one form or another, has always dominated human interaction, and this may well be true, as McCarthy's epigraphic quotation about a 300,000 year-old skull showing evidence of scalping makes clear. But the gunslinger cannot be divorced from the West; he is as deeply engrained into the American national myth as the heroes of the Trojan War were for the Greeks. As I have attempted to argue, he is as indebted to the Greek heroes of Troy as all neo-mythic figures are, if only for the manner in which the construction of their narratives has impacted upon more recent mythologies.

This further demonstrates the links between myth and history: Turner's aim was to argue a historical basis for what became known as "American exceptionalism," but instead his theories helped to further a national mythology (and continue to do so). The very ideals and traits that Turner put forward as historical evidence for his traditionalism ultimately became the ideals and traits associated with the mythology of the American West. This is hardly different from the ancient Greeks and their own use of mythology: the values that their mythical heroes displayed were the ones that they idolized and even worshipped. Turner believed the American experience to be unique, and his influence may in part be attributed to

the fact that he had the one thing that any storyteller requires: a captive audience. As Opie argues:

> Turner's remarkable success in dominating the historical profession, and the avid response he received from a wider public, suggests that he did elaborate on a national mystique. He was looked upon as a national prophet. Frontier expansion became America's "sacred history", the exemplary past upon which a national identity depended. In a biographical letter written in 1922, Turner claimed the discovery of "Uncle Sam's psychology", a suprasectional myth binding the nation together. Since their history was so brief, Americans had to create their own mythical past. And pioneers moving west contained America's national saga, the key to national identity. (80)

Turner, it seems, did not singlehandedly arrive at this unifying theory: it appears to have lain dormant but alive until Turner famously awoke it. In this sense, an interesting parallel can be discerned between McCarthy and Turner. Like Turner, McCarthy may be seen as a kind of prophetic figure; *Blood Meridian* acts as both a poetic truth about the past and a warning about the future destiny of America. If one examines the ultimate aim of Turner's theories about the United States, one can see that, although McCarthy is arguably exposing the terrible truth behind thinking like Turner's, their methods and concerns are not entirely dissimilar:

> For Turner, then, history must make concrete affirmations about the meaning of America. This was not a time to be dispassionate, objective, or detached. The historian in America has a prophetic task. In looking backward Turner transformed concrete history into mythical time. When he wrote, he joined together certain selected aspects of the American past which represented a model history. This mythic saga then could be invoked to renew the American spirit and protect it from alien invasions. Turner's objective was to notify Americans that their useful history – thereby their sacred history, in contrast to the useless and profane present – was their westward expansion into empty land. Turner believed he did not twist the past out of shape, but made it available to Americans in meaningful form. The frontier thesis made sense of the American past, and gave Americans a national myth even before they had acquired a national history. (Opie 81)

Turner, according to Opie, did not believe that that he had "twist[ed] the past out of shape"; and perhaps some will argue that, in contrast, McCarthy's mythic vision in *Blood Meridian* does precisely that. But as I have suggested, McCarthy is more interested in a poetic truth than a historical one. There is a single word in the above quotation attributed to Turner that

really drives home the difference between Turner's thinking and McCarthy's startling critique: "expansion into *empty* land." There were entire nations of people inhabiting the West who had lived in relative peace for thousands of years. There were also the descendants of Spanish settlers who had been there for hundreds of years (in *Blood Meridian*, only their ruined churches remain). These are the forgotten victims of Manifest Destiny, victims of gangs like the one that Glanton gives his name to, victims of the tidal wave of blood that erased one history and simultaneously built another. This goes some way to explaining Gareth Cornwell's view of McCarthy's novel as "ambivalent national epic". He argues that in *Blood Meridian*

> McCarthy is paying an ambivalent patriotic tribute to the United States by *remythologizing* the frontier, by imagining it as a zone so strange and so removed from conventional human existence as to have provided a unique and monumental opportunity for the full and final confession of humanity to be heard. (539)

Writing in the epic mode, McCarthy elaborates a startling new mythology that captivates and enthrals the reader, while stirring a new ambivalence about his subject. He evinces the influence of Classical mythology as do his own immediate literary influences, Faulkner and Melville. Just like the tales of the rhapsodes of ancient Greece, *Blood Meridian* beguiles its audience with echoes of a world that has passed beyond memory to a place where only myth can preserve or destroy it: the Age of Heroes.

Chapter 2: "Hell, there's no God in Mexico": McCarthy's Critique of Manifest Destiny in *Blood Meridian*

> *Ah, ye admonitions and warnings! why stay ye not when ye come? But rather are ye predictions than warnings, ye shadows! Yet not so much predictions from without, as verifications of the foregoing things within. For with little external to constrain us, the innermost necessities in our being, these still drive us on.*
>
> –*Moby-Dick*(206)

> *This is our high destiny, and in nature's eternal, inevitable decree of cause and effect we must accomplish it. All this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man – the immutable truth and beneficence of God. For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen; and her high example shall smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs, and carry the glad tidings of peace and good will where myriads now endure an existence scarcely more enviable than that of beasts of the field. Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity?*
>
> –John O'Sullivan, 1839

I. Introduction

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny is not easily defined. Many historians both past and present have tended to view it in terms of a series of events as opposed to a principle that governed (and continues to govern) the imperialist impulses of the United States. Indeed by the time the term was first in common usage (c.1833), the hallmarks of the doctrine had already been at work for more than a century. In a sense, the establishment of the Thirteen Colonies as English settlements by disaffected Puritans and settlers seeking to escape the legal confines and abject misery of slum life in 18th Century Europe was itself an embryonic form of the doctrine. Almost from the moment the first colonies were founded, tales filtered back to the "Old World" of a new Israel or Canaan: a promised land for a chosen people, such as that be found in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Indeed the analogy created a dangerous mindset both back in Europe and in the "New World." Just as the Israelites had to overcome obstacles and defeat other peoples openly hostile to their occupation of "their" land, so too did the early colonists see their Native American neighbours as nothing more than enemies to be vanquished or souls to be saved. According to Slotkin:

> The Puritans saw their voyage to the new world as a spiritual journey, and the landscape of the New World often seems to owe more to their concept of the spiritual features of the soul than to the actual topography. [...] Where was the Promised Land to be located, in the New World or in England? Were the emigrants like the Israelites, bound from Egypt to a true Promised Land or like the Babylonian

> captives, doomed to a painful exile among the heathen before they could return to a renewed home country? (40)

Once it became clear that life in the New World, despite its inherent dangers and lack of "civilization," was still preferable to a life of persecution in England, the view of the New World as a utopia took root; in particular, there was reliance upon the ideal of the Garden of Eden and all that it symbolized. This view of the New World did not make interaction between Native Americans and the colonists any easier; if anything it exacerbated the slightest provocation into full-blown hostility and conflict, a pattern that was to continue until the very end of the nineteenth century. Any fraternization or social interaction between the two groups was strictly discouraged by the governments of the Colonies, this despite the fact that the early settlers came to rely on Native Americans for food, survival techniques and tribal remedies for illnesses. Many early colonists encouraged the idea that the Native Americans they encountered were the descendants of the Trojans, thereby creating a link between the Native Americans and their own British mythical history.

Coinage of the phrase "Manifest Destiny" is usually ascribed to John L. O'Sullivan, a contributor and editor of *The United States Democratic Review*, who is thought to have used it in1839, although some sources claim that the term was not in use until as late as 1845 (Bailey 280). Whenever it became part of American political discourse, the fact is that O'Sullivan reflected the mood of much of the political elite when he claimed that it was their "Manifest Destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" (Bailey, 280). Thus, religious duty and political pragmatism were seen to be inseparable from one another. Naturally, such a policy meant the colonization and forced removal of the Native American populations who already inhabited the regions earmarked for settler growth and development. At this stage the demand was for greater areas of land for the purposes of primary economic activities such as agriculture and hunting. The issue of settling both Oregon and Texas became particularly thorny issues during the elections of 1844. Bailey argues:

> The campaign of 1844 was, in part, an expression of the mighty emotional upsurge known as Manifest Destiny. Countless Americans in the 1840's and 1850's, feeling a sense of mission, believed that Almighty God had "manifestly" destined our people for a hemispheric career. We would irresistibly spread our uplifting and ennobling democratic institutions over at least the entire North American continent, and possibly over South America as well. The expansionist Democrats were strongly under the intoxicating spell of

> Manifest Destiny. They came out flat-footedly in their platform for the "Reannexation [sic] of Texas" and the "Reoccupation of Oregon" all the way to 54° 40'. (289)

James Polk, who won the election running on a Democratic ticket, leading a party in Bailey's words "flushed with victory" (289), seized the opportunity to pressurize the Mexican government to cede huge areas of land to the United States, including Texas and California. After several minor conflicts and a great deal of negotiation, Polk secured the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. The treaty was signed on 2 February, 1848, and as Bailey suggests, the terms granted the Americans everything they had wanted:

> The terms of the treaty were sweeping. They confirmed the American title to Texas,[2] and yielded the enormous area stretching westward to Oregon and the ocean and embracing the coveted California. This total expanse, including Texas, was about one-half of Mexico. The United States agreed to pay $15,000,000 for the land, and to assume the claims of its citizens against Mexico in the amount of $3,250,000. [...] Polk, who had planned to offer $25,000,000 before the war, paid $18,250,000 after winning the war. (297)

The amount of land gained was truly immense. Politicians in Washington DC had little idea of the true size of the land gained by the Treaty: as Bailey points out, "the total expanse of the United States, already vast, was increased by about two-thirds (counting Texas) – a addition greater than that of the Louisiana Purchase" (297-98). Chillingly, Bailey further remarks that "A sharp stimulus was given to the spirit of Manifest Destiny, for, as the proverb has it, the appetite comes with the eating" (298). It is this self-same appetite that has fuelled American expansionism well into the twenty-first century. Along with an increased "appetite" there came the literature and art of the Frontier. The Mexican War was the first major conflict the United States had been involved in and could be considered the "blood-splattered schoolroom of the Civil War" (Bailey 98), the conflict that deeply scarred the psyche of the nation and deterred it from engaging in major conflicts until its reluctant entry into the First World War in 1917. O'Sullivan's idea that America was somehow "destined" to be the shining democratic example to the rest of the world has persisted just as long as the mythology of the West has, and yet the connection between the two has largely gone unrecognized outside of academic circles. The literature and art that emerged from this period was charged with the emotion of the day: the conflict had revealed the deep divisions within American society and the issue of slavery was roused like "a snarling dog," one that "did not stop yelping until

[2] This had been a matter of dispute between the Mexican and American governments for some time and was ultimately what led to the conflict between the two nations.

silenced by the Civil War" (Bailey, 298). This goes some way to explaining why McCarthy may have selected a setting from one particularly emotionally charged period of history as an allegory for post-Vietnam America.

The tropes and motifs that are considered to be indispensable in portraying the West actually began along the Eastern seaboard. Although one cannot usefully compare James Fennimore Cooper to Cormac McCarthy, one can nevertheless see how the mythology that Cooper expanded still resonates in McCarthy, just as much as any of his other American influences like Faulkner and Melville. The concept of the "Noble Savage" may not feature in *Blood Meridian*, but its absence speaks volumes. There is a further importance to analysing the literature borne from the early history of America when examining Manifest Destiny: just as the mythology of the pilgrims came to inspire westward expansion, so too has the mythology of westward expansion become the inspiration for American involvement in conflicts in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Without understanding how these seemingly disconnected narratives are in fact linked, much of the import and meaning of McCarthy's novel is lost. As Sara Spurgeon writes, McCarthy's aim is to "evoke archetypal myths and mythic heroes that have traditionally been used to serve the cause of American westward expansion and imperialism" (85); "traditionally" in the sense of contemporary American foreign policy right up until the present day. Spurgeon goes on to explain the role that mythology plays in society and why an understanding of McCarthy's use of mythology becomes so important in order to understand his broader concerns. She writes that the function of myth is:

> to legitimate current social structures through a stylized version of the past, to offer blueprints for behaviours and attitudes, and to justify future actions. I will also argue, however, that by uncovering the most ancient bones underlying these myths and using them to construct a new mythic vision of history, McCarthy is deliberately deconstructing the imperialistic aims and justifications of the old myths while disrupting assumptions about the ideas and identities they were intended to uphold. The result is an indeed an indictment, bloody and accusatory, of an American national(ist) identity based on the violent conquest of both racialized Others and feminized natures. (85)

This need to "justify future actions" is what forms the basis of my inquiry into McCarthy's critique of Manifest Destiny. Given what some perceive as the acceleration of American imperialist ambitions in the early twenty-first century, Manifest Destiny is hardly a thing of the past; rather it has evolved into more acceptable, better disguised forms. If one examines

the historical parallels between *Blood Meridian* and historical events during the period in which it was written, and beyond, the novel is no longer just an exercise in deconstructing myth but a prophetic blueprint for future US military forays.

It is important to understand the interaction between the early settlers and Native Americans as it became a pattern of behaviour that would recur for more than three centuries. As time progressed, relations became strained between the colonists and the Native American Tribal Confederations. In both the French Indian War and the War of Independence, tribal allegiances were split, thus causing even more mistrust and animosity between Native Americans and settlers. Some thirty years after the War of Independence ended, Andrew Jackson, famed war hero and politician, was elected President. Jackson initiated the first of the removal policies which saw entire tribes being forcibly removed to the West. These removals were to have a devastating effect on the Native American population, as conflict with tribes already settled in the areas allocated to them, disease and starvation caused the deaths of thousands. It also set a dangerous precedent: within a few generations the need for further westward expansion became dire and thus even more Native Americans were dispossessed, often by force. In order to rationalize such blatant imperialism, the American people were led to believe that the Native Americans were nothing but ruthless savages, heathens who had no respect for the sanctity of life nor the values that civilization stood for. Thus it was that the doctrine of Manifest Destiny came into being; imperialism was now a religious duty, the fulfilment of a promise ordained by God. Worst still than this blatant lie were those who claimed that this represented "progress" and that in time the Native Americans would benefit from this progress.

In discussing the events of the period in which *Blood Meridian* is situated, Jonathan Imber Shaw writes:

> During the 1840s, the temporal setting for much of the novel's action, that border region [the border between the United States and Mexico] was the subject of a series of disputes and political crises sparked by President Polk's desire to expand the nation's terrain and John O'Sullivan's rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. These political and rhetorical initiatives precipitated the relentless drive to the Pacific, to open the way to California through then Mexican territories. To effect this expansion more expediently, the Polk administration sought to extend Texas' southern boundary to the Rio Grande, an ambition that completed the annexation of Texas and sparked the Mexican American War. (209-10)

Shaw goes on to argue:

> In 1849 and 1850, a number of American mercenaries, many of whom had spent time in the military, contracted with Mexican government officials to hunt and kill Native American populations. Those tribal nations – largely Apache and Comanche – that had actively taken up arms against Mexican settlements and traders were the putative targets of such contracts. (210-11)

These contractual agreements form the basis of much of the plot in *Blood Meridian* as the Glanton Gang ride from place to place massacring and scalping Native Americans and Mexicans alike. This was not what the Mexican government officials who hired these men had intended; the mercenaries were supposed to safeguard Mexicans and be paid to remove the dangerous Native American tribes. Shaw notes the irony of the failure of this arrangement:

> the Mexican government did business with its former antagonists to protect its populace, only to open the way for the "Anglos" to effectively re-enact the indiscriminate slaughter that marked many episodes of the war. Caught in the middle of this tragic and absurd state of affairs was a portion of that unfortunate populace, the indigenous peasant farmers whose interests had not been served either by the war or the subsequent forays of the scalphunters whose knives soon flayed many pates they had been hired to protect. The farmers' lives were extinguished in frontier regions imbued with the cultural anxieties and spatial confusions that attend shifts in boundaries, when national and ethnic territories expand and contract by the hour. (211)

II *Blood Meridian*'s Literary Influences and Manifest Destiny

Vince Brewton who, has written at length about the links between *Blood Meridian* and the Vietnam War, argues:

> A clear and discernible correlation exists between the novels of McCarthy's first period and the era of American history defined by the military involvement in Vietnam [...] [they] exhibit a similar imaginative and thematic debt to the changing political and cultural landscape of America beginning in the 1980s, a landscape best evoked by the Reagan presidency and the Gulf War with Iraq in 1991. (122)

In other words, McCarthy's novel may be viewed as a reflection of the socio-political upheaval that was the hallmark of American society during the period in which the novel was written and received. And if one takes in to account the quotation from Shaw, above, particularly the phrase "when national and ethnic territories expand and contract by the hour"

(211), then it is possible to see the novel as having an allegorical quality to it. Borders were also constantly being reassessed and redrawn on maps during the Vietnam War, and once the Vietcong began using the Ho Chi Minh Trail through neighbouring Laos and Cambodia, the whole concept of international boundaries quickly became absurd.

Critics have tended to avoid such a reading of the novel as it narrows its focus considerably, from a work that decries the evil of all imperialism to a work that allegorises the West and Vietnam. As Vince Brewton argues, however, understanding the novel relies upon understanding the culture in which it was written:

> The correspondence between McCarthy's work and his times are [sic] part of a larger cultural equation whereby contemporary historical events influenced prevailing cultural attitudes on the one hand, and cultural production on the other, a form of influence manifested in film and literature generally, but felt with equal force in the arena of national media culture, in the campaigns for president in 1980 and 1984 and in the political discourse of the 1980s. (122)

Brewton goes on to suggest that this corresponding link is exemplified "primarily by the representation of violence and issues closely related to violence in the novels" (122). This means that one cannot, according to Brewton, focus purely on the historical record and the violence that accompanied westward expansion in the United States. By scrutinizing the historical record of post-Vietnam America, one may interrogate a whole range of thematic and technical aspects of the novel: the lack of interiority displayed by protagonists, the narrative structure of the novel (why the plot unfolds this particular way and not differently), McCarthy's sharing Conrad's concern with demonstrating the tenuousness of "progress," the nature of the violence during the conflict in Vietnam, and the effect of the ubiquitous representations of this violence upon the American psyche.

Brewton argues that "The Vietnam experience, while never appearing directly in McCarthy's novels, has nevertheless left a deep imprint on his early work" (123). He goes on to suggest that *Blood Meridian* "comes close to being a novel whose true subject is Vietnam, a kind of allegory of American involvement in Southeast Asia and of the reverberations of that history in the American psyche" (123). He further argues that "the novel of 1985 is significantly an artifact of McCarthy's two-decade working through of the war and the mediation of that war by American popular culture" (123).

In agreeing with Brewton's conclusion that the novel does in fact function as a kind of allegory, I would argue that a closer analysis of the text reveals a link between the aesthetics

of violence in *Blood Meridian* and the Vietnam War. As Sepich notes, "[t]he language of 'atrocities' in Vietnam seems consistent, in its language, with that of Glanton's 'atrocities'" (Sepich quoted in Brewton, 123). The work on which Brewton bases much of his argument is Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. *Dispatches* has been widely acclaimed as one of the best works to emerge from any war, and is recognised by many as the "truest" book about Vietnam. Brewton argues that Herr's influence upon McCarthy's novel may be viewed as "significant" (123), a conclusion with which I fervently agree.

Peter Josyph, in an extended note in his book *Cormac McCarthy's House: Reading McCarthy without Walls*, writes:

> When I was delving into de Born, I was also reading Michael Herr's Vietnam memoir, *Dispatches*, published eight years before *Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West* in 1977, and I realized I was reading about the subject of *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*. Not war per se, not the Vietnam referenced in Barclay Owens' *The Western Novels of Cormac McCarthy,* but quite specifically Michael Herr's Vietnam – in other words, another man's art. Herr's Vietnam exists in *Dispatches* and in the parts that he wrote for *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now*, although certainly veterans of Vietnam have recognized their own nightmares in Herr's. (256)

This idea of veterans recognizing "their own nightmares" in a narrative recounted by a man who was officially a non-combatant, raises interesting questions about how collective cultural memories are formed and how they go on to influence other representations of the same war or, in McCarthy's case, different conflicts entirely. Josyph makes a fascinating series of stylistic and lexical connections between Herr's work and *Blood Meridian* by pointing towards the similarities in their depictions of the most grisly gore and violence:

> We know Michael Herr's response to the novel through the blurb that he wrote for it – "A classic American novel of regeneration through violence" – but it would be interesting to know whose idea it was to ask for Herr's comment. I do not mean to ascribe any influence on McCarthy, who might not even have read the book (he probably did). But with passages in Dispatches like: "Our machine was devastating. And versatile. And could do everything but stop" (71), or: "If you kill for money you're a mercenary. If you kill for pleasure you're a sadist. If you kill for both you're a Green Beret" (257), [...] or: "even the dead started telling me stories, you'd hear them out of a remote but accessible space where there were no ideas, no emotions, no facts, no proper language" (31), [...] or: "In Chu Lai some Marines pointed a man out to me who swore to God they'd seen him bayonet a wounded NVA and then lick the

> bayonet clean" (35), [...] or: "[they] followed the black light around the bend and took possession of the madness that had been waiting there in trust for them for eighteen or twenty-five or fifty years" (58), I felt as if I were reading about the Glanton gang, to such a degree that after copying out the relevant passages, I noticed that the citations were reading like this: 13,13, 14, 15,15,15,16,17 – in other words, I was copying out half the book. (257-58)

There is a simple but profound conclusion to be drawn from Josyph's analysis of the two texts: the fact that he is able to find such commonality between two works that are vastly different in terms of setting demonstrates how an allegorical reading of *Blood Meridian* is not as fanciful as some may suggest. Josyph also goes on to state that not even the worst examples of extreme and violent behaviour allow one to make light of the connections that exist between the two works:

> Concentrating on a single motif – even a far-out one like the collection of ears – didn't change the situation, not with bits like: "He pulled a thick plastic bag out of his pack and handed it over to me. It was full of what looked like large pieces of dried fruit. I was stoned and hungry. I almost put my hand in there, but it had a bad weight to it … Someone had told me once, there were a lot more ears than heads in Vietnam" (34), or: "a picture of a Marine holding an ear or maybe two ears or, as in the case of the guy I knew near Pleiku, a whole necklace of ears, 'love beads' as its owner called them." (119)

The kid and the judge do not escape Josyph's attentions either. The connections that he raises between the kid and Herr and the judge and Herr's close friend Tim Page reveal a level of shared concern between the two works that corroborates the idea that *Blood Meridian* operates on an allegorical level. First, in terms of the kid and Herr, Josyph argues:

> Herr's insightful invocation of how he and his fellow correspondents were observed in their observing reminded me of the Kid being watched in his watching and of the fact that the prototype for the Kid, Samuel Chamberlain, was a writer himself and thus a kind of war reporter. (258)

Secondly, Josyph quotes Tim Page's rant about "the glamour of war" which sounds eerily similar to the judge's musings on warfare which I quote and deal with in greater detail in my final chapter. For now, it is sufficient to quote Page, who is outraged at a proposal that he write a book subverting the romance and "glamour" of war. Josyph writes:

> In perhaps the least likely place, I found a flavour of Judge Holden. The photojournalist Tim Page, an English orphan who roamed the globe dangerously before he was wounded many times in many places in Vietnam and who, in Herr's view, was erudite and at times an aristocratic snob, reacts to a proposal by an English publisher to write a book that will take the glamour out of war: "Take the glamour out of war! I mean, how the bloody hell can you do that? Go and take the glamour out of a Huey, go take the glamour out of a Sheridan...It's like trying to take the glamour out of an M-79...Ohhhh, war is good for you, you can't take the glamour out of that. It's like trying to take the glamour out of sex, trying to take the glamour out of the Rolling Stones....I mean, you know that, it just can't be done! The very idea! Ohhh, what a laugh! Take the bloody glamour out of bloody war!" (248-49)

Jospyh argues finally that "[r]e-reading *Dispatches* made me wonder whether it wasn't perhaps necessary to reread everything after one has read *Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West,* for what Herr says about the war in Vietnam applies equally to McCarthy's masterpiece: 'The thing transmitted too much energy'" (49).

Indirectly supporting a reading of *Blood Meridian* as an allegory subversive of Manifest Destiny, Herr writes: "Vietnam was where the Trail of Tears was headed all along, the turnaround point where it would touch and come back to form a containing perimeter" (47). Brewton explains: "Herr uses the familiar imagery of Native American dispossession to suggest that the disastrous American involvement in Vietnam was the logical conclusion of the ideology of Manifest Destiny" (123).

Naturally, such an allegory is a complex and problematic one. The fact is, however, that it plays an important role in making the conflict in Vietnam seem less exceptional or unique than it has been portrayed as. If one were to argue that the study of conflict is merely the study of violent behaviour, then there are no doubt many conflicts that share similarities or have been waged in similar ways. What then becomes critical is how the memory of such conflicts is used and why it is used for a particular agenda. Decoding the role of Manifest Destiny in initiating and spurring on Westward expansion is therefore little different to understanding how perceptions of the conflict in Vietnam have come to shape foreign policies and how contemporary wars are fought. By arguing that such an allegory is the foundation for McCarthy's critique of Manifest Destiny, I hope to demonstrate that the novel seeks both to highlight a shift in American self-definition whilst simultaneously providing a warning that such patterns of behaviour are, as Steven Shaviro argues, "limitless" (11). Herr's work is not a classic battle narrative nor is it by any means exhaustive in terms of detail: it must be noted that while much of what eventually became *Dispatches* was written

while Herr was in Vietnam, large portions of the work were written many years after he had "rotated back to the World". The connection between *Blood Meridian* and *Dispatches* is perhaps not as easily discernible as, say, the connection between *Blood Meridian* and *Moby-Dick*, but it nevertheless exists.

One common thread linking *Blood Meridian* to *Dispatches* is that both works were, in part, influenced by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In the case of *Dispatches*, as Donald Ringnalda eloquently argues, the connection between the two stems largely from a desire to explain the inexplicable:

> Herr's reportage is as different from conventional journalism as Marlow's is different from conventional sea tales. The link between the two became secure in 1979 when Herr did the voice-over for Francis Ford Coppola's version of Marlow – Captain Willard – in *Apocalypse Now*. More importantly, both men realised that what they had witnessed in the heart of darkness was simply beyond conventional storytelling. Their experiences had been altogether too dark, or because of what they revealed about Western behaviour in Third World countries, altogether too light. All "straight history" and straight anything became seriously compromised [...]. The only illumination Marlow and Herr experienced was the illumination of the disintegration of their confidently straight Western consciousness, like tracer rounds illuminating objects targeted for destruction. (72)

I will elaborate further on the connections between *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now* and *Blood Meridian* in Chapter Three, when I examine McCarthy's portrayal of the judge and how this may have been influenced by both Conrad and Coppola. For the purposes of this chapter, it will be sufficient for me to present Ringnalda's arguments about Herr's work and draw parallels between his literary project and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. For just as much as Herr concerns himself with "Western behaviour in Third World countries" and the rapid disintegration of both morality and "confidently straight Western consciousness," McCarthy uses this very disintegration as a means to critique the terrible realities of Manifest Destiny, the foundation upon which all American imperialist adventures have relied. Ringnalda continues his explanation of Herr's treatment of such moral disintegration before elaborating on his choice of form in *Dispatches*:

> Herr suggests an analogue for this disintegration as he observes "the phosphorescence that gathered around rotting tree trunks and sent pulsing light over the ground from one damp spot to another" (269). Instead of structuring episodes on a continuum, Herr moves pulsatingly from one "damp" critical mass to another. The episodes that Conrad's external narrator speaks of are like a tier of new cement blocks: coherent ,

> self-contained parts of the larger structure. But for Marlow and Herr, all is *a*-part. Meaning is as elusive as the muddy serpentine Congo River or the ominous, unmappable Central Highlands of Vietnam. Instead of kernels, both stories are swirling strobes eerily illuminating the spooky shadows. (72).

McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, whilst having more of a "concrete" episodic structure, is just as determined to "illuminate the spooky shadows" of the American West. Meaning in *Blood Meridian* is difficult to discern clearly and this is perhaps why it is often referred to as "nihilist" text. The absence of an unambiguous conclusion to the novel and the mystique that surrounds the judge are trifling when compared to our lack of access to the imagined, mythic world that McCarthy explores in *Blood Meridian*: it is as remote to us as the battlements of Troy or Marco Polo's descriptions of Xanadu. One must also consider the chronology of the plot: we are told that the kid "takes as pay from a farmer an aged mule and aback this animal in the spring of the year eighteen and forty-nine he rides up through the latterday republic of Fredonia into the town of Nacogdoches" (5). From this point until the final chapter of the novel ("the late winter of eighteen seventy-eight", 333), we are provided with no details of the efflux of time during the gang's adventuring and the kid's journey. The absence of specific chronological detail is a deliberate technique on McCarthy's part: whatever details we are presented with are all the more remarkable as a result. One may speculate at some of the weather patterns described in the novel to try and fix a season to the Gang's appearance in a particular place but this is as problematic as McCarthy's treatment of landscape. Furthermore, the words "They rode on" blur the places visited and actions of the gang into the same kind of "swirling strobes" of Herr's narrative: we are given place names and sometimes dates but it is the ceaseless movement from place to place that gives both works their own particular style. Herr describes this ceaseless movement:

> As a technique for staying alive it seemed to make as much sense as anything, given naturally that you were there to begin with and wanted to see it close; it started out sound and straight but it formed a cone as it progressed, because the more you moved the more you saw, the more you saw the more besides death and mutilation you risked, and the more you risked of that the more you would have to let go of one day as a 'survivor'. (9)

The idea of the kid being just such a "survivor", of "getting out" will form part of the next chapter. For now, it is sufficient to note that both Herr and McCarthy (as Conrad did before either of them) rely upon the power of the journey motif to captivate their readership. In a sense, due to the lack of interiority displayed by McCarthy's characters, the journey informs a

great deal of our understanding of the border region and its surrounds. Yet such journeys are not finite: their experiential value continues to affect those who witnessed them long after they are deemed to have ended. Just as Ishmael says in the epilogue of *Moby-Dick:* "The drama is done. Why then here does any one step forth? Because one did survive the wreck" (676). Herr too has his own tale of "survival" to tell. When Herr arrives back in "the World" he can still feel the rush and fatigue that recognition of his survival provides:

> Back in the World now, and some of us aren't making it. The story got old or we got old, a great deal more than the story had taken us there anyway, and many things had been satisfied. Or so it seemed when, after a year or two or five, we realized that we were simply tired. We came to fear something more complicated than death, an annihilation less final but more complete, and we got out. Because (more lore) we all knew that if you stayed too long you became one of those poor bastards who had to have a war all the time, and what was that? We got out and became like everyone else who has been through a war: changed, enlarged and (some things are expensive to say) incomplete. (244)

Herr continues this line of thought a few pages later:

> Home: twenty-eight years old, feeling like Rip van Winkle, with a heart like one of those little paper pills they make in China, you drop them into water and they open out to form a tiger or a flower or a pagoda. Mine opened out into war and loss. There'd been nothing happening there that hadn't existed there already coiled up and waiting, back in the world. (254)

This sense that Herr's state of mind and his feeling of loss were buried deep within him is not unlike the judge telling the Gang: "War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way" (262). The survival narrative is important as it demonstrates a willingness to confront the idea that warzones in the Third World are not as markedly different from peaceful, First World settings as those who live in either believe they are: atrocity and violence are common wherever there are people. They may take on different forms or have different levels of extremity but the fact is that the idea that the First World is a utopia compared to the terrors of the Third World is no less a myth than the justifications for Manifest Destiny. The survival narrative is one key way in which such barriers are first exposed and then shattered.

It must however be noted that our "illumination" of the true horrors of American involvement in Third World settings is limited. Unlike most journalists and authors of the

period who presented themselves as authorities for having been on the ground, Herr is highly self-depreciatory in this regard: if anything, he maintains that "[c]onventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it" (220). He repudiates his right to be considered an authority and thus paradoxically confirms his status *as* an authority. McCarthy similarly tells his readers, through the hermit the kid encounters early on in the novel, "A man's at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know it with" (20). This speaks to our physical capacity to understand events that shape and mould life around us, and it is by no means the only time McCarthy elaborates on the limited power of human perception. The judge, having resolved the dispute between Black Jackson and Sergeant Aguilar in Chapter Seven, tells the former:

> It is not necessary, he said, that the principals here be in possession of all the facts concerning their case, for their acts will ultimately accommodate history, with or without their understanding. But it is consistent with notions of right principle that these facts – *to the extent that they can readily be made to do so* – should find a repository in the witness of some third party. (90; emphasis my own)

Conrad, Herr and McCarthy himself are examples of just such "third parties": their ability as individuals to attempt to explain the inexplicable horrors of Western "adventures" in Third World countries may be gripping and startling in equal measure but they are still limited. The works they create must be seen as products of an imperfect historical and mythic record, and of the limitations that language itself imposes on the mediation of atrocity or man's most basic condition ("The horror," as Conrad called it). The phrase "the extent that they can be readily made to do so" is a subtle acknowledgment within *Blood Meridian* of a lack of authority which, like Herr's admission, paradoxically confers narrative authority. One could also argue that it further highlights the possibility of Herr's influence upon McCarthy, if *Blood Meridian* is read allegorically. For it is this precise willingness to disavow any notion of his work as authoritative that first created and has subsequently ensured Herr's popularity with readers. Ringnalda argues:

> *Dispatches* is a freewheeling collage of straightforward remembering, hallucination, irony, acid sarcasm, jump cuts, freeze frames, stream of consciousness, incongruous juxtaposition, realism, surrealism, Dadaism, and metafiction. It is a bulimic book that pigs out at the literary supermarket as it desperately tries to satisfy its appetite for a *real* opening in the wall. Finally, because Herr is acutely aware of the "fictive forms already imposed by one's culture upon the experiencing mind," his book is founded

> on a paradox: *self-conscious* artificiality engenders authenticity. (81; emphasis in original)

It is this "self-conscious artificiality" that McCarthy exploits in order to achieve an authentic perspective from which to debunk the mythology of Manifest Destiny. We know that McCarthy painstakingly researches all his novels and that he himself is well read in a wide variety of fields. *Blood Meridian* is one in a series of great American novels that share similar concerns and features. As McCarthy told Richard Woodward in their 1992 interview "Venomous Fiction," "Books are made out of other books" (Woodward). Whilst McCarthy may term this as "an ugly fact" (Woodward), Robert Rebein writes:

> This statement seems to me to be a good place to begin thinking about a book like *Blood Meridian,* which comes so clearly out of the books that came before it. On the one hand, and exactly one hundred years before *Blood Meridian* (1985), we have *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), which, like McCarthy's novel, features a fourteen-year-old "kid" who leaves an alcoholic father and strikes out for a territory where he will confront the evil, ignorance and violence of man's most basic condition. (117)

Rebein goes on to elaborate on the links among *Blood Meridian,* Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* and Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and these links are of great significance when one examines McCarthy's critique of Manifest Destiny:

> Like *Huckleberry Finn* and *Blood Meridian, Absalom! Absalom!* is set almost entirely in the mid-nineteenth century, hovering around the crucial decade before the Civil War. This time period (1849-50) takes on an additional importance when we consider the other book that has influenced *Blood Meridian* in a profound way, namely, Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). From the single interview we have with McCarthy, we know that *Moby-Dick* is his favourite book. We also know that Faulkner thought highly of *Moby-Dick* and was in fact in the process of reading it aloud to his daughter during the composition of *Absalom! Absalom!*(117)

Rebein argues further:

> These somewhat touristic remarks take on a new meaning when we consider that *Blood Meridian* belongs to a long line of American novels that in one sense or another meditate upon the moral consequences of American power, especially in the crucial decade of the nineteenth century. (117)

Thus, the recognition of "moral consequences" informing McCarthy's critique of Manifest Destiny is hardly new; this despite the fact that his own particular interpretation and critique

are arguably the most startling among the novels mentioned above. Even stylistically, however, McCarthy's influences are easily recognizable, as Rebein argues:

> *Huckleberry Finn* and *Absalom! Absalom!* are both concerned with the historical significance of slavery and the broader issue of race relations, and *Absalom! Absalom!* especially figures these as the result of an Ahabian will to power. Thomas Sutpen, it is often remarked, is a wronged Huckleberry Finn who grows into a kind of Ahab, seeking the obliteration of past wrongs through an explosive will to power that ignores all moral consequences. The downfall of his "design" which stands as a metaphor for the "design" of the South, comes about when his *sons* rise up against him. From here, it is only a small step to the last text that figures into all of the above, namely the King James Version of the Bible, which supplies the names of both Ahab and Absalom, the theme of sons rising against their fathers, and indeed, the peculiar linguistic force we find in all of these authors. (117; emphasis in the original)

McCarthy not only wished to emulate his two greatest literary idols, Melville and Faulkner, he wished also to essay a kind of allegorical critique that both those authors and Twain had become revered for. The radical shift from his Appalachian works to the genre with which he has ultimately become more readily associated further supports this idea. America, in the wake of the turbulent social upheavals of the late 1960s that continued well into 1970s, needed a work that allowed for deep introspection, a work that challenged social ordering and concepts of what it meant to be moral and civilized. If one adds to this list of influences both Conrad and Herr, it is not impossible to see how McCarthy was able to develop his own allegorical critique. Rebein, however, has one more insight to offer that is further proof of McCarthy's attitude towards both self-conscious artificiality and Manifest Destiny. Rebein quotes the judge's "parable of the lost father" in Chapter Eleven:

> The story might be called the parable of the lost father, since it deals with, as the judge says "a son whose father's existence in this world is historical and speculative even before the son has entered it" (145). This son, who we later find, "went away to the west and . . . himself became a killer of men" is, "in a bad way. All his life he carries before him the idol of a perfection to which he can never attain" (145). Likewise, the Indians the Judge and his men hunt "wander these canyons to the sound of ancient laughter" (146). "The tools, the art, the building" of the ancient Pueblo ancestors – "these things stand in judgment on the latter races" (146). And so it is also with the Judge's men, many of them descendants of Europe's most advanced civilizations, who now wander the deserts of the American West, little more than primitives. And so it is finally with McCarthy himself, who would appear to understand how the great books of the past stand in judgment on the works of all later writers, even as the best work of later writers alters all that came before. (119)

III Manifest Destiny and American Foreign Policy

The mythology of the American West has been a part of American foreign policy for decades. Stephen Silliman has written about the duality of the metaphor of "Indian Country" and how it is variously used in the United States today. He argues:

> "Indian Country" is a complex metaphor. For Native Americans it signifies home, territory, families and friends, sacred space, landscape and community. One can hear of it from New England to the Northwest Coast and from the Southwest to the Dakotas. It denotes particularly Native spaces in the geographical and cultural landscape of the United States, ones that may comprise ancestral territories and reservations, refer to sacred spaces, be framed by wins and losses in federal acknowledgement battles, and crosscut rural and urban environments. Because "Indian Country" is not one place it is a metaphor for what it means (and where it means) to be Native American in the contemporary United States (237).

This is, however, not the only way in which the metaphor is used. The phrase has also been incorporated into military jargon. Noting the difference between the description quoted above and the military use of the term, Silliman maintains that:

> Counteracting this positive valence is the work that "Indian Country" does in another realm: as a metaphor used by U.S. military personnel to refer to hostile, unpacified territories in active war zones. From the Vietnam War to the occupation of Iraq by U.S. forces beginning in 2003, the notion of "Indian Country" offers a powerful heritage metaphor for the armed forces. The phrase summons the history of Native American and U.S. military encounters, particularly those of the 19th century, in ways that interpret the present in the light of the past, that retell (or reinterpret) the past through present political filters, and that forecast the future while justifying the present. (237)

The military's use of the term "Indian Country" is not dissimilar to the way in which McCarthy critiques the doctrine of Manifest Destiny in *Blood Meridian*, only in the case of the novel it is largely through irony that the retelling of "the past through present political filters" is transmitted to the reader. If one accepts that "Indian Country" is as much an invocation of an attitude towards American military intervention as it is a fixed series of geographical spaces, then the reader is made aware of such irony in the very first chapter of the novel:

> Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins become remote 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. (5)

There is no doubt that the "Old West" has a distinctive character as a geographical space, a harsh and exacting landscape seemingly hostile to human endeavour. To the extent that its like will not be seen again "in all the world's turning", it is a unique and implicitly valorised character. Yet there is arguably nothing exceptional or extraordinary about the patterns of behaviour that McCarthy describes in the novel: such scenes, albeit in different guises, have been played out for centuries across a range of terrains and locations. The question then becomes: are these terrains "wild and barbarous" because that is their natural state, or have they acquired virtual malevolence because of the atrocities committed within them? The landscapes that McCarthy goes on to describe in such detail, however, do not conform to the typical depictions of landscape in either Western films or pulp fiction. In fact, they are decidedly *atypical*, creating a sense of an almost otherworldly location.

This contrast between expectation and reality was of course the defining shock to those who saw combat in Vietnam, and herein lies the principal danger in continuing to use terms like "Indian Country" that "interpret the present in light of the past": it perpetuates the idea that victory is assured, that the Cowboys will always defeat the Indians, that such territory is not to be feared as it is no different from the ranges and ranches shown on the sets of Western films. In reality, however, it is difficult to think of place more different from the Southwestern United States than Vietnam: one is largely arid desert with occasional greenery along the courses of the major rivers like the Colorado, the other is mainly dense jungle and marshland and is subject to torrential downpours for months on end during the monsoon season. It is therefore understandable why so many troops in Vietnam quickly became disillusioned with the nature of the fighting: if this was "Indian Country" then it was an altogether different kind of "Indian Country," one where the distinction between ally and deadly human enemy had been upstaged by the alien climate and physical conditions. This contrast is something that troubled the likes of Herr, who had anticipated an altogether different kind of experience of warfare.

The designation of hostile territory as "Indian Country" is among the least of the ways in which the mythology of the West continues to be used in the present day. In the wake of the 9/11 terror attacks, Frontier mythology came to be used as a major component of the political rationale for American involvement in both Afghanistan and later Iraq. As Mark West and Chris Carey argue:

> The Bush administration's public discourse after September 11 pursued many rhetorical veins, but a story embedded in the national myth of the Old West carried special significance, with vast implications for the sentiment of its audiences and for war policy. A careful examination of the tactical narration of frontier justice by President Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney reveals the deliberate deployment of a particularly potent chapter of "America's story" delivered to key audiences to secure consent at critical junctures in the War on Terrorism. (380)

The success of past imperialistic ambitions and their rationale is therefore used to inspire, promote, initiate and continue the ambitions of today. This is done in a number of ways, the most common being a symbolic identification of political leaders with figures of importance in Frontier mythology, real or imagined. This speaks to the role that popular narratives play in creating both entertainment and versions of history, particularly in the US where Frontier mythology has played so prominent a role in constructing a national identity. As West and Carey argue:

> The half-century that bridged the closing of westward expansion in the late 1800s, to the early years of electronic mass media in the mid-1900s, was supported as all rhetorical narrative is, by the telling of stories. The actual lived experiences of the frontiersmen and women of the historical Western territories made their way to the American public consciousness both through news stories and the tall tales that were the popular currency of the age before cinema and television. (384)

West and Carey focus on two American political greats, Theodore Roosevelt (a man who through his actions and lifestyle exuded the qualities associated with Frontier Mythology) and Ronald Reagan (who as an actor had played various roles as a heroic gunslinger, akin to a knight errant figure), to demonstrate just how pervasive Western mythology became in the twentieth century. Roosevelt was an important founding figure in the history of using Frontier mythology for personal and political gain, as West and Carey explain:

> Perhaps the central character on the historical bridge from Western expansion to the rise of a national identity, the shift from country to court, is an American president: war hero, storyteller, and model of rugged individualism, Theodore Roosevelt. As President during the turn-of-the-century national effort to populate the newly expanded American West, and at the same time seeking to preserve the natural environment of the new states, Roosevelt set out to make a strong mark on the mind of the electorate. In addition to his embodiment of the Western hero, one of the earliest records of explicit presidential rhetoric in conjuring the values of the Old West was in the speeches of President Roosevelt. His advocacy of conservationism

> built today's stage for the sacred mythology of the Old West and his push to increase immigration to populate the new sovereign territory with loyal citizens gave identity to the Western hero, one and all: "We want Americans, pure and simple." (384).

This conferral of all the heroism and power of the legendary figures of the West on the average settler created a sense of national pride that has endured, and continues to endure, despite hostile scrutiny and criticism. Identification with such figures is dangerous as the popular version of events is frequently far from accurate and even deliberately skewed in order to foster unity and co-operation. This may also go some way to explaining why the kid has so little identity granted him by McCarthy: his anonymity confers a measure of universality.

Roosevelt and Reagan were not unique in their use of Frontier mythology to advance their own causes and designs, but they did embody the mythical ideal to an unusual degree. As West and Carey point out,

> Other presidents following Roosevelt, and preceding Reagan, employed the naming of the frontier as a powerful trope for advancing policy. But Roosevelt and Reagan were unusual; they didn't need to speak the key words of American frontier mythology repeatedly because each embodied them in himself. Each president was an avid outdoorsman and no-nonsense individualist, the former actually growing up in the time of the frontier and the latter playing such characters in films. (384)

McCarthy's novel was thus written and published during a time when the president of the United States, the very symbol of Western power and dominance, used the myths of the Old West in order to promote national policy. If the Vietnam War affected how violence is portrayed in the novel, then the novel's powerful attack on Manifest Destiny seems driven by this fact: that Frontier mythology continues to have as much effect on the American public as it did when Westward expansion was taking place. The supposedly self-contained universe in which McCarthy sets his novel has in fact no borders or boundaries, no physical limits in terms of either time or space. The meridian of blood is not limited to the North American continent or even Southeast Asia; as long as Frontier mythology continues to be invoked in the service of belligerent propaganda, there will be no such thing as a border.

Reagan is an important figure to consider, given that his presidential term coincides not only with the re-intensification of the Cold War but also with the writing and publishing of *Blood Meridian*. The role of bears in the novel, in two particular cases, makes for interesting reading when one considers how the bear was used by Reagan in his campaign for re-election in 1984. As West and Carey argue,

> In Reagan's 1984 re-election campaign the famous television commercial that framed the Soviet threat as a "bear in the woods" was a rare political moment explicitly conjuring the president as the guardian gunslinger. The spot features a faceless hunter with a rifle, crunching through the forest, with a warm voiceover favouring Reagan's candidacy – an image not unlike Davy Crockett or any other iconic Western settler keeping the national psyche safe. The camera cut away to the image of a grizzly bear in the same woods, ominously moving through the underbrush, and then back to the hunter. At the close of the ad, the elder male voiceover asked "There's a bear in the woods...Isn't it smart to be as strong as the bear?" In the ongoing fantasy chain of presidential frontier this Reagan commercial holds a very strong link, creating cultural cinematography that stuck in the American consciousness. (385)

Now consider two episodes from *Blood Meridian* where bears feature prominently; the first when one of the Delawares in the Gang is violently attacked and carried off by a bear:

> and just at dusk as Glanton's horse was clambering over a fallen log a lean blond bear rose up out of the swale on the far side where it had been feeding and looked down on them with dim pig's eyes. [...] and the bear's long muzzle swung toward them in a stunned articulation, amazed beyond reckoning, some foul gobbet dangling from its jaws and its chops dyed red with blood. [...] Glanton cocked the pistol a third time as the bear swung with the Indian dangling from its mouth like a doll and passed over him in a sea of honey coloured hair smeared with blood and a reek of carrion and the rooty smell of the creature itself. [...] Several rifleshots rang out and the beast loped horribly into the forest with his hostage and was lost among the darkening trees. (144)

The failed attempt to retrieve the bear's victim is summarized thus by McCarthy: "The bear had carried off their kinsman like some fabled storybook beast and the land had swallowed them up beyond all ransom or reprieve" (145).

Now consider the bear dancing in the saloon in Griffin, Texas, at the conclusion of the novel:

> An old man in a tyrolean costume was shuffling among the rough tables with his hat outheld while a little girl in a smock cranked a barrel organ and a bear in crinoline twirled strangely upon a board stage defined by a row of tallow candles that dripped and sputtered in their pools of grease. (342)

The fate of the dancing bear is as heart-wrenching as it is cruel, a complete distortion of the hunter mythology that created legends of the frontier like Davy Crockett:

> The shot was thunderous and in the afterclap all sound in that room ceased. The bear had been shot through the midsection. He let out a low moan and he began to dance faster, dancing in silence save for the slap of his great footpads on the planks. Blood was running down his groin. [...] The man with the pistol fired again and the pistol bucked and roared and the black smoke rolled and the bear groaned and began to reel drunkenly. He was holding his chest and a thin foam of blood swung from his jaw and he began to totter and to cry like a child and he took a last few step, dancing and crashed to the boards. (343-44)

If the first episode is intended to dispel the hunter mythology utilised in the Reagan campaign advert, then the second completely subverts it. The bear is regarded by many Native American tribes as a keeper of the West, a teacher of young hunters and a symbol of great power. In the taking of the Delaware, the gang is unable to prevent him being seized by the bear and his fellow-tribesman is unable to locate even a trace of him. This could be symbolic of McCarthy's desire to show how futile the idea of being "as strong as the bear" really is. Even though the gang fires multiple shots at the bear, it does not die but disappears into the woods with its prey. On a figurative level, therefore, the failure to kill the bear may obliquely represent doubt in the superiority of American capitalism over communism. The killing of the dancing bear in the saloon in Griffin, however, suggests an explicit criticism of frontier mythology's being used for purposes like electioneering and entertainment. The dancing bear is an unnatural occurrence, a perversion of nature trained and dressed up to entertain the patrons of the bar. McCarthy's critique of Manifest Destiny would not be complete without such an analogy. Was McCarthy indeed influenced by the Reagan campaign advert? I am inclined to think so, though any answer to this question must of course remain entirely speculative.

IV Captain White and the Filibusters: A case study in conquest ideology

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny is best captured in *Blood Meridian* by the musings of Captain White (a name pregnant with allusion). At this early stage of the novel, the kid is still very much on a search for direction and purpose. Having already journeyed more than a thousand miles from his birthplace in Tennessee, he is recruited to join a filibuster expedition over the border into Mexico. Such expeditions were common during the 1850s; according to Slotkin they were

> private military expeditions, usually invited and organized by Latin American patriots-in-exile or embattled in-country partisans, whose aim was to use American manpower and firepower to achieve victory. In the 1850s the enemies against which expeditions were directed were chiefly the regimes of the surviving Spanish colonies in Cuba and the islands, and the Conservative (also "Servile" or "Legitimist") governments of Central America. (243)

When the kid questions Sergeant Trammel, the man sent to recruit him, about the end of the war (which had just been concluded by a treaty) the man replies "He [Captain White] says it aint over" (31). Asked if he is ready to go to Mexico, the kid replies "I aint lost nothing down there" (31). The laconic humour aside, the words are trenchantly ironic: the kid will go on to lose a great deal in Mexico, and not only material items. But the absence of interiority that so distinguishes the representation of character in the novel means that the changes initiated in the kid by his experience of travel across the border remain largely invisible and unknowable. It is unclear from the novel whether the expedition is officially sanctioned or not; we are told that Captain White has "the tacit support of Governor Burnett of California" (37), but this does not amount to an official order. It makes little difference either way: what is crucial to understand is not so much the mission but the *impulse* behind the will to embark upon it. Officers were encouraged to use their initiative in the field and would exploit the communication delay between their position and the seats of power. This was an operational necessity but it did give officers greater opportunity to abuse their power and act clandestinely. Many officers in the field exploited this situation during the Vietnam War. The kid seems impressed by Captain White's command of rhetoric. No doubt the sales pitch that the Captain delivers to the kid to persuade him to join up is one he has used on many other occasions. Like most effective propaganda, the Captain uses simple language that appeals to the kid's sense of patriotism and desire for adventure. The transformation that such propaganda allows speaks to its timelessness: the unwilling have ever been convinced by the language of their commanders to make sacrifices in the name of what Wilfred Owen famously called "the old lie." The Captain's motives, patriotic as they may seem, are not altogether altruistic. Soldiers in the United States Cavalry, particularly an irregular unit made up of volunteers, such as Captain White's, were not paid well. They relied on the promise of land and being able to loot and pillage from the civilian population, much as soldiers have done for thousands of years. As Sergeant Trammel relates: "Hell fire son, you won't need no wages. You get to keep everything you can raise. We goin to Mexico. Spoils of war. Aint a man in the company who wont come out a big landowner" (32).The promise of productivity

or making a quick fortune selling to oil prospectors or railway companies intent on connecting the nation meant that the prospect of owning land, despite its appearing to have little value, would excite any volunteer. As Slotkin writes: "The American officers and soldiers enlisted for these expeditions were promised land and political offices under the new regime, so that their forays often had the cover of colonization and always the prospect of economic gain" (243).

This hoary belief in the West as holding endless wealth invokes all the shine and allure of older myths like *El Dorado* that spurred on explorers and Conquistadors in the wake of Columbus's successful return. One must, however, question how valid such a promise is. Sergeant Trammel promises that which is not his to give away – a figure, if you like, for the dispossession of Native Americans and Mexicans. In both cases, the opponents of westward expansion saw their land carved up and distributed, only for much of it to be destroyed by over-grazing and the pollution that modern civilization brings with it. The kid is quite easily recruited as he fits the ideal profile: young, unmarried, without family or responsibilities except to himself. This is suggestive of the draft policy during the Vietnam War (and presumably all the major conflicts America has been involved in). The death of a married man with children creates a greater degree of unpopular perception of the conflict than the death of an unmarried man with little or no connections or ties to the community. If one wishes to examine this in terms of economy, the State has no obligation to provide compensation in such cases.

The kid is to receive a rifle, a horse and a new set of clothes, to him, all the trappings of status. He gains distinction by virtue of this elevated position. He is no longer a wanderer who partakes in vices and becomes violent when presented with arguments. Rather he is now a militiaman, a title that carries with it all the historic significance of his Appalachian roots, the Tennessee Minutemen having been legends in the American War of Independence. Furthermore, as the Captain relates during their interview later on in the chapter, Volunteers from Tennessee fought against the Mexican army at Monterrey with great distinction. This explains why Sergeant Trammel expresses confidence in the kid's proficiency with a gun, saying: "Well I dont misdoubt you can shoot a rifle" (32). The recruiter's invitation to "come up and meet the Captain" is also significant. The story of his chequered past before meeting the Captain is not entirely dissimilar from the path the kid himself has been on for some time. The image of the Sergeant being "raised up like Lazarus" (32) from a dreamlike state to the wonders of a renewed reality, presents the Captain as a Messianic figure capable of putting people "on the path of righteousness" (32).

The inability to see that there is very little that is righteous about invading a neighbouring state with the express purposes of killing, looting and dispossessing people of their land is indicative of the religious imperative behind the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. Arguments that were contrary to the doctrine, namely that God wished all humankind to live in peace and that making war on other nations was not Christian, were dismissed as seditious or even heretical.

Trammel finishes off his tale of salvation by saying "He seen somethin in me worth savin and I see it in you" (32). This idea of "seeing somethin" is one that will be echoed by the judge in the final chapter of the novel. This is intended, I would argue, to reinforce the idea that the kid is not unremarkable or without charisma. Of course the kid is a virtual unknown to Sergeant Trammel, so his sentiment about "seein somethin" is vague and could well be seen to be a reference to any number of character traits or flaws. What the Sergeant means to say is, "You could be of some use to us on our expedition," but this would only add to the kid's reluctance. The kid, unmoved by this tale of salvation and indifferent about his own, is then invited to meet the Captain.

His response of "Well...dont reckon it'd hurt nothin" (32) is deliberately ironic and misleading; by successfully convincing the kid to agree to go and meet the Captain the Sergeant knows his task is complete. The task of safely removing any lingering doubts the kid may have can safely be left to the impression his senior officer will make upon him. This again highlights McCarthy's use of irony: it is possible that the kid could be wounded or killed if he signs up for the expedition, so it could wind up hurting a lot more than "nothing."

The kid is then taken to meet the Captain. In order to assert his authority over the scene, the Captain makes both the recruiter and the kid stand and wait while he finishes writing a letter. The process of sealing the letter with wax and imprinting his seal on it again reinforces the idea that the Captain belongs to a different social class from the men standing before him. This notion of commission or high rank granting one standing in higher social circles (provided of course that the soldier in question met certain criteria such as being educated and well-mannered) was borrowed from England and other European colonial powers, who praised and rewarded the upper echelons sent to keep the empire safe or to expand it as need be. Captain White is no exception; the fact that he does not remain seated but instead chooses to walk around the front of the desk and loom over the interviewees is a subtle reminder of the power dynamic. Our attention as readers is also drawn to the Captain's revolver, still something of a novelty in the late 1840s. Guns were not widely available in the

West until after the Civil War when there were surplus stocks from arms manufacturers like Springfield, Smith and Wesson and of course Colt.

The Captain's revolver, therefore, is not just a symbol of authority and power but also a symbol of wealth. The Captain then asks the kid a curious question, one that is rhetorical in nature and is designed to highlight the Captain's position of authority "What do you think about the treaty?" (35). The Captain is aware that the kid is uneducated and has little comprehension of the importance of the treaty that has been signed. Whatever opinion the kid is likely to have on the treaty is unlikely to change how the Captain feels, hence the question is designed more to test the kid than to reveal his opinions. Again, this could be construed as a metaphor for public relations between the state and the public during the Vietnam War, particularly as the war became more and more unpopular. Asking people how they felt about a war was something of a Catch-22; unless they had themselves served in Vietnam, they could have little understanding of what the conflict was like. Despite this, patriotism and nationalism run deep in American society. Thus, if America is at war, Americans recognize a civic duty to support American intervention and "get behind the troops." This mental conditioning was largely as a result of the very successful "Home Front" propaganda of the Second World War. There had been protests against American involvement in conflicts before but this stemmed largely from a belief in isolationism more than any concern for American lives or the economy. Vietnam was the first major conflict where the people against the conflict found themselves in a majority. The similarities between the ending of the Mexican War and the Vietnam War become clearer as the Captain continues his speech about the disregard shown for the men who saw combat in Mexico:

> They were sold out. Fought and died down there in that desert and then they were sold out by their own country.
>
> The kid sat silent.
>
> The captain leaned forward. We fought for it. Lost friends and brothers down there. And then by God if we didnt give it back. Back to a bunch of barbarians that even the most biased in their favor will admit have no least notion in God's earth of honor or justice or the meaning of republican government. A people so cowardly they've paid tribute a hundred years to tribes of naked savages. Given up their crops and livestock. Mines shut down. Whole villages abandoned. (36)

The "if we didnt give it back" part of this musing is what is important to note: the Captain feels, possibly with some justification that the sacrifices of so many brave men should not end in defeatism and the pragmatism of diplomacy. His overtly racist and bigoted viewpoint does not fully mask a truth that was true of Vietnam, and more recently, Afghanistan and

Iraq: the United States has had to extract itself from difficult military situations and "give back" a great deal in order to ensure peace, despite often being the aggressor who initiated the conflict to begin with. The Captain continues this line of argumentation later on in the interview:

> And I don't think you're the sort of chap to abandon a land that Americans fought and died for to a foreign power. And mark my word. Unless Americans act, people like you and me who take their country seriously while those mollycoddles in Washington sit on their hindsides, unless we act, Mexico–and I mean the whole of the country – will one day fly a European flag. Monroe Doctrine or no. (37)

The effect of the withdrawal from South Vietnam after the Paris Peace Accords were signed was particularly damaging to the American psyche, as this was the first time in history that American forces had suffered total military defeat. The damage only increased once the true cost of the War, in terms of both lives and money spent, sank in. This irrational fear of European involvement in American affairs masquerading as legitimate concern is typical of the kind of rhetoric that was used during the Cold War; it formed the basis of the "Domino Theory" and the communist witch hunts led by Senator McCarthy. There is a subtle subversion of the usual pattern of escalation here, though: usually it is Washington that must justify involvement, not those ordered to do the bidding of those in power. In the mind of the Captain, the seeming lack of ruthlessness and action on the part of the politicians in Washington is out of regard for their own safety and political wellbeing. McCarthy's equation of a fear of European domination of neighbouring states during the 1850s and all the fear and paranoia associated with Communism during the Cold War is entirely justified. The Captain then begins the next step in his "sales pitch": convincing the kid of the United States army's superiority over the Mexicans:

> Did you know when Colonel Doniphan took Chihuahua City he inflicted over a thousand casualties on the enemy and lost only one man and him all but a suicide? With an army of unpaid irregulars that called him Bill, were half naked and had walked to the battlefield from Missouri? (36)

Even if the information that is used to pose these questions is correct (which I have great difficulty in believing), the Captain is deliberately exaggerating the strength of even irregular units against a determined and skilful enemy who, some weeks before Chihuahua City was taken, had inflicted a defeat on the US troops at the Alamo, a name that is just as significant in United States military history as Gettysburg, Bastogne, Hue City or Khe Sahn. Davy

Crockett, one of the very symbols of the frontier, the greatest hunter and trapper since Daniel Boone, was killed there. Jim Bowie, another famous frontiersman and inventor of the Bowie Knife was also killed during the battle. The need to avenge the loss of men like Bowie and Crockett ran deep within the psyche of the American public and may go some way to explaining the Captain's urgent desire to ride into Mexico and exact vengeance. The fact that the United States had acquired California, Oregon and Texas as part of the terms of the peace treaty is irrelevant, and this is where religion again conditions people to be advocates of the doctrine.

The Bible, as we are later told in *Blood Meridian*, "has many a tale of war inside it" (262). The notion of vengeance against those who disobey or anger God is well founded in the Old Testament: Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden, the mark of Cain, Sodom and Gomorrah, the flood that forced Noah to build an ark and the Ten Plagues of Egypt, to name but a few. The idea of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was later tempered by New Testament teachings which encourage true Christians not to take revenge upon their enemies but rather, as Christ enjoins them, "to turn the other cheek." The real "fire and brimstone" of the Old Testament, however, is what was used at the pulpit and in written pamphlets to advocate the continued westward expansion of the United States. The concept of saving heathen souls from damnation was also a powerful motivator, but the idea of having a religious duty akin to that of the Crusaders in the Holy Land centuries before was one that greatly appealed to the more conservative elements of American society.

Having satisfied the kid with a suitably tall tale of American military superiority, the Captain begins to hold forth on some of the principles of what we would now term Social Darwinism. The idea of Americans being racially superior to the other peoples they encountered on the North American continent was nothing new: since the very first conflicts between Native Americans and Puritan settlers, this blatant racism was reinforced by a perception of backwardness, by military successes and by the inability of Native Americans to survive the many infectious diseases brought to America from Europe. In the case of the people of Mexico, their willingness to pay tribute to tribes such as the Apache combined with their close economic and social ties to Spain (the colonial relationship so reviled by Americans who wanted nothing more than to be free of the "Old World"), different language and Catholic religion, meant that they were seen as inferior.

The striking thing about the Captain's overtly racist speech at this point is not so much the fact that it clearly demonstrates how much of the public and in particular those in positions of authority felt about their neighbours. Rather, what is troubling is the fact that his

rhetoric is so familiar to the reader. This kind of racism has become entrenched in modern society. It was used as the justification for Hitler's *Rassenkrieg* in the East; for American propaganda against the Japanese during World War Two; as the reasoning behind opposition to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States; justification for apartheid in South Africa, and an endless list of outrages and atrocities committed under colonial rule. The fact that organisations like the Ku Klux Klan are still in existence today proves that such rhetoric is hardly a thing of the past. Perhaps the best example, one that would have been even more familiar than any of these to McCarthy's readership in 1985, is the kind of racial propaganda that was used to justify American involvement in Vietnam and worse, justify atrocities like the My-Lai Massacre.

A closer examination of the Captain's words leaves us in little doubt as to the metaphor that McCarthy seeks to invoke here:

> The captain leaned back and folded his arms. What we are dealing with here, he said, is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there's no God in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people *manifestly incapable of governing themselves*. And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That's right. We come in to govern for them. (36; emphasis added)

The remark "Hell, there's no God in Mexico" is noteworthy as it is indicative of the kind of permissive attitude that prevails in "Indian Country." Beyond the border, all manner of morally repugnant behaviour is considered, if not acceptable, then inconsequential: the filibusters and later the Glanton gang may act as they please without fear of retribution, heavenly or otherwise. The gang's actions in Chihuahua City at a reception held in their honour by Governor Angel Trias perhaps offer the best example of such behaviour:

> The governor had tapped his glass and risen to speak in his well-phrased english, but the bloated and belching mercenaries were leering about and were calling for more drink and some had not ceased to scream out toasts, now degenerated into obscene pledges to the whores of various southern cities. The bursar was introduced to cheers, catcalls, hoisted bumpers. Glanton took charge of the long canvas bag stamped with the state cartouche and cutting the governor short he rose and dumped the gold out onto the table among the bones and rinds and pools of spilled drink and in a brisk drumhead disbursement divided out the pile of gold with the blade of his knife so that each man was paid his spoken share and no further ceremony to it. (179)

The night only degenerates further into chaotic behaviour as the mercenaries become ever less inhibited and irresponsible:

> A blind street harpist stood terrified upon the banquet table among the bones and platters and a horde of luridlooking whores had infiltrated the dance. Pistolfire soon became general and Mr Riddle, who was acting American consul in the city, descended to remonstrate with the revelers and was warned away. Fights broke out. Furniture was disassembled, men waving chairlegs, candlestands. Two whores grappled and pitched into a sideboard and went to the floor in a crash of brandyglasses. Jackson, pistols drawn, lurched into the street vowing to Shoot the ass off Jesus Christ, the longlegged white son of a bitch. (180)

We are then told, a few lines later, that "[t]hese scenes and scenes like them were repeated night after night" (180), indicating that such behaviour was more than acceptable to men who had been risking life and limb and needed a release from the horrors and anguish they had both caused and witnessed. In essence, the revelry is nothing but escapism, a distraction from their travels and deeds in "Indian Country." Just as the gang take extensive liberties with their time outside their zone of combat, serving soldiers gained notoriety for wild behaviour. Prostitutes and a flourishing black market meant that there wasn't much a soldier in Vietnam could not obtain if he had the money, time and right connections. This is all part and parcel of the kind of attitude that the doctrine encourages: Sergeant Trammel's notion of the "spoils of war" (32) extends far beyond just owning land or even taking scalps. McCarthy's description of the reception, therefore, offers further evidence of American moral degeneration in Third World settings.

The words of Captain White also invite some analysis of racial attitudes of the period. African-Americans have only had one mention prior to this point in the novel: in the first chapter, as the kid is making his way out of Tennessee the narrator notes: "Blacks in the fields, lank and stooped, their fingers spiderlike among the bolls of cotton. A shadowed agony in the garden" (4). In comparing the Mexicans to slaves and the descendants of slaves, the Captain plays upon the prejudices and fears of many white Americans in the Pre-Civil War era. The Abolitionist movement had gained significant momentum, particularly in the North and Mid-West and the tensions that would lead to the Civil War were already simmering away in the South. As a result, as Slotkin relates:

> the new wave of filibuster colonists had to contend with the intensified domestic conflict over the extension of slavery; they could find support only by linking their projects to the ambitions of the most extreme partisans of slavery expansion, who

> alone possessed a rationale for incorporating a large nonwhite population a basis short of full citizenship. (244)

These racial tensions that were to lead ultimately to the Civil War are not totally dissimilar from the racial tensions that were prominent during the Civil Rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s. By the time *Blood Meridian* was published, segregation had been abrogated legislatively but racial tensions continued to cause difficulties well into the twenty-first century. The Ku Klux Klan, although an illegal organisation, continues to operate much as it has always done, this despite the fact that those convicted of hate crimes may be federally prosecuted and face the death penalty. Such tensions were also prominent among servicemen in Vietnam, particularly when the news broke of Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968. Servicemen channelled their own racial prejudices into the conflict, an aspect of the Vietnam War that was tacitly encouraged by command structures. The "Gooks" and "Charlie" of Vietnam thus became akin to the "Injuns" of the "Old West," much the same as members of the Taliban and Al Qaeda have in recent years become victims of such racism.

The phrase "manifestly incapable of governing themselves" is a direct reference to the doctrine. Exactly how a foreigner has the ability to judge whether or not a people are capable of governing themselves is not discussed in *Blood Meridian.* I would assume that the answer to such a question is beyond the comprehension of the Captain and policy makers like him. This "we're doing them a favour by invading" kind of rhetoric is the lowest form of the argument put forward by the doctrine and is in many ways not dissimilar to the rhetoric used by the Bush administration in order to initiate Operation Iraqi Freedom. This impulse, to spread democracy by force, is one that has preoccupied the United States since the American War of Independence. The same ideal infected much of the rhetoric around the American Civil War (particularly in the North where more liberal ideas prevailed), World War One (where Germany was singled out as a totalitarian monarchy fighting against democratic France and Britain), and World War Two (where Hitler's oppressive brand of dictatorship was seen as the complete antithesis of a democratic state). Once the Cold War began, this imperative was framed in different terms but the outcome of the equation remained much the same: America, as the symbol and protector of democracy everywhere, had to do whatever it could to counter the rising menace of Communism. Thus the United States became embroiled in conflicts in both Korea and Vietnam, on the pretext that democracy must be maintained. In the case of Mexico in the 1850s there was concern that the arrival of greater numbers of European settlers in Mexico could mean the formation of a colony belonging to a European

power right on America's border. Having fought two wars to throw off the yoke of European domination, Americans' fear of such a colony becoming a reality was a very real one and thus easy to exploit. As Slotkin writes:

> Ostensibly the politics of the filibusters was "liberal": their aim was to liberate Cuba from Spanish colonialism or Mexico from the domination of French influence; to overthrow some local tyranny; or even to attach the colonists' adopted homelands to the United States and its liberal institutions. (243)

It is far easier to convince people to support a war in defence of one's own democracy than it is to convince people of the need to protect the democracy of others, particularly after the military disasters in Vietnam. The idea that it was "better to be fighting in a jungle in 'Nam than to be fighting in the streets of New York or Washington" was a rationalization often used by politicians and commanding officers alike, despite there being very little possibility of such fighting ever occurring. The fact is that since the Civil War, there has not been a major battle on continental American soil: America sends its troops to other corners of the world to defend the principles it embraces. Furthermore, as Slotkin mentions, dissidents opposed to a current regime may also apply for American intervention simply to advance their own cause. This policy began with Mexico and has subsequently gone on to define American foreign policy well into the twenty-first century. As Captain White tells the kid:

> There are already some fourteen thousand French colonists in the state of Sonora. They're being given free land to settle. They're being given tools and livestock. Enlightened Mexicans encourage this. Paredes is already calling for secession from the Mexican government. They'd rather be ruled by toadeaters [the French] than thieves and imbeciles. Colonel Carrasco is asking for American intervention. And he's going to get it. (36)

The concept of "free land" is a complete misnomer; the land belonged to some group of people at some point: even the most inhospitable and arid regions of the desert were part of existing tribal domains when first the Conquistadors and later the Americans arrived. It may well have been free in the sense that colonists were granted the right to live and farm there without charge, but there is no such thing as historically unencumbered land in the West. The attitude of the Captain seems to mirror the concerns that settlement posed for Washington DC, namely that the colonists would demand independence and would thus pose a greater threat than if they simply remained a state or province of Mexico. The difficulty for the Mexicans in such a situation is America's price for intervening. Faced with a border

commission from Washington to formally conclude the boundary lines stipulated in the terms of the treaty, if the Mexican government should ask for American intervention, it would be forced to cede some of its territory as recompense. As the Captain says:

> I don't think there's any question that ultimately Sonora will become a United States territory. Guaymas a US port. Americans will be able to get to California without having to pass through our benighted sister republic and our citizens will be protected at last from the notorious packs of cutthroats presently infesting the routes which they are obliged to travel. (36-37)

The fact that many of these "notorious packs of cutthroats" had in their ranks or were made up entirely of Americans seems to escape the Captain's notice. With the discovery of gold in California, a new kind of mythology was being born, one that saw California as a land of opportunity: the new "New World" if you will. This myth would persist well into the twentieth century and was memorably captured by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath.* Despite much of the settlement that had taken place along the routes to California (or because of them), the journey to the west coast was still a perilous one. Many nefarious individuals, sick of making a living as small-time criminals in the overcrowded cities of the East, came west to make money and avoid justice. The Captain's last entreaty to the kid seems to be a philanthropic one but it is still very much couched in the language of the aggressive colonial. His assurance that Sonora and Guayas will soon be American possessions highlights this, as does his description of Mexico as "our benighted sister republic" (37), an openly sarcastic appraisal of the relationship between the two countries. The religious imperative in the doctrine of Manifest Destiny is again evident in the Captain's words when he explains the important role that the expedition will play:

> Son, said the captain. We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land. That's right. We are to spearhead the drive. We have the tacit support of Governor Burnett of California.
>
> He leaned forward and placed his hands on his knees. And we will be the ones who will divide the spoils. There will be a section of land for every man in the company. Fine grassland. Some of the finest in the world. A land rich in minerals, in gold and silver I would say beyond the wildest speculation. You're young. But I don't misread you. I'm seldom mistaken in a man. I think you mean to make your mark on this world. Am I wrong?
>
> No sir. (37)

The image of democracy being brought to the unenlightened, of light as knowledge and civilization, darkness as backwardness and tyranny, borrows liberally from Christian symbolism. The religious connotations of the terms are well known: Jesus Christ called himself the Light of the World whilst Milton conferred on the Satan of *Paradise Lost* the title of "Prince of Darkness." Nor can Conrad be excluded from the resonance of the imagery, one of McCarthy's obvious aims in *Blood Meridian* being to remind us, just as Conrad did, that man is capable of terrible acts of evil once he descends into a space where the norms of civilization seemingly no longer make sense or are dangerous to apply. Exceptional circumstances in which people are being tested to their limits and beyond create exceptional patterns of behaviour, including a unique kind of savagery that Kurtz with his dying breath called "The horror." A similar sentiment is expressed by the old man tending bar in the cantina into which the kid ventures with his new comrades:

> The Mennonite watches the enshadowed dark before them as it is reflected to him in the mirror over the bar. He turns to them. His eyes are wet, he speaks slowly. The wrath of God lies sleeping. It was hid a million years ago and only men have the power to wake it. Hell aint half full. Hear me. Ye carry a war of a madman's making onto a foreign land. Yell wake more than the dogs. (43)

"The horror" in this case is the observation that only men have the power to awaken the wrath of God. This is mostly because guilt stems from an understanding of ethics, of good and evil and the consequences of both, which is provided by religion. The figure of the Mennonite is an interesting and seemingly incongruous one at this juncture and (in another inheritance from Melville) is reminiscent of Elijah in *Moby-Dick*, who accosts Ishmael and Queequeg before they set sail aboard *The Pequod*. Mennonites are pacifists and conscientious objectors, and the reader gets the impression that the old man has come to this identity through some bitter personal experience, that now moves him to tears as he contemplates the fate of the callow youths before him. Or perhaps the old man's concern comes from the fact that any such war, as Slotkin states, "must, because of its racial character, become a 'savage war' of extermination" (273).

One should again note McCarthy's use of the contrast between light and dark in order to reinforce his point. The three young men's inability to heed this warning, moreover their insulting dismissal of the man who provides it, is a typical reaction within a militarist society where naysayers and peacemakers are branded with all manner of abusive labels. A binarist logic is at work here: those who champion the doctrine and all that goes with it are symbolic

of light and progress; all those who oppose it are in league with darkness and backwardness, even cowardice. The contrast between light and dark is used by McCarthy continually throughout the novel in order to promote his Gnostic point of view. The darkness is not something that materializes because of action or thought, but rather, like the light, it is carried with us wherever we go. To deny this is to feed the darkness. Such a concern is implicit from the subtitle of the novel, *The Evening Redness in the West*, which according to Brian Edwards,

> signifies not just the movement between day and night, and light and darkness, but also the drawing in of an era of 'the west' as place and as concept, it is the redness of blood, in all of its ambiguities, that colours McCarthy's return to the emblematic blackness as a predominant marker in American cultural history. (31)

Furthermore, if one is mindful of the quotation from Jacob Boehme that McCarthy uses as one of the novel's epigraphs, the need to explain this phenomenon of the human condition becomes clearer. Edwards writes about how this treatment of light and darkness harks back to Melville and Conrad:

> Presented in *Moby-Dick* as a metaphysical quality and oppositional dialectic to the unscribbled whiteness of the whale, and in *Heart of Darkness* as the Belgian Congo, the past, Kurtzian madness and the uncertain depths of dream and the psyche, in *Blood Meridian* darkness marks the desert landscape itself as a place of threat, savagery and death. It is the 'awful darkness within the world' (p.111) marked emblematically by fire and dust and occasional flood as the riders move across the terrain that is presented as 'alien ground', 'the void', and 'hellish', a surrealistic nightmare location of dryness littered with the smoking remains of buildings, wagons and bodies. (36)

This "darkness within the world" is almost certainly a Nietzschean concern, one to be found at the heart of *Beyond Good and Evil.* Linda Townley Woodson argues that language for Nietzsche is "the will to know devised by the intellect to detain humans for a moment in existence" (206). If one applies this to the language of Manifest Destiny, then one of McCarthy's chief concerns becomes clearer: if people must ultimately be coerced towards activities that are productive, even if the reasons supplied for the activity are blatantly false, then this raises important questions about the role of myth in shaping a national consciousness. As Edwards writes, this relates to the

> host of ways in which references, allusions, and faint echoes are recycled, modified and remade within the intricacies of inter-textual relationships. It is in this way that texts can be more-or-less specific in their attention to particular social-cultural contexts while, at the same time, exceeding those contexts through exchange processes inherent in the play of language. Thereby, history and its imaginings are never lost; decapitalised and revitalised, they are recycled in the displaced forms of allusion, metaphor, symbol and myth, this elaborate and changing palimpsest upon which new inscriptions are made and have their meanings. (33-34)

Thus, the language of Manifest Destiny has acquired a life far beyond its original uses; it is now inseparable from the life of the nation that it helped to build. It is as much a part of the foundations of modern America as are the liberalism and patriotism that came with the Declaration of Independence. With each new chapter of history, the language of the doctrine may change and develop as required. In 1836 it was tribes like the Sioux and the Cherokee who posed a threat to national prosperity: in more recent times Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS) have become the targets of the doctrine as "obstacles to global peace and security."

V The Attack of the Comanche: *Blood Meridian's* Grisly Inversion of Manifest Destiny

The filibuster expedition led by Captain White does not come to a good end: the party is attacked by a band of Comanche and butchered almost to a man. The level of detail that the narrator employs at this point has long been cited by critics as emblematic of McCarthy's treatment of violence in the novel. There are many other scenes and episodes of violence, often of a ruthless and disturbing nature: the worst outrages of the judge include the shooting of puppies thrown into a river and the rape and murder of a young boy. Why then is there such a collective critical focus on this episode in a novel awash with blood? In terms of its impact on the plot it is negligible, barring what it leads to: the kid's survival and imprisonment in a Mexican jail, where he is reunited with Toadvine and finally "rescued" by the judge. The importance of the episode somehow inheres in the language used to describe it, which accentuates and yet simultaneously subverts literary conventions of the West:

> up from the offsides of those ponies there rose a fabled horde of mounted lancers and archers bearing shields bedight with bits of broken mirrorglass that cast a thousand unpieced suns against the eyes of their enemies. A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream [...].(55)

This "legion of horribles" belong to one of the most warlike of all the Native American tribes. Their reputation for fierceness had been suitably dramatized by the folk tales and stories that became popular as part of the myth of the Frontier. The important thing is that there is nothing noble, stoic or dignified about these figures: these are not the Mohicans of Fennimore Cooper. This is clear from their "costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream," consisting of:

> skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of previous owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil and some in headgear of cranefeathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in a pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor of a spanish conquistador, the breastplate and pauldrons deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country by men whose very bones were dust [...]. (55)

McCarthy deliberately plays upon the fears of the "civilized" when describing the horde: they ride as an unorganised rabble instead of in a military formation; their manner of dress is not uniform but crazily miscellaneous, featuring the relics of previous victories over their foes as both symbol and armour or weapon; they are "more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning" (55), an astonishing anticipation of the hell that awaits their would-be conquerors. Many elements in their vestments have little functional value on a battlefield: the wedding veil, the umbrella and the stockings have no purpose other than to shock the sensibilities of the filibusters, used to seeing such items in entirely different, far more peaceful circumstances. The appearance of the Comanche warriors offers a bizarre parody of European culture and the history of colonization in the New World, exposing civilization's pretensions as a scattering of rags and geegaws. This is perhaps focused in the image of the "pigeontalied coat worn backwards" by an otherwise naked man.

The shock of all this incongruity is compounded by the inclusion in of the armour of a "spanish conquistador," a relic of a past distant and unfamiliar to the filibusters. The armour recalls the splendours of a bygone age, the age of exploration when possibilities seemed endless for those who came to conquer lands and peoples for their imperial masters. Plate armour was expensive to manufacture, though the process was somewhat refined by the time Cortez landed in Central America. The dented armour therefore becomes a metaphor for colonial ambitions in the region; the dress of the overlords captured and taken by the very

people they sought to subjugate, transformed from a symbol of faraway imperial authority into protection for a ravening band of stock thieves. If the kid and his fellow recruits needed further proof of the truth of the Mennonite's warning, it is to be found in the appearance of that breastplate.

VI Scalping: The Currency of the American West and its Treatment in *Blood Meridian.*

After the massacre, we are told, the Comanche busy themselves "stripping the clothes from the dead" (56), before mutilating, sodomizing and scalping them. This is the first time, barring the epigraph taken from the *Yuma Daily Sun* suggesting the antiquity of the practice, that scalping has been mentioned in the novel. This first description of the process is particularly visceral and is not to be repeated again in the novel's entirety: "seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs" (56). The thinness of the skin of the scalp and thus correspondingly the number of nerves close to the surface of the skin means that being scalped alive is one of the most painful things that one human being can inflict on another. Moreover, it is irreversible: though it is possible to survive a scalping, one bears the evidence for life.

There is some debate as to whether or not scalping was practised by Native Americans in Pre-Columbian times, or whether it was a custom introduced by Europeans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such a debate falls outside of the scope of my examination of *Blood Meridian*. What is of particular interest, however, is how the practice of placing bounties on scalps taken came to evolve to the level that is described by McCarthy. As James Axtell and William Sturtevant argue, the offering of bounties for scalps

> was practiced first in New England on the Penobscot Indians. The General Court of the Province of Massachusetts offered a bounty of forty pounds for every scalp of a male Indian brought in as evidence of his being killed, and for every scalp of a female or male Indian under twelve years, twenty pounds. (452)

A leading Native American historian and critic, Vine Deloria, is quoted as saying,

> [s]calping, introduced prior to the French and Indian War by the English [...] confirmed the suspicion that the Indians were wild animals to be hunted and skinned. Bounties were set and an Indian scalp became more valuable than beaver, otter, marten and other animal pelts. (Deloria, qtd. in Axtell and Sturtevant 453-54)

Whether or not scalping was introduced by Europeans, there is little doubt that they ruthlessly exploited the practice. Their pursuit of the wealth offered through claiming bounties undoubtedly contributed to tensions and conflicts between the various tribes and settlers. What this demonstrates is a symbolic cycle of retribution that continues to this day: the dress and weapons of defeated enemies are difficult to obtain, so immediately become symbols of competence and bravery. This is one of the greatest ironies of Manifest Destiny: by taking on the dress or equipment of the oppressor you partially assimilate yourself into their culture, thus weakening the connection to your own, evolving and becoming something altogether new. At its most basic level, originality is the greatest resistance to the cultural hegemony which is the ultimate aim of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. Scalping may or may not have been invented by Native Americans but it is most regularly associated with them; it is not immediately associated with either "white" Americans or economic gain, though there is clear evidence that there was indiscriminate scalping taking place on both sides of the racial divide during the days of Manifest Destiny for the express purpose of profiteering. It is interesting to note that the idea that white Americans were solely the victims of scalping (and not the ones who introduced or practiced it) quickly became part of the romance associated with the mythology of the West; it is, after all, quite difficult to idolize cowboys or sheriffs if they were no better than the "bloodthirsty savages".

In *Blood Meridian*, the taking of scalps continues the tradition of bounties being placed upon them. As Dan Moos writes

> The scalps brought in by Glanton and his gang represent victory in a genocidal war against the Apache and the Comanche. But more than just symbols and proofs, the scalps operate as specie, as articles exchanged for other articles or for different monies in officially government-sanctioned slaughter: Trias, the governor of Chihuahua City pays Glanton one hundred dollars per scalp. Human blood, or at least, what passes as proof of the extinction of human life, operates as the medium of exchange in Trias's war. The threat of the original is gone, proven through disembodied hair: the hair remains but a sign – a sign whose signified is precisely human life. (32)

The fact that the scalps have economic value can be viewed as synecdochic of all the resources pursued by America through imperialistic aims. One might argue that the drive within colonialism is no different, but colonialism appears to be a thing of the past. One might argue that neo-colonialism is just as real as Manifest Destiny, but neo-colonialism is in truth a mere shadow of the original structures and practice of colonialism. Manifest Destiny,

on the other hand, has hardly changed at all since Westward expansion. The rationale behind it may have altered at times (perhaps a heightened emphasis on freedom, or democracy), but the doctrine is still deployed for much the same purposes as it was in the past.

Dana Phillips is unwilling to read the novel as allegorizing any specific historical or political context. He eloquently argues that the novel should be read literally so as to allow the implications for the "real world" to speak for themselves. He writes

> *Blood Meridian* certainly cannot be read as suggesting some moral insight on the order of "scalp hunting is wrong." Nor does it try to adumbrate a more sophisticated, more political version of that insight, something on the order of "scalp hunting is imperialism by other means." (449)

This view surely sells the novel short. If one regards the novel as an imaginative re-mythologising of the West without any political commentary then it is simply a blood filled tale with a few odds and ends of philosophy and history, thrown together to produce neither nostalgia nor disgust. It effectively becomes little more than an exercise in enjoying McCarthy's style and that, I would argue, does not cover the ambit of McCarthy's intentions. Even if one rejects the idea that *Blood Meridian,* like *Moby-Dick, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Absalom! Absalom!* before it, is not an allegorical novel, then one still cannot discount (entirely at least), the novel's take on violence in general. The militarisation of American society is discussed by Catherine Lutz, who in examining the military history of the United States, argues:

> The early U.S. Army was defined as a kind of constabulary whose purpose was nation-building through "Indian clearance," rather than defense of national borders (Weigley 1967:27). The Army also built roads and forts to facilitate colonial settlement, an aim so intrinsic to the military that "any difference between soldiering and pioneering escaped the naked eye" (Perret 1989:137). The real and imagined threat of slave insurrection rationalized the raising of local official militias in the 19th century as well, and the military fought the Mexican-American and the Spanish-American Wars with racial rationales. European colonialism was, of course, also rooted in race violence, and the World War, which ran with brief interruption from 1914 to 1945, was fueled by contests over colonial holdings and militant expansionism based on racial supremacism (whether European, American, or Japanese). (726)

In other words, American imperial ambitions have vast historical precedent. Lutz argues further that,

> the notion that we have encountered radically new conditions of global and national life draws attention away from the fact that the bombing of Afghanistan (and of other countries that may follow in the days between the writing and your reading of this article) has causes deeper in the past and broader in scope than the planning and carrying out of the terror attacks on New York and Washington. U.S. support for the Taliban in the immediate period leading up to the bombing was fuelled by the desire to "normalize" relations in the interest of securing a trans-Afghanistan pipeline to Central Asian oilfields for U.S. corporate and strategic interests (Rashid 2000). In this, the story is similar to many instances where repressive regimes were supplied arms and money in exchange for access to resources (Klare 2001). The list includes Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, Iraq, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Chile, South Korea, Indonesia, South Vietnam, and so on. With their country's food poverty and relative arms wealth, the Afghans in power share characteristics with many regimes around the world, where a generation of war, much of it originally Cold War enflamed, has created the social conditions for militancy. (731)

The attack upon the hopelessly outnumbered filibusters is as chilling as it is sudden. If one examines the progress of the company so far, they have hunted game in order to continue their journey, trekked across a saltpan, lost four men to sickness, stopped at a hamlet whose only inhabitant was an old man who loses control of his bladder out of sheer terror, and rested in an abandoned church where they "burned the fallen timbers of the roof for their fire while owls cried from the arches in the dark" (53). Up until the sighting of the herd of livestock and their eventual encounter with the Comanche, the expedition has featured the hunters, on a search for prey both animal and human. In a stunning reversal of roles, however, the hunters become the hunted. It is striking that the description of the battle is much shorter than either its prelude or its aftermath: despite the Americans' modern technology and imagined racial superiority the fight does not last long. The descriptions of firearms earlier in the chapter are important as they draw the reader's attention to the superiority complex inherent in modern American attitudes to conflict. The idea that a soldier would blame ineffectual leadership long before he would blame his equipment has been part and parcel of the Military Industrial Complex for generations. What is interesting about the West in this regard was that it was a testing ground for all manner of new weaponry: everything from revolvers and shotguns to breech-loading rifles were first blooded in the West.

The fact that the Comanche have what one might term "traditional" weapons and the filibusters are all armed with at least a rifle makes the annihilation of the company all the more stunning. The mythology of the West is filled with tales of handfuls of men holding off entire waves of attackers with only the raw power of firearms, and *Blood Meridian* is no

exception. Tobin's story about the judge's manufacturing of gunpowder is important not so much as an illustration of the judge's intelligence but rather for its result: a handful of men who were doomed to die a terrible death were rescued by the power of firearms. Against the Comanche, however, the *deus ex machina* does not materialise; lance and arrow triumph over firearms. As far as historical allusions go, there are several possible sources, the most likely of which is the Battle of the Little Big Horn where Colonel George Custer took a regular cavalry force of about three hundred men against a Sioux army some two thousand strong. If the attack by the Comanche is in some way a dispelling of the myth that surrounded the self-sacrifice and heroism of Custer and his men, then it is subverted through the kid's survival.

Yet the massacre of the filibusters could equally also be an allusion to the nature of the conflict in Vietnam: despite having superior technology at their disposal, the American troops suffered defeat after defeat because they tried to fight an unconventional war with conventional tactics. Thus, the idea that fire superiority would conquer all, a myth carefully cultivated and proven in hundreds of skirmishes with Native Americans was proven to be false in the jungles of Vietnam, just as it is in McCarthy's battle scene. The later attack of the Yuma during which Glanton is killed is another example of this idea.

The way in which the battle itself is narrated is extremely clever: much of it is a breathless account of the awe that the filibusters feel when confronted by their attackers and their subsequent terror when they realise there is no hope of either victory or escape. The kid appears for a few lines: his horse collapses underneath him "with a long pneumatic sigh" (56), presumably hit by an arrow in the chest, puncturing a lung. This literal deflation of the horse's lung mirrors the sense of deflation the company's spirits have undergone since first sighting the charge of the Comanche. The reader is then given a glimpse of the kid's panicky attempt to reload his rifle in the heat of the battle:

> He had already fired his rifle and now he sat on the ground and fumbled with his shotpouch. A man near him sat with an arrow hanging out of his neck. He was bent slightly as if in prayer. The kid would have reached for the bloody hoop-iron point but then he saw that the man wore another arrow in his breast to the fletching and he was dead. Everywhere there were horses down and men scrambling and he saw a man who sat charging his rifle while blood ran from his ears and he saw men with their revolvers disassembled trying to fit the spare loaded cylinders they carried and he saw men kneeling who tilted and clasped their shadows on the ground and he saw men lanced and caught up by the hair and scalped standing and he saw the horses of war trample down the fallen and a little white faced pony with one clouded eye leaned out of the murk and snapped at him like a dog and was gone. (56)

The cumbersome nature of the early firearms, the lack of leadership to try and rally the men towards some kind of fabulous "last stand," the exaggerated image of men being scalped while still standing up (which would appear to be almost practically impossible while a man still had his strength), and the calm resignation of the man reloading his rifle while blood pours from his ears, all combine to create a picture of utter chaos. This is not, according to popular Western Frontier mythology, how Americans die in battle. Nor is even the biased account of their enemy's behaviour this wild and frightening. This is a nightmare scene for those who advocated the doctrine then and for those who continue to do so now. It pricks at the conscience of decision-makers simply because there have been many such massacres: through incompetence, lack of foresight or just sheer cunning on the part of the enemy, many Americans sent into foreign lands for dubious reasons have suffered similar fates to that of the filibusters.

Part of what is so unsettling about the moments before attack is the level of detail with which the mounts of the Comanche and their riders are described:

> their horse's ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one whose horse's whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubing like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools. (55)

This creates what I would term a "total image" of the scene; the Comanche seem transformed into otherworldly beings, a perception that measures how unprepared the filibusters are for the true "savagery" of their attackers. The fact McCarthy chooses to include a description of the Comanche's mounts suggests the importance of the relationship between Native Americans and their horses. Unlike the Corporal who tells the kid in the previous chapter, "Wait till you get one of these...You aint never had no fun" (40), the mounts of the Comanche are more than just a means of transportation or beasts of burden; they are just as terrifying as the men they carry. In other words, the distinction between warrior and mount becomes blurred. The innocence of the beast, pure of human desires and motives is stripped away, leaving us with the image of even the animals resenting the presence of the foreign invaders. This is a further subversion of the hunter mythology that became an integral part of

first the Eastern and later the Western Frontier; the "noble steed" (such as Silver of "Lone Ranger" fame) has become just as ignoble as the "noble savage" that he carries into battle.

Confronted with such an image, it is not difficult to see why the filibusters are gripped by panic. Yet this panic does not stem purely from terror or considerations of personal safety: it seems to have something to do with the portrayal of the Comanche as "a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them" (55). The subversion of figures associated with entertainment is disturbing enough, but the Comanche warriors are described as "death hilarious" because they know they have the filibusters' lives at their mercy. This is the kind of hilarity that only sureness of victory and vengeance for a thousand wrongs can bring. It is akin to the laugh of the Rohirrim upon the fields of the Pelennor in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*:

> And then all the host of Rohan burst into song, and they sang as they slew, for the joy of battle was on them, and the sound of their singing that was fair and terrible came even to the City. (871)

This is what one can only describe as a pleasure at the fullest exertion of strength and dominance; a celebration of justified slaughter. One might well argue that such a display borders on sadism. If one considers, however, the descriptions of the atrocities committed by the Glanton gang further on in the novel, no emotion is shown by the gang (that we are told of, at least); the slaughter is a cold, mechanical process with only the promise of reward seeming to motivate the participants. There is nothing righteous about such killing, nothing justifiable or morally acceptable. The attack of the Comanche, as unsettling as it may be, is more justifiable than any of the other acts of violence in the novel, except perhaps the killing of the judge (see Chapter Three). If one sees this as a continuation of the Vietnam War allegory, then the killing of American troops who had been sent to Vietnam was entirely justified; if one enters a foreign land on the flimsiest of pretexts, largely for personal gain, then your death at the hands of a vengeful oppressed people, who, after centuries of foreign oppression want nothing more than to decide their own fate without foreign involvement, is justified. Conrad's Kurtz and McCarthy's Captain White are both victims of an ideology long before meet their deaths. Whether the ideology was called imperialism or Manifest destiny makes little difference: the result, according to Conrad and McCarthy, is ultimately the same.

Only the slaughter, in the case of the filibusters, is not complete. Witnesses survive; a crucial element in the continuation of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. Eyewitnesses to "tragedies" such as these are often touted as heroes; as if survival somehow grants them a

hitherto unnoticed degree of nobility. They are akin to the survivors of natural disasters or escapees from enemy captivity: they are seen as symbols of the endurance of the human spirit beyond all hope and expectations. Certainly, live heroes offer far more opportunity for such a view to take root than dead ones, whose mythology is altogether more complex. The kid is not a hero; *Blood Meridian* deliberately avoids the clichés of the heroic gunslinger who wins out against all odds, the kind of mythology that was created by novels like *Shane*. Yet neither can the kid be called an anti-hero; his compassion and his willingness to place his own safety in jeopardy in order to help people places him in another category. I would argue that the kid is simply a figure who is capable of both good and evil, much like all humankind is. In a novel awash with the victims of death and dispossession, the kid is a reminder that good may still flourish, even in circumstances as bleak and nihilistic as those recounted in the novel. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on the importance of the survival narrative and ultimately why it is the kid who triumphs over the judge.

In a rare interview with Richard Woodward, McCarthy says

> there's no such thing as life without bloodshed. [...] I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous. (Woodward)

In the face of such an opinion, one has to assume that violence as depicted in the novel is intended to reduce humankind to its most basic condition. I wish to conclude this chapter by once again quoting Michael Herr. In the chapter entitled "Breathing In," Herr gives us an account of his first impressions of Vietnam. As part of this chapter, Herr quotes a soldier who had already done one tour of duty and whose feelings on American involvement in Vietnam were quite clear:

> 'Oh it ain't so bad. My last tour was better though, not so much mickeymouse, Command gettin' in your way so you can't even do your job. Shit, last three patrols I was on we had fucking *orders* not to return fire going through the villages, that's what a fucked-up war it's gettin' to be anymore. My *last* tour we'd go through and that was it, we'd rip out the hedges and burn the hootches and blow all the wells and kill every chicken, pig and cow in the whole fucking ville. I mean, if we can't shoot these people, what the fuck are we doing here?' (28; emphasis author's own)

Implicit in this expletive-laden quotation is the terrible legacy of Manifest Destiny. McCarthy's imaginative critique of this violent and bloody chapter in American history, as I

have argued in this chapter, owes its existence to more than just his choice of setting or genre: his literary influences and the socio-political climate in which *Blood Meridian* was produced both contribute significantly towards the startling depiction. The allegorical value of such a depiction, as I have further argued, is not to be discounted lightly and helps to inform the subject of my next chapter: the role of the judge and why it is the kid, not the judge, who ultimately survives their encounter at the climax of the novel.

Chapter 3: The Judge as Nietzschean *Übermensch* and an alternative reading of the ending of *Blood Meridian*

> *Delight is to him – a far, far upward, and inward delight – who against the proud gods and commodores of this earth, ever stands forth his own inexorable self. Delight is to him whose strong arms yet support him, when the ship of this base treacherous world has gone down beneath him. Delight is to him, who gives no quarter in the truth and kills, burns, and destroys all sin though he pluck it out from under the robes of Senators and Judges.*
>
> –Father Mapple in *Moby-Dick* (68)

Blood Meridian is a complex work, and its structural and narrative complexities are only compounded by the complexities of its philosophical concerns. One concern of central importance to the unfolding and ending of the narrative is the Nietzschean ideal of the *Übermensch*,[3] best exemplified by the character of the judge. But first a brief contextual analysis of how Nietzsche's philosophy influences McCarthy is necessary.

According to Steven Frye,

> Often considered the founder of contemporary continental philosophy, the nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is a central figure in the revolutionary reconsideration of the history of philosophical and scientific thought. A rough contemporary of Charles Darwin (1809-1882), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and T.H. Huxley (1825-1895), who were major figures of the scientific revolution in biology, Nietzsche shares their sense of the limitations of the Judeo-Christian tradition. (83)

This shared sense of the limitations imposed by religion and a society whose laws and regulations are still very much governed by a Judeo-Christian version of morality, is integral to understanding both what philosophical concerns McCarthy is trying to address in *Blood Meridian* and why he chooses the judge as the figure to best reveal and confront these concerns. Many critics have written about the absence of religion in this work and it is not my intention to discuss religion; religion is largely symbolic in the novel and thus decoding such

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[3]I have, like Magnus and others, chosen to use the term *Übermensch* instead of "Overman" or "Superman" simply because I feel "Overman" is ambiguous and sexist, whilst "Superman" conjures up the wrong image of the judge. As Magnus notes "The word Superman seems to me to have been pre-empted, for now at least, by Clark Kent and Lois Lane and I cannot for the life of me see Nietzsche's *Übermenschen* leaping tall buildings with but a single bound" (635).

symbols is not unlike decoding the characters and events marked with philosophical symbolism. It will suffice for me to suggest, therefore, that because of or rather through the Enlightenment philosophy and science expressed in the novel, religion is seen to be of little consequence or help in the face of the violence and cruelty that exists beyond the border. One might argue that the nihilism and empiricism of the Enlightenment replaces religion within the text but again, I would argue that such arguments are best left to those interested in religion, not philosophy.

What I will argue in the following chapter is that the judge and the kid are representative of two differing philosophical arguments, and thus it is how the kid reacts to the judge's pedagogy that is of significance. I will also argue that it is the judge, rather than the kid who winds up dead in the jakes in Griffin at the novel's conclusion. First I shall outline the two philosophical arguments and explain why the characters are representative of them.

I The Judge as *Übermensch*

It is best to deal with the judge first and then illustrate how the kid reacts against his philosophy. What does it mean to characterise the judge as an *Übermensch*? Ever since this notion was proposed by Nietzsche there has been tension between two readings of it, namely that the *Übermensch* possesses particular traits or virtues, or an opposing view suggested by Bernd Magnus (and that I concur with), that the *Übermensch* is simply "a representation only of a particular attitude toward life, that it articulates a certain form of life" (634). Having established why this view is the more critically relevant for a philosophical reading of *Blood Meridian*, I will then go on to argue that whilst the judge may dominate the narrative, it is the kid who ultimately emerges victorious over him.

There can be little doubt that the judge's philosophy dominates the novel, right up until the jakes scene. By that time, the preceding pages have demonstrated McCarthy's commitment to nihilism[4] and Enlightenment philosophy and science. The position articulated by the judge is quite simple to understand; as Frye notes, both McCarthy and the judge are opposed to "any ideology – scientific, social, or religious – that would claim that human perfectibility is in any way remotely attainable" (77). In other words, man must be reduced to

[4] I use the term here in reference to McCarthy's rather blunt view of all life, especially human life, in *Blood Meridian*, and the difficulty of finding value in individual lives (perhaps in anything at all) in the wake of such large-scale slaughter. No violent act is without a point in the novel; "nihilism" here stands for the rather grim perspective on existence prevails in the novel.

his most animalistic in order to reveal his true nature. This resists the ideals of Western culture in a startling way, for as Steven Shaviro argues:

> Western culture has dreamed for centuries of some heroic transgression and self-transformation: whether this take the Enlightenment form of rational mastery, 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. (12-13; emphasis in original)

The judge tells us as much in his speech on warfare:

> Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test. A man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views. His very involvement in such a trial gives evidence of a newer and broader view. The willingness of the principals to forgo further argument as the triviality which it in fact is and to petition directly to the chambers of the historical absolute clearly indicates of how little moment are the opinions and of what great moment the divergences thereof. For the argument is indeed trivial, but not so the separate wills thereby made manifest. (263)

Whilst I accept in general Shaviro's reading of the novel, I fundamentally disagree with the conclusion that such a reading helps him to reach. He continues:

> What is most disturbing about the orgies of violence that punctuate *Blood Meridian* is that they fail to constitute a pattern, to unveil a mystery or to serve any comprehensible purpose. Instead, the book suggests that "a taste for mindless violence" (3) is as ubiquitous – and as banal – as any other form of "common sense." Scalping has been a common human practice for at least 300,000 years, as one of the epigrams to the novel suggests. Acts of destruction are as casual, random and unreflective as acts of kindness and civility – which occur at odd moments in the course of the narrative. (13)

I would argue that a more nihilistic reading of the plot is largely based on the assumption that the judge emerges victorious over the kid by raping and murdering him in the outhouse. Yet, as I will argue, if one sees the opposite as being true, that it is the kid rather than the judge who emerges from the outhouse and that he is the Promethean figure envisioned in the epilogue, then there is indeed a pattern to the violence, one that is entirely in keeping with the

romance of the Western genre. The kid's taste for violence may start out as "mindless," but by the end of the novel it is anything but. This is demonstrated by his willingness to stand up to the judge, knowing that the consequences may be dire. As Bloom states: "To have known Judge Holden, to have seen him in full operation, and to tell him that he is nothing, is heroic" (7). Whilst I am reluctant to call the kid "heroic," that single action, the willingness to confront and argue against the judge is not a singular action without meaning as Shaviro and others would have us believe. The ambiguity created within the novel itself (we are never explicitly told what becomes of the kid) means that whilst the kid may hardly be called a hero, he may be seen as a survivor.

The fact is that the reader finds it difficult to separate the words of the judge from his physical otherworldliness, a deliberate technique on McCarthy's part not unlike his method of describing the landscape in such unfamiliar terms. By creating this shroud of mystery and otherworldliness about his protagonist, McCarthy is able to challenge perceptions on a range of subjects without fear of his character being mistaken for a more contemporary figure. This has the effect in part of dispelling nostalgia for the Old West. But it also helps us to identify more readily with the kid: our experience of the judge is just as fresh and startling as it is for the kid, even after multiple readings. Yet the closer one gets to the philosophical implications of the judge's world-view, the more apparent it becomes that whilst a man who is entirely hairless, seven feet tall, usually naked and seemingly omniscient is hard enough to swallow, it is chiefly his attitude towards life that sustains our discomfort as readers.

This is in part because the judge exists only in fiction. There is no reliable historical record of his presence at all. What we know about the judge comes either from Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession* or from *Blood Meridian*; and it is difficult to say which of these texts uses more embellishment. But the arguments, the philosophy, the world-view of which the judge is representative, these do indeed have a life outside of the text, even if they are not immediately familiar to the reader. One could argue that such a phenomenon is not unlike having never read Melville's *Moby-Dick* or Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* before reading *Blood Meridian*. It is not necessary to read either in order to understand *Blood Meridian*. Doing so, however, makes the experience of reading McCarthy's work infinitely richer.

Robert Solomon, in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche,* writes the following about the *Übermensch*:

> The *Übermensch* [...] is far better characterised as an attitude towards life and in terms of the presence (and absence) of certain emotions than as a metaphysical projection or a possible product of biological evolution. The *Übermensch* is whatever we want, in the most profound way, to be. The will to power is nothing if not Nietzsche's one attempt at an all-embracing if not ultimately convincing psychological hypothesis. How do we explain masochism, self-destructive behaviour, righteous self-denial, the urge to martyrdom, wanton cruelty? The "desire for pleasure" fails on all of these counts. The desire for power gives us a much better understanding. (186)

It certainly seems that the judge's philosophical world-view mirrors the "all-embracing" nature of Nietzsche's own philosophical world-view. When objections or queries are raised, the judge always has a ready reply, and this form of dialogue only enhances the sense of dominance that the judge exerts over his audience. It is only when the kid tells him "I dont like craziness" (347) and "You aint nothing" (349) that the first real challenge to the judge is effectively mounted. It is important to note that this is perhaps the central concern of any *Übermensch*-like figure: the judge seeks to dominate his surroundings and all he encounters through a heady mixture of charisma, force of character, manipulation and sheer terror. Yet what he is really seeking is a worthy opponent, and the kid is offered up as such by McCarthy; whether or not this is in keeping with the romantic conventions of the Western genre is irrelevant. What matters is the relationship between the judge and the kid. For the kid, in his simple ignorance and in keeping with the words of the Hermit he encounters in the second chapter, is all that stands between the judge and his complete mastery over the self-contained universe of the novel. Glanton may have led the gang and given his name to the band of scalp hunters, but really it is the judge who is the central figure among them. He is given far more room to speak and be heard than any other character. He intermittently seems to break the realist narrative frame by suddenly and improbably appearing, or by not aging a day during the approximately twenty years between the last chapter of the novel and the previous action. His will to power thus seems to stretch beyond the events of the text and becomes a frightening meta-textual force that, as the judge claims, "will never die" (353).

II The Kid as the Judge's Protégé and Philosophical Foil

Conversely, the kid is representative of a different kind of philosophical argument, one that is much less clearly defined. I do not wish to argue that the kid is a moral or heroic figure; he is neither of these. He participates in violent genocide for the sake of profit just as much as the

rest of the gang. Yet the kid should not be condemned along with them so easily. As Maria O'Connell points out, the kid is "innocent of anything but self-preservation" (175). O'Connell argues further that "[the kid's] reinforced schema becomes the basis of his socialization in the Glanton gang and is also the basis for a peculiar form of mentorship practiced by the judge, aimed at preparing the kid as a possible successor" (175). This "peculiar mentorship" is precisely what I will be examining in this chapter.

What sets the kid apart is his compassion in circumstances when compassion goes against the natural law that presides over all life in the desert. The kid is largely free of the prejudices and materialism engendered by society. His sense of morality is the product of experience, not formal education, and he is obliged to rely on his own judgement in order to determine right from wrong. The kid is therefore symbolic of the kind of rugged individualism that permeates the mythology of the Western genre, a configuration of character traits that was indispensable to survival. When one adds to his characterization the significant fact of the absence of interiority, the kid becomes opaque, hearkening back to the words of the hermit he encounters in the second chapter:

> It's a mystery. A man's at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know it with. He can know his heart, but he don't want to. Rightly so. Best not to look in there. It aint the heart of a creature that is bound in the way God has set for it. You can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man the devil was at his elbow. (20)

What we are being told by both the hermit and the authorial narrator is not to look for sentimentality or introspection in the novel; there is not a trace of guilt, remorse or even vindictiveness in this novel, though these are plainly emotions that are responsible for a great deal of action in the world outside of it.

If the kid's journey is his attempt to reconcile his heart with his mind, there are implications for *Blood* Meridian's structure. As Harold Bloom writes:

> McCarthy subtly shows us the long, slow development of the Kid [sic] from another mindless scalper of Indians to the courageous confronter of the Judge in their final debate in a saloon. But though the Kid's moral maturation is heartening, his personality remains largely a cipher, as anonymous as his lack of a name. (3)

I will argue that the kid's "slow development" is indicative of the novel's allegorical power that I discussed in the previous chapter: the kid, like many veterans (or in Herr's case,

correspondents) takes time to fully come to terms with the horror of his actions. Almost two decades pass before the kid confronts the judge. The kid should be seen as a survivor: his moral maturation comes about in the first instance as a result of this fact.

O'Connell pursues her argument about the "peculiar mentorship" of the judge by noting:

> In *Blood Meridian*, Judge Holden's one weakness is that he seems to believe in the pedagogical methods applicable to boys during this time. For American culture, virility and capability in men went hand in hand with the virility and strength of the nation. The pedagogy of what would come to be known as 'boyology' reinforced the national myth. Young men, like their young nation, needed a redemption of the spirit. (177)

This "redemption of spirit" required, as Richard Slotkin has argued, "a separation [from civilization, including the influence of women, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state and regeneration through violence" (Slotkin, qtd. in O'Connell 176). Thus if we accept O'Connell's argument that the journey across the border is intended to "make a man of the kid," we must ask why it is the judge rather than, say, Glanton who winds up taking the role of mentor? The answer lies chiefly, I would suggest, in an examination of who the judge is and how he views himself. O'Connell argues

> Judge Holden would certainly consider himself an exceptional man, using violence against those who are less 'fit' to rule or even to exist. In addition, like a Teddy Roosevelt, Robert Baden Powell, or Buffalo Bill, he considers it his duty to indoctrinate the right kind of boy (white, intelligent, charismatic and violent) into his values. (177)

What qualifies the judge to take on such a role? Well, as O'Connell points out, "Holden represents and communicates the ideals of the Euro-American social system, and the desire of that system to reproduce itself wherever it may." (177) In the judge's mind he is supremely qualified for this task; he is well educated, well travelled and exceedingly efficient at being violent in the most horrendous ways, ways that seem gratuitous even by the standards of the men who follow him. But the judge does not see his acts as extreme at all. I agree with O'Connell's assessment that he "sees a Darwinian world and teaches that dominant males should be both cultured and, when necessary, violent." (178)

Yet, for as much as one may read the judge as a "father figure" dispensing wisdom, there is also the uncomfortable fact that those whom he seeks to educate are in fact in

competition with him. His desire to revel in and encourage savage warfare means that, as O'Connell argues, he is also "a feral predator against those whomever he considers his inferiors or who are in his way" (178). There is no exception made for the kid; he holds a special place in the judge's eyes but that will not prevent the judge from trying to kill or rape him. If anything, the kid's compassion provides an added impetus for the judge to do just that, because for the judge compassion is nothing but weakness. The naturalistic outlook that the judge embodies cannot acknowledge the existence of such an emotion. Nature is indifferent to those who seek to aid the weak or in the very least, stay their hand out of mercy. Thus, the final confrontation between the two becomes inevitable and the judge cannot lose, either way.

The kid's control of his emotions is, according to O'Connell, "esteemed by the judge" (178), and is crucial to understanding why the judge selects him as his protégé. O'Connell writes:

> The kid is the very model of iconic Western masculinity. His ability to control his own fear and to inspire fear in others makes the gang value him. It signals his exceptional nature. The idea of regeneration through violence in the American mythos is that once the feral stage is over, then the violence should no longer be necessary. However, in the novel, as in history, the use of violence to control others becomes habitual. The judge's essential violence and need for domination is illuminated through his treatment of children and animals. He kills puppies for sport and rapes and murders children. (178-79)

The habituation of violence means that whatever confrontation takes place between the judge and the kid must be violent; there can be no peaceful resolution of conflict between them. The judge's need for domination mirrors the kid's resistance to fear: as one increases, so must the other. In other words, the judge's acts of violence must become more extreme because of the kid's refusal to allow the judge to intimidate him.

It must also be pointed out that the relationship between mentor and student relies upon a degree of willingness to be mentored, to accept the teachings offered and meet the expectations of the mentor figure. O'Connell notes:

> Judge Holden's attempted education of the kid into the violent masculine family depends on his belief in the power and attraction of myth and its ability to organize the world. However, his ultimate failure to transform the kid into a "fairybook beast" like himself illustrates the way that the outcome of pedagogy and mentorship depends

> upon a receiver and how the receiver understands and interprets the myth. The social system has many ways to bring the individual into line with its expectations. They can include expressions of esteem or of disdain, legal values, and inclusion or exclusion from a group. (179)

The kid's rejection of the judge's pedagogy is paradoxically what ensures their final confrontation: his refusal to shoot the judge. O'Connell sees this as a form of "mutiny" (180) and argues: "The kid, in traditional Western fashion, should kill the judge or be killed by him in order to establish who is right. Instead, the novel ends ambiguously" (180). I will discuss the ambiguity of the ending of the novel in the final section of this chapter. Before I do so, however, I feel it is important to outline the philosophical, literary and cultural influences that may have contributed to the character of the judge.

III The Judge and Morality: An Exercise in Nietzschean Ethics

The judge's disdain for the limitations imposed by the Judeo-Christian tradition is displayed in the very first chapter of the novel, in the episode involving Reverend Green. Crucially, this is when the kid meets the judge for the first time, and the fact that the judge seems to have incited the faithful towards lynching the Reverend purely for his own amusement is suggestive of a Nietzschean theme taken to extremes. There is a distinctly problematic issue with doing so though, as Eric Miles Williamson argues:

> The problem, of course, with disposing of the tenets of Western religion, is that without a moral system that is even somewhat universally recognized, a moral void is created. Religion was created in most cultures because man is the animal who seeks a purpose: gods and their "dictates" have often provided that purpose, given mankind a consolation for the recognition of mortality. In the absence of a religion, however, mankind nevertheless still seeks a purpose, a metaphysics. [...] McCarthy explores characters who live in this void of key value, and his characters fills this void with the metaphysics of war. (263)

Thus, the interaction of the judge with the preacher and his baseless accusations are critical in the sense that they place the characters firmly in a moral void. This may be playing towards convention in the sense that the West was typically seen as a "wild" place where law and order gave way brute force. But simply accepting this perspective does not take into account the judge's will to power. Having the Reverend Green chased out of his own tent (in the

midst of a sermon, to boot) is as much about asserting the judge's dominance as it is about the very Nietzschean desire to expose Christianity as fraudulent. Williamson points out that the crowd, upon hearing the judge's accusations, transforms "into a hypocritical, murderous mob, something Nietzsche rails about at length" (264).

The reactions of the men gathered in the bar after the service when they learn that the judge "never laid eyes on that man before today. Never even heard of him" (9) seem to confirm not only that his actions were his idea of a joke but that his audience approves of such humour as well. Incitement to violence, violent acts and the judge's philosophical stance are inseparable from one another from the opening of the novel. Once we have entered the void, there can be no turning back, there can be no effective salvation or redemption.

Within this moral void of McCarthy's creation, we are also unable to determine what is "good" or "bad". Williamson argues:

> *Blood Meridian* blurs the distinctions between good and evil (indeed, going beyond good and evil in the Nietzschean sense), confounding readers who seek such a distinction. The first chapter conspicuously lacks the traditional protagonist and antagonist of a typical Western. The opening of the novel seems to thwart detection of an authorial ideological stance: there do not seem to be identifiable forces of good vying against identifiable forces of evil. If we assume that both the kid and the judge are evil – the kid in whom "broods already a taste for mindless violence" and the judge who embodies the force of intellectual violence – and if we assume that the novel itself is a stage on which mindless violence and intellectual violence will battle, then the novel becomes a frightening commentary. It would seem to say, The world is violent, and the successful man is he who survives. (261-62)

Williamson goes on to argue that the judge is not an ideological reflection of McCarthy, nor is he based upon "Nietzsche's Superman" (262). He argues that whilst other figures like "Ahab, Lear, Kurtz, Wolf Larsen and Sutpen [...] clearly have their faults and are destroyed because of them" (262), the judge appears – if one accepts that the judge is triumphant at the novel's conclusion – to be "faultless [...] victorious and dancing" (262). I disagree with this argument, both on the basis of Nietzschean philosophy and because of my reading that it is the kid who finally triumphs.

Bernd Magnus and Kathleen Higgins explain Zarathustra's account of the role of the *Übermensch* as follows:

> The *Übermensch* [...] is continually experimental, willing to risk all for the sake of the enhancement of humanity. The *Übermensch* aspires to greatness, but Zarathustra does not formulate any more specific characterization of what constitutes the enhancement of humanity or greatness. He does, however, contrast the *Übermensch* to the *last man*, the human type whose sole desire is personal comfort, happiness. Such a person is "the last man" quite literally, incapable of the desire that is required to create beyond oneself in any form, including that of having children. (40)

These observations are important for a philosophical reading of Blood *Meridian* for a number of reasons. Firstly, the characterization of the *Übermensch* as being prepared to "risk all for the sake of the enhancement of humanity" is echoed by the judge's sentiments about war being the ultimate test:

> 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. (262)

In other words, war is the best way to exert strength to its fullest extent because the consequences of doing so are irrevocable for the loser. In becoming a victim of murder, the loser has wagered all and lost all, gains both past, present and future, to the benefit of the victor who now obtains greater respect for his deed. One could argue that the entire Glanton gang, if seen as a collective entity, could well be seen to be acting according to what they believe to be the "enhancement of humanity"; in fact it is difficult to think of any genocide which has not seen in this light by the perpetrators. The judge, however, the most skilled practitioner of violence and warfare in the novel, most clearly embodies this ideal: his pedagogy is centred in trying to foster the conditions for an amoral Darwinism to flourish through sheer force of will. By allowing the kid to kill him he ensures that the cycle of violence will continue after he dies, thus gaining both figurative and meta-textual immortality. Through this powerful evocation of "survival of the fittest," the judge's will to power confirms that McCarthy's West has been all but "swallowed up" by the violence that came to characterize it most eloquently.

Secondly, the fact that Zarathustra does not specify what this enhancement or greatness is supposed to be provides fertile ground for the kind of naturalistic world-view that the judge espouses and embodies. The judge does not simply provide insight and then fail to act upon it: it is no coincidence that throughout the novel the great speeches made by leading characters are punctuated either by violence which leads to material gain or violence that leads to disaster. In the case of the speech quoted above, the attack of the Yuma comes soon after. Earlier in the novel Captain White's pronouncements about the nature of existence in Mexico are followed by the attack of the Comanche. Philosophical idealism is therefore regularly confronted with the raw reality of physical violence.

Thirdly, the comparison between the *Übermensch* and the so called "last man" is very similar to the dynamic that exists between the judge and the kid, and the judge says as much to the kid in the bar in Griffin: "You of all men are no stranger to that feeling, the emptiness and despair" (347). One could argue that the judge must feel a similar sense of isolation because he is without equal, an intellectual paragon who must make do with manipulation rather than true connection. His professed desire to regard the kid as a son could be seen as indicative of this idea as well, although in all likelihood he is merely trying to create a feeling of guilt in order further to manipulate and exploit the kid.

The kid also fits the description of the last man in his unwillingness to create anything outside of himself. The rather poignant episode with the old Indian woman in the desert (who turns out to be long dead and far beyond the reach of the kid's kind words) reflects this doubt in the importance of legacy. The interesting thing is that the kid is illiterate: he cannot create nor derive meaning through writing. The words used to describe the episode reflect a very Nietzschean concern, namely that ideas and thoughts are not simply the currency of the mind but rather indistinguishable from emotions and the reactions they are able to cause. As Hollingdale states in his introduction to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

> unlike most people, even most philosophers, Nietzsche lived with his intellectual problems as with realities, he experienced a similar emotional commitment to them as other men experience to their wife and children. It is this, indeed, which is the badge of his uniqueness and the key to understanding him. (11)

The kid's uniqueness derives from his compassion: as the judge observes dryly, "You alone reserved some clemency for the heathen" (316). Of course, the kid's decisions are not always

morally correct, as the judge is quick to point out when dealing with the kid's inability or reluctance to bear witness to the events he has seen and participated in:

> Where is Shelby, whom you left to the mercies of Elias in the desert, and where is Tate whom you abandoned in the mountains? Where are the ladies, ah the fair and tender ladies with whom you danced at the governor's ball when you were a hero anointed with the blood of the enemies of the republic you'd elected to defend? (349)

In each case, the kid cannot escape the consequences of his actions. The crucial factor in each case is that the judge would have the kid feel no guilt whatsoever by recognizing that such events are simply part of "the dance of war" and cannot be understood in any other way. Immediately the judge uses this as a platform to once again reinforce his violent philosophy:

> As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior's right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers. (349)

In other words, those who resist the urge to celebrate war because of the bloody price it demands attempt to define war in a way that is false. Thus all participants who still argue for the sanctity of life despite actively participating in the horrors of war perpetuate false representations of war simply to assuage their consciences or prevent criticism. There is, according to the judge, no way to divorce the wonder of the dance from the acts that require it; one cannot truthfully participate in the dance until one has shed all compassion. And the kid is warned by the ex-priest Tobin of the danger of such compassion in the face of the judge:

> When the kid returned to his own blanket the expriest leaned to him and hissed at his ear.
>
> Fool, he said. God will not love ye forever.
>
> The kid turned to look at him.
>
> Dont you know he'd of took you with him? He'd of took you, boy. Like a bride to the altar. (171)

It is this level of obsession, this relentless drive of his will to power despite facing destruction that has led to the judge being compared to Melville's Captain Ahab.

IV *Blood Meridian, Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*: Ideas on possible common influences

In terms of their physical characteristics, the two characters could hardly be more different. What they do share are mental acuity, resourcefulness, magnanimous personalities and an ability to inspire both fear and awe. What motivates the characters is something of a mystery that allows for little consensus. Ishmael and the nameless narrator of *Blood Meridian* do, however, attempt to offer something of an explanation in this regard. Ishmael states of Ahab:

> There was an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsurrendable wilfulness, in the fixed and fearless, forward dedication of that glance. Not a word he spoke; nor did his officers say aught to him; though by all their minutest gestures and expressions, they plainly showed the uneasy, if not painful, consciousness of being under a troubled master-eye. And not only that, but moody stricken Ahab stood before them with a crucifixion in his face; in all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe. (152)

We are at pains to know the true depths of Ahab's character, but we are deliberately prevented from ever fully comprehending it. Certainly his motives of revenge and obsession even to self-destruction, with the killing of the whale who took his leg, do help to explain his relentlessness. In the case of the judge, however, there is only the unceasing desire for control and the sating of his most base appetites. Robert Rebein, writing about the ways in which *Blood Meridian* has inherited tropes and motifs from earlier works, notes the connection between it and *Moby-Dick* as follows:

> In *Moby-Dick*, Melville unfolds his allegory of man's confrontation with evil on the high seas –long associated in the western tradition with the desert, the site of McCarthy's book. In both of these novels, a ragtag group of men made up of many races and creeds becomes involved in a hunt led by a madman. And both Ahab and Judge Holden know without asking who among their men fails to join the hunt wholeheartedly. As the Judge says to the kid, "Did you think I could not know? You were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen" (299). The one word – mutinous – a word we normally associate with the order of ships on the sea, brings with it all the questions raised by *Moby-Dick* to bear on *Blood Meridian*. (118-19)

As the kid lies in the grip of a morphine hallucination we are told by the nameless narrator:

> In that sleep and in sleeps to follow the judge did visit. Who would come other? A great shambling mutant, silent and serene. Whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go. Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing. In the white and empty room he stood in his bespoken suit with his hat in his hand and he peered down with his small and lashless pig's eyes wherein this child just sixteen years on earth could read whole bodies of decisions not accountable to the courts of men and he saw his own name which nowhere else he could 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. (326)

These "old dated maps" that McCarthy writes of here are not dissimilar to the one of Indo-China that hung in Michael Herr's room in Saigon, the description of which are the first words we read in *Dispatches*:

> There was a map of Vietnam on the wall of my apartment in Saigon and some nights, coming back late into the city, I'd lie out on my bed and look at it, too tired to do anything more than just get my boots off. That map was a marvel, especially now that it wasn't real anymore. For one thing, it was very old. It had been left there years before by another tenant, probably a Frenchman, since the map had been made in Paris. The paper had buckled in its frame after years in the wet Saigon heat, laying a kind of veil over the countries it depicted. Vietnam was divided into its older territories of Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China, and to the west past Laos and Cambodia sat Siam, a kingdom. That's old, I'd tell visitors, that's a really old map. (3)

In both cases, the sense of disconnection between the present and what is depicted on the maps holds significance. Maps are used as navigational tools, a means to orientate oneself. McCarthy is therefore implying that even with the aid of "certain pensioners" and "old dated maps" the kid's (and the reader's) ability to fully comprehend the origins and ruthless appetites of the judge is limited, much in the same way as Herr's ability to know about the previous tenant whose map hung on his apartment wall: the evidence that one has is simply not enough to make a definitive judgment.

In discussing the inversion of American mythology in the film *Apocalypse Now*, a film that was inspired by both Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Herr's *Dispatches* (Herr served as a script consultant for the film), John Hellman argues that both Conrad's Marlow

and Coppola's Willard become detectives of a kind. The relevance of this will become clear in due course. Of more immediate significance are his conclusions about the role that ritual plays in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*. In this regard, the roles of Marlow and Willard as agents of moral order are particularly worth considering when one considers the final encounter between the judge and the kid. Hellman writes:

> Marlow's attraction in *Heart of Darkness* to the hearsay he encounters concerning Kurtz is developed in *Apocalypse Now* through a stock device of thrillers: a dossier full of fragments of evidence that the detective must study and interpret. Willard, repelled like Marlow and the hard-boiled detective by the depravity of his society, recognizes in his "investigation" of Kurtz that this "murderer" is the embodiment, in vastly larger scale, of his own inner ideals. (434)

Hellman argues further that the labelling of Colonel Kurtz as a "murderer" is significant for Willard as Willard is

> attracted to Kurtz *after* society has identified him as a murderer. Like Marlow, he consciously moves away from a corrupt, inefficient society towards an idealistic, efficient outlaw. By the time he approaches Kurtz's compound Willard has made Marlow's "choice of nightmares": "Kurtz was turning from a target into a goal." (434-35)

This process is undergone by the kid as well. It is the kid's almost subconscious resistance to this "choice of nightmares" that is the source of the judge's ire, though the relationship between the two figures, like the relationship between Willard and Colonel Kurtz, is more complicated than that. The confrontation between what both figures named Kurtz term "the horror" and the irony of the moral idealism that informs the need to eliminate Kurtz in the face of "the horror" mirrors the tension that exists between the judge and the kid. Many critics choose to see the kid's falling victim to the judge as simply in keeping with the novel's nihilist or naturalistic agenda; that the judge simply "swallows up" the kid because of his vast appetite. This does not take into account the resonances of both *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* in *Blood Meridian*. Hellman, concurring with Grella, uses the idea of the "magical quack" that is a common motif in detective genre fiction to explain the role of both the Kurtzes, and I would argue that this same interpretation may be of some use in examining the judge:

> The final scenes of the film, set at Kurtz's compound in Cambodia, represent the most visible use in the film of Conrad's novella. Here again, however, the particulars owe considerably more to the hard-boiled detective formula. In many works of the genre the murderer turns out to be what Grella calls a "magical quack," a charlatan doctor or mystic presiding over a cult or temple. Free of social restraint, Colonel Kurtz has, like his literary namesake, set himself up as a god among primitive tribesmen, becoming a ghastly figure of evil. (435)

The charming if rowdy saloon typical of the standard mythology of the American West is replaced in *Blood Meridian* by the bar in Griffin, the inside of which is described by McCarthy in some detail: "A dimly seething rabble had coagulated within. As if the raw board structure erected for their containment occupied some ultimate sink into which they had gravitated from off the surrounding flatlands" (342). And, naturally, the judge is the one who by his very presence presides over this "seething rabble." It is of particular importance to note the use of the word "gravitated" as this is precisely what has happened to the kid: just as the other members of the surrounding flatlands communities have gravitated to the bar, so too has the kid. His journey since the last time he saw the judge has passed with sparse narration simply because he was being pulled inexorably and without his knowledge towards this final confrontation; the intervening years are not described because their importance lies in what they culminate in. The ritualistic nature of the ending of *Blood Meridian* has several other components which display the influence of either Conrad, Coppola or, as I would argue, both. Hellman argues:

> The Russian "fool" in *Heart of Darkness,* now a counter-cultural American photo-journalist (the character played by Dennis Hopper), still praises Kurtz mindlessly in mystical terms. But these elements are presented within a more detailed portrayal of Kurtz as the "magical quack" the hard-boiled detective tracks down to his southern California headquarters, a significance first suggested by allusions to Charles Manson in a newspaper story about the Sharon Tate slayings and in the similarity of the "Apocalypse Now" graffiti to the "Helter Skelter" scrawled at the LaBianca home. This portrayal is even clearer in the plot development, for whereas Marlow confronts a pathetic Kurtz crawling away in the grass, this Kurtz, if psychologically "ripped apart" is nevertheless still a powerful controlling figure who has Willard brought to him. (435-36)

In *Blood Meridian*, the judge first rescues "the idiot" from drowning and then later saves him from the Yumas when they attack. This, metaphorically at least, may be compared to the devotion towards Kurtz that the Russian fool and Hopper demonstrate towards their

respective versions of Kurtz. McCarthy refers to this act as "A birth scene or a baptism *or some ritual not yet inaugurated in any canon*" (273; emphasis added). After escaping the Yuma, when the kid and Toadvine are happened upon by the judge in the desert, the idiot is still with him, clinging closely to his side and dependent upon him for both food and protection. The ex-priest Tobin, usually a moderating force upon the kid, urges him to kill both the judge and the idiot. When the kid fails to do so, Tobin is resigned to the fact that the kid will never be able to escape his final ritualistic confrontation with the judge:

> We got to hide.
> Hide?
> Yes.
> Where do you aim to hide?
> Here. We'll hide here.
> You cant hide lad.
> We can hide.
> You think he cant follow your track?
> The wind's taking it. It's gone from the slope yonder.
> Gone?
> Ever trace.
> The expriest shook his head.
> Come on. We got to get goin.
> You cant hide.
> Get up.
> The expriest shook his head. Ah lad, he said.
> Get up, said the kid.
> Go on, go on. He waved his hand.
> The kid spoke to him. He aint nothin. You told me so yourself. Men are made of the dust of the earth. You said it was no pair...pair...
> Parable.
> No parable. That it was a naked fact and the judge was man like all men.
> Face him down then, said the expriest. Face him down if he is so. (312-13)

By now it is clear to the expriest that the judge is not an ordinary man and that it would take an uncommon amount of bravery and a willingness to die on the judge's part to cause his destruction. His actions and words of advice to the kid throughout the novel suggest that he is simultaneously doubtful and hopeful that this end will be achieved. Tobin, we may therefore infer, recognizes the moral cost of removing the evil of the judge[5] far more clearly than the kid does, even if the kid has spared the judge's life only moments before the scene quoted above.

[5] The moral cost being that in order to remove the evil, one must commit an evil act.

Another feature common to both *Apocalypse Now* and *Blood Meridian* is the disdain that both Kurtz and the judge show for their eventual killers. Hellman writes:

> Like the magical quack in the hard-boiled detective formula, he [Kurtz] sneeringly taunts, tempts and intimidates Willard. The murderer often scorns the detective for his low socioeconomic position and quixotic quest (Kurtz tells Willard, "you're an errand boy sent by grocery clerks to collect the bill"), has him held captive and drugged or beaten (Kurtz has Willard caged, brutalizes him by leaving him exposed to the elements and drives him into hysteria by dropping the severed head of a boat crewman into his lap). (436)

Similarly, the judge taunts the kid, almost echoing Colonel Kurtz's sardonic reply to the enquiry he puts to Captain Willard in *Apocalypse Now*, "Are you an assassin?":

> No assassin, called the judge. And no partisan either. There's a flawed fabric in the place of your heart. Do you think I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved some corner of clemency for the heathen.
> [...]
> You think I've killed Brown and Toadvine? They are alive as you and me. They are alive and in possession of the fruits of their election. Do you understand? Ask the priest. The priest knows. The priest does not lie.
> [...]
> Perhaps, he called, perhaps you have seen this place in a dream. That you would die here. (316)

Later in this chapter I focus on the bar and jakes scenes in Griffin in more detail; for now it is sufficient for me to suggest that McCarthy is following a pattern of inversion that Coppola also used to great effect in *Apocalypse Now*. If the judge's taunts and assurances of the health of his comrades were not enough, he later visits the kid during his imprisonment in San Diego. This is the second time that the kid and the judge have had cell bars between them, the first being after the kid is released along with Toadvine in Mexico after the ill-fated filibustering expedition led by Captain White. Unlike the first prison visit, however, this time the judge does not make any effort to secure the kid's release. He is instead content to present false evidence against the kid in order to see him hanged and his name forever damned by God and men alike:

> What do they aim to do with me?
> I believe it is their intention to hang you.
> What did you tell them?

> Told them the truth. That you were the person responsible. Not that we have all the details. But they understand that it was you and none other who shaped events along such a calamitous course. Eventuating in the massacre at the ford by the savages with whom you conspired. Means and ends are of little moment here. Idle speculations. But even though you carry the draft of your murderous plan with you to the grave it will nonetheless be known in all its infamy to your Maker and as that is so so shall it be made known to the least of men. All in the fullness of time. (322)

In short, therefore, the judge holds the power of life and death over the kid in much the same way as Colonel Kurtz holds Willard's fate in his hands. In Willard's case, a clear inversion of this state occurs as he escapes his confinement and murders Kurtz. In *Blood Meridian* the fate of the kid is less clear but the inference may, I would argue, be made that it is the kid who kills the judge and not vice versa. For just as Willard kills Kurtz, the kid murders the judge and thus completes the ritual of violence implicit in their final confrontation. Grella's "magical quack," as Hellman explains, is "an emblem of the desperate search of the faithless for significance in a dispirited world" (436). This kind of existential crisis is perhaps where one can see the influence of Nietzschean philosophy upon the text most clearly. Certainly Nietzsche himself, a great critic of organized religion and Christianity in particular, excoriated this need or desire to derive significance from anything outside personal experience. Grella points out an even greater significance for those who substitute for organised religion the mysticism of the "magical quack" or what Melville calls "a metaphysical professor" in *Moby-Dick*. Grella argues:

> the bizarre cults and temples lend a quasi-magical element of the Grail romance to the hard-boiled thriller – the detective-knight must journey to a Perilous Chapel where an ambivalent Merlin figure, a mad or evil priest, presides. His eventual triumph over the charlatan becomes a ritual feat, a besting of the powers of darkness. (Grella qtd. in Hellmann 436)

The inclusion of a final confrontation between the kid and the judge may appear to be nothing more than an artistic indulgence on McCarthy's part, rather than the product of a concern for a logical and satisfying conclusion to the novel. The fact is that the entire confrontation has been orchestrated by the judge and this includes the kid killing him. Like Willard who rejects Kurtz, the kid rejects the judge and in doing so ensures that there can only be one outcome. Hellmann explains:

> While the hard-boiled formula is completed by Willard's rejection of his attraction to Kurtz when he sees that Kurtz is indeed a murderer without "any method at all," and by his resistance to Kurtz's intimidation and brainwashing in order to fulfill his mission, he himself knows that his slaying of Kurtz is at the latter's direction: "Everyone wanted me to do it, him most of all." The ritualized confrontation further suggests that the detective figure is in fact killing not an external evil, but his unconscious self. (436)

The judge, as I will relate later in the chapter, confirms this very fact to the kid during their talk in the bar in Griffin. The discovery of the true "heart of darkness" that resides within Marlow's Kurtz, Willard's Kurtz and the judge is what causes Marlow, Willard and the kid to reject any idolizing of the figures they have previously seen value and strength in. In Willard's case, the realization is a particularly grim one as his journey culminates with his finding Kurtz. In the case of the kid, the judge's depravities and avarice have been all too evident on their shared journey together. His resistance towards the judge steadily increases under the tutelage of Tobin; where Willard has a dossier, the kid has Tobin and his own witnessed experiences of the judge's depraved nature. Both Willard and the kid, I would argue, struggle to understand the men they eventually kill; though in killing their victims they perhaps come closer to understanding them than through the communicated violence of their mystic pedagogy. Their decisions to kill Kurtz and the judge are predicated on a desire to be free of the wish to relent and admit their similarity at a subconscious level. In both cases, their immediate survival is questioned: Willard cannot hope to escape the compound if he does not kill Kurtz, and the kid is forced to kill the judge in order to leave the jakes alive.

Hellmann argues that Willard's journey to Kurtz ends with the discovery of "moral chaos." He writes:

> Willard's discovery of the moral chaos that has resulted from Kurtz's pursuit of a moral ideal had led him to see the darkness that pervades not only the hypocrisy of the army, but also the darkness at the heart of his own pursuit of an honest war. The indulgence in death and depravity, of total power, that Willard finds in Colonel Kurtz's display of severed heads, his reading of selected lines from Eliot, and his parable of a Viet Cong atrocity is a devastating illumination of the same hollowness, the darkness, that in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow finds in the figure of Kurtz. (437)

The "parable of a Viet Cong" atrocity is arguably the most iconic moment in the film (aside from Kurtz gasping "the horror, the horror") and is worth repeating here:

> I remember when I was with Special Forces... seems a thousand centuries ago. We went into a camp to inoculate some children. We left the camp after we had inoculated the children for polio, and this old man came running after us and he was crying. He couldn't see. We went back there, and they had come and hacked off every inoculated arm. There they were in a pile. A pile of little arms. And I remember... I... I... I cried, I wept like some grandmother. I wanted to tear my teeth out; I didn't know what I wanted to do! And I want to remember it. I never want to forget it I never want to forget. And then I realized... like I was shot... like I was shot with a diamond... a diamond bullet right through my forehead. And I thought, my God... the genius of that! The genius! The will to do that! Perfect, genuine, complete, crystalline, pure. And then I realized they were stronger than we, because they could stand that; these were not monsters, these were men... trained cadres. These men who fought with their hearts, who had families, who had children, who were filled with love... but they had the strength... the strength... to do that. If I had ten divisions of those men, our troubles here would be over very quickly. You have to have men who are moral... and at the same time who are able to utilize their primordial instincts to kill without feeling... without passion... *without judgment... without judgment! Because it's judgment that defeats us*. (emphasis added)

Yet as Hellmann explains, the film's setting in Vietnam and Cambodia raises serious questions about American foreign policy and identity:

> Here, the Vietnam context and hard-boiled detective persona of the protagonist give it a specific commentary on the American identity: not just the corrupted American reality but the American self-concept of a unique national idealism is itself a fraud, a cover for the brute drives for power that dominate Americans as much as any people. Just as Marlow discovers in Kurtz the essential lie of European imperialism, Willard as hard-boiled detective finds in Colonel Kurtz the essential lie of his own and his nation's Vietnam venture. (437)

The crucial point here is that neither Marlow nor Willard (nor indeed the kid) would be able to discover these "essential lies" were it not for the extraordinary figures they are forced to confront. Each of these extraordinary figures has a parting gift: they force those who confront them as agents of moral order to question whether or not they have a right to judge their victims and yet escape judgement themselves. Colonel Kurtz's parable has often been misunderstood as proof that "America was defeated by its reliance on technology and by its conscience" (Hellmann, 437). As Hellmann points out however:

> Viewed in the context of the detective formula, it is properly understood as a critique of the hollowness of a "mission" that is based on illusory abstraction as much as is the

> redeeming "idea" of Conrad's imperialism. The pure pursuit of an ideal, the obsession with efficient method, becomes the lack of "any method at all," the moral chaos Willard finds at Kurtz's compound, and that dark illumination causes him to draw back from his grail. (437)

The sentiment expressed in the Kurtz parable above is fully indicative of the judge's role in *Blood Meridian*: his function is to show the senselessness of all judgment, be it moral, religious or legal. The Nietzschean underpinning of this is essential: for if the judge was not an *Übermensch* his world-view could be far more easily dismissed. The fact that his charisma and will to power force the kid to accept his world-view through action is what makes the judge's elevated status necessary. As Frye argues: "In artfully blending these various conceptions and figurations, he becomes a uniquely contemporary villain, one who espouses a brutish philosophy that McCarthy presents as the ethical outcome of a rigid philosophical materialism" (69).

Heart of Darkness, *Apocalypse Now* and *Blood Meridian* all have plotlines that involve a journey to the very fringes of civilization (in terms of both geography and patterns of behaviour), and the final result of these journeys is self-reflexivity on the part of the protagonists. The questioning of a moral and ethical ordering based within a system of ruthless expansionism and genocidal violence is at the very centre of the critique of "progress" that each of these works presents. Hellmann concludes his analysis of *Apocalypse Now* by explaining this motif:

> In the river journey Willard uncovered the corruption of the actual American mission; in Kurtz Willard finds the emptiness even of the ideal. This is the significance [...] of Kurtz's telling Willard "you have the right to kill me...but you have no right to judge me." Willard acts out the reassuring action of an agent of moral order, but in so doing realizes that he is judging himself, taking a moral stance towards his own unconscious self. When Willard leaves with Kurtz's book (a report on which Kurtz has scrawled "Drop the bomb" and "Exterminate them all!") and Lance, the surfing innocent traumatized into acid-dropping acceptance of the surrounding madness, he duplicates Marlow's lie to Kurtz's "Intended". Willard at last sees, like Marlow, that the only possible response to the utter dissolution of his moral assumptions is to preserve innocence and the false ideal. (437-38)

In *Blood Meridian* the preservation of innocence lies in the kid's survival: yet even so, this preservation is a pyrrhic victory as best, as the haunting words of the phantom judge proclaiming his immortality confirm. The corruption of this innocence has often been

interpreted by critics in terms of the sexual violation and ultimate destruction of the kid by the judge. Indeed, whilst this interpretation is indeed plausible it is, I would argue, less likely, given the links with *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* adumbrated above.

The strength of the argument that it is the judge who triumphs over the kid rests largely upon the idea that the judge is more like Moby Dick than Ahab (Bloom 4). Cassie Polasek concurs that "McCarthy chose to evoke the figure of Moby Dick as a man" (82). I would argue that this view does not take into consideration the role that Ahab plays in *Moby-Dick*: the whale to be sure is an enigma but it is Ahab's obsession that drives the plot forward. The whale, as frightening and mysterious as it may be to Ishmael and the rest of the crew, is merely the object of the hunt, not the reason for it. The reason for the continuation of the hunt is Ahab's obsession, his determination to kill the great white whale even at the risk of his own destruction. By this logic, the kid could be seen as *Blood Meridian*'s version of the whale: he is hunted and pursued by the judge right until the bloody conclusion of the novel. And, just as Ahab's obsession ultimately leads to his destruction by the very thing he has hunted, so too is the judge finally destroyed by his obsession with overcoming the kid's resistance and annihilating his supposed moral superiority. I also would argue that the links between *Heart of Darkness, Apocalypse Now* and *Blood Meridian* I have discussed above also refute Polasek's assertion that the judge "has more in common with the white whale *than any man*" (82; emphasis my own). Whilst McCarthy's judge may indeed be an unusual and extraordinary figure, he is not completely without connection to humanity, in terms of either possible influences on his representation or his patterns of behaviour. The judge demonstrates many of the qualities of an *Übermensch*, but recognition that he is a product of *Blood Meridian*'s literary inheritance and indeed Coppola's Kurtz makes Polasek's assertion problematic.

V The Judge and Representation as Will to Power

The aspect of the judge that most clearly displays his will to power is not his skill at arms or his predilection for depravity, but rather his desire to control representation. As Moos argues, "Growing out of Chamberlain's narrative and embellished by McCarthy, Judge Holden begins to take control of the world of *Blood Meridian*, dragging all of it under his jurisdiction" (28). The judge "begins to take control" not only through his charisma but also through his lectures and his insistence on controlling representation. As Moos relates:

> As he travels with the scalp hunters, the judge collects, sketches, and catalogs numerous natural and historical finds. Through this scientific ordering, Holden attempts to control the world around him. Collection and categorisation allow him power over his surroundings through a scientific reproduction of nature and history. In the judge's thinking, representation is tantamount to ownership. Enlightenment ideals of science that rationalise and compartmentalise the world drive the judge's endless cataloguing of natural phenomena. Judge Holden presses plants, sketches archaeological finds and petroglyphs, collects rare butterflies, shoots and stuffs birds; he can lecture on geology, ancient history, and the disappearance of the Anasazi. (28)

The judge's knowledge of geology is particularly important for one to consider. The judge seems fascinated by stone for its ability to represent a far older, more primitive time, a time when the kind of violence the judge practices and encourages was far more common. The judge notes: "For whoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry. But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe" (154).

I would argue that creating and nurturing a legacy is another way of altering the structure of the universe. Again the judge's world-view is demonstrated in his description of the desert: "This desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but it is also ultimately empty. It is hard, it is barren. Its very nature is stone" (348).This "largeness of heart" is ambiguous; either the judge is implying that a measure of co-operation is necessary in order to survive in the desert or he is suggesting that a desire to survive, no matter the cost, is what is required. Given his predilections, one could argue that the latter interpretation makes more sense. Yet the kid resists the judge's will to make sense, to divine an order out of chaos, as well as the judge's explanations as to why this is necessary in order to successfully navigate the dangers of the western desert.

As Moos continues:

> The judge's knowledge of geology sets him apart intellectually and spiritually from the rest of his travellers. Scientific cataloguing and categorization hold the ultimate power of representation, and Holden's science accepts a one-to-one correlation between an article and its representation. The judge allows only his vision of the thing into his notebooks. If the object is inanimate, he must destroy it. If it is alive, he must destroy its animate qualities, its life. (28)

The distinction between sinking into the primordial mud and altering the structure of the universe is negligible until one applies the idea to representation: a man who leaves no mark upon the world, who leaves no traces for generations to come (in other words a man with no legacy) may indeed be said to subside with scarcely a cry. In the judge's mind, leaving a legacy is therefore more important than survival; his meta-textual survival is his true accomplishment, one that does not require him to outlive the kid. The judge's destruction of artefacts, flora and fauna in order to be the sole keeper of their memory (for that is all his representation amounts to) does not grant him moral superiority, nor does it make him the only authority on the subjects he chooses. It simply means that, in the self-contained world of the novel, he possesses a greater degree of intellect and learning than his counterparts. His experiences, unlike the others, are to be preserved for posterity.

Or at the very least, the idea of preserving a version of events is what is kept for posterity. McCarthy delights in the tension between the judge's desire to record and his own storytelling; like Conrad, the idea of what it means to tell a story deeply influences his ability to critique what he sees to be a failure to understand the true nature of existence out on the fringes of civilization. Yet for all his intellect the judge has neither restraint nor an aversion to morally repugnant acts, arguably worse than any committed by anyone else in the novel. This contrast between his intellect and his actions is what makes pinning the judge down into a single role so difficult, rather than his mastery of the several skills and talents he possesses. If we choose to define the judge in terms of his abilities and intellect rather than what he chooses to do with them, then there can be no doubt that the judge is the one who emerges from the jakes victorious over the kid; the kid is not only unable to match the judge physically but has also had a responsibility to stop him yet chose to be merciful, not once but twice. In short, the judge's lack of restraint triumphs over the kid's restraint, because restraint is nothing but weakness.

Interestingly though, the judge reflects a very real concern within Nietzschean philosophy, namely that the method by which science was conducted by men like Darwin was ultimately more important than the conclusions that it helped to reach. Nietzsche himself was ardently opposed to Darwinism as he felt that it was not a true depiction of the world. He writes:

> That will to power in which I recognize the ultimate ground and character of all change provides us with the reason why selection is not in favour of the exceptions and lucky strokes: the strongest and most fortunate are weak when opposed by

> organized herd instincts, by the timidity of the weak, by the vast majority. My general view of the world of values shows that it is not the lucky strokes, the select types, that have the upper hand in the supreme values that are today placed over mankind. (364)

The judge needs to be viewed as emblematic of the methods of inquiry that he favours and not necessarily the views that accompany them. For example, one could not suggest with any credibility that the judge is a fascist purely because he practices an interest in scientific enquiry using the same methods that Darwin used. Darwin's methodology and findings were twisted to suit the ideals and theories of racist policy makers and ultimately gave rise to what we now call "Social Darwinism." And just as Darwin's theories were manipulated for all manner of morally reprehensible arguments, the same could be said of Nietzsche, a figure long touted in right-wing circles despite the fact that he would no doubt have been appalled by being associated with Hitler and the Nazis in any way (Magnus, 638-39).

In writing about the problems one encounters in examining the complex relationship between the judge and the kid, critics seem oscillate between seeing the kid as an ethical subject, or disagreeing with such a view on the grounds that there is not enough evidence to support such a claim, or indeed that what little evidence is used to support such a claim is contradictory at best. In examining this tension Joshua Comyn writes:

> I believe that there exists enough evidence for both views to arise but not enough for them to be finally validated, and that this indeterminacy is a deliberate function of the text – a trick played by the text on the reader-critic. Without ever allowing the reader access to the kid's inner thoughts, but providing just enough evidence of a psychic life through descriptions of his words and actions, the text entangles us in the problem of being the kid, a problem that is essentially that of apprehending the judge: of judging him. (57)

Whilst Comyn suggests a neat way to frame the argument, his implicit suggestion that the only way one can understand the kid is by trying to understand the judge ignores the instruction that is given to us by McCarthy in the very first line of the novel: "See the child" (3). Comyn mentions this instruction himself:

> "See the child" instructs the narrator at the very beginning of the novel. It is a direct address by the narrator to an implied addressee of the text, which I take to be the reader. (It is also curiously performative, oral even, and as such has a great affinity with the oratory and storytelling of the judge in various parts of the novel.) (58)

I would argue that these words are McCarthy's warning to his readership, and that to see the judge as the author of the text, as Comyn argues, completely misses the fundamental point McCarthy is trying to make through his embellishment of a shady historical character in the first place. The kid, I would argue, should have far more importance attached to him than has been the case because it is how he reacts to the judge throughout the novel that is McCarthy's most pressing creative concern, even greater than his attention to detail or the (sur)realism of his style. It is easy to be swept up in the words and arguments of the judge; his charisma makes him unique amongst the great villains created by literature. *Heart of Darkness* is not about Kurtz but rather about how Marlow is changed by his meeting with Kurtz and the journey back to "civilization." Likewise, one may read *Blood Meridian* as the collected musings of the judge or one may view it as the failure of the judge to kill the kid; in either sense the judge is not the sole protagonist. Besides all of this, the judge is not the architect of his own story: his function is to create something for the kid to resist. He is symbolic of that which should be resisted, not that which should be doing the resisting, and this places the kid, critically at least, at a greater level of importance.

It does not seem just that critics so lightly dismiss the role of the kid whilst fully accepting the judge's triumph over him as "logical" or even "in keeping with events that preceded it." The ease with which the ambiguity of the ending of the novel is dismissed seems a bit narrow-minded: simply because something is unlikely does not mean that it is impossible, no matter how implausible it may seem. Comyn's words again reflect this critical prejudice towards the ambiguity of the ending of the novel:

> *Blood Meridian* is structured as a "Bildungsroman" – we encounter the kid in the opening pages of the book and the rest of the novel is for the most part taken up in tracking his movements until his implied, though *nonetheless certain* death at the end of the novel. (57; emphasis added)

I do not wish to argue the case for seeing the novel as a true Bildungsroman as again, there is significant debate as to whether or not this is indeed the case; Harold Bloom for one sees a moral development in the kid, whereas critics like Dana Phillips and Steven Shaviro see the novel in far more nihilistic terms. McCarthy may well have been influenced by Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in this regard. As Magnus and Higgins note:

> Indeed *Zarathustra* stands in the tradition of the German *Bildungsroman,* in which a character's development towards spiritual maturity is chronicled. Zarathustra can be seen as a paradigm for the modern, spiritually sensitive individual, one who grapples with nihilism, the contemporary crisis in values in the wake of the collapse of the Christian worldview that assigned humanity a clear place in the world. (40)

This "contemporary crisis in values" is, I would argue, a fundamental component of the tension that arises between the kid and the judge. From the judge's side this is abundantly clear: his use of Nietzschean philosophy and his desire for scientific ordering is clearly meant to resolve this crisis. On the part of the kid, this is more difficult to ascertain, although his carrying around of a bible which the narrator tells us "no word of which he could read" (329) is perhaps indicative of the kid representing if not a purely Judeo-Christian worldview then at least an inchoately ethical one.

Seeing moral development is not necessary for my theory to succeed; although such a reading of the kid would go some way to explaining his actions. The kid's decision to kill the judge is predicated on a societal imperative more than it is on any kind of moral one. If one accepts that representation, how one captures and explains the world, truly is ownership, then the kid is a nothing more than a glaring failure. If he still has the ability to show restraint, then all the judge's "lessons" about the nature of existence, warfare, representation and what tools a man needs to survive in the West have been wasted on him. And this is I feel the crucial point that most critics ignore or have yet to understand: the value of the speeches is not in their content but rather what they produce, in terms of significant action. In a very literal sense, the actions of the gang are America's legacy to the world, they are reflective of a culture that has simply evolved other ways violently to enforce its will on others. Where once there were gangs of scalp hunters there are the contemporary evils of outsourcing and sweatshops. If the kid is still able to challenge the judge, even up to the bar scene in Griffin, it means that the judge has failed to fully convert the kid to his twisted, animalistic version of reality, one in which one is accountable to none, not even oneself. On a more profound level, I would argue that such resistance means that those who would seek to rationalize Manifest Destiny, in whatever form it takes, will force the hands of those who counsel resistance. The kid's resistance and ultimately his final confrontation with the judge is proof of this; neutrality is non-existent in McCarthy's vision.

VI The Final Confrontation

If one examines the interactions between the judge and the kid in the final chapter, the judge's failure becomes obvious. I would argue that the judge's speech on destiny at this point rivals anything that he has produced in the novel up until then. It is curious that the judge should choose such a subject, for two reasons; first, it is the final chapter when destinies will, for good or ill, be decided. Secondly, the meeting between the two is not a chance encounter. As the kid points out:

> I never come here huntin you.
> What then? said the judge.
> What would I want with you? I come here same reason as any man.
> And what reason is that?
> What reason is what?
> That these men are here.
> They come here to have a good time. (346)

This is no "showdown at high noon," no town square Mexican standoff; it is simply two men standing at a bar arguing while drinking whiskey. Yet there is an edge of menace in the way in which this interaction is being conducted: from the moment that the kid spots the judge in the bar we become aware that something momentous is about to happen, in all likelihood one of these men is going to die at the hands of the other. In fact, the words of the barman – Speak or forever" (342) (clearly a shortening of "Speak now or forever hold your peace," a phrase usually associated with weddings but now something that takes on a sinister tone) – seem to indicate that a reckoning will take place. Then there is the moment in which the kid first sees the judge:

> He wiped his mouth and turned around and placed his elbows on the bar behind him.
>
> Watching him across the layered smoke in the yellow light was the judge.
>
> He was sitting at one of the tables. He wore a round hat with a narrow brim and he was among every kind of man, herder and bullwhacker and drover and freighter and miner and hunter and soldier and pedlar and gambler and drifter and drunkard and thief and he was among the dregs of the earth in beggary a thousand years and he was among the scapegrace scions of eastern dynasties and in all that motley assemblage he sat by them and yet alone as if he were some other sort of man entire and he seemed little changed or none in all these years. (342-43)

There is something predatory, something almost reptilian in the judge staring at the kid in this way. McCarthy's description of the company surrounding the judge is presaged by the single line which indicates his presence to the reader. In a single line the entire complexion of the visit to the bar has changed: we, like the kid, have no longer simply immersed ourselves in a heady mixture of light, smell and sound but instead find ourselves once again confronted by the judge. The description of the company surrounding the judge, I would argue, serves two purposes. Firstly and perhaps most obviously, it exists to remind us that the judge is unique, that whilst there may be many such forms of the listed professions that surround him his position within society is paradoxical. As a judge, in the legal sense, he must be part of the community he serves in order to accurately judge the degrees of their various transgressions; in order for his decisions to be respected and abided by, he must have the respect of the people he serves. The judge is, however, also set apart from any community thanks to his *Übermensch*-like stature: his level of education, his physical dimensions and otherworldly manner (both in terms of body language and his grandiose way of speaking) ensure that whilst he is able to mix freely among the society he finds himself in, he is not one of them. McCarthy's description reinforces the idea that though we may encounter many professions in *Blood Meridian* there is only one judge. This further reinforces the idea that the judge and the kid are foils and that some final reckoning must take place between them.

To add to this, the bear dancing in the bar is then shot, a scene which adds to the sense of impending doom. The men in the bar may have been drawn to it in order to "have a good time" but that does not mean that such endeavours are without danger. If one were to recall the night of adventure embarked on by the kid and his new filibuster comrades that ended tragically for the one named Earl, then it is not hard to foresee a similar occurrence taking place. Indeed there have been several instances in the novel where bars, saloons and bordellos have been scenes of violence – perhaps indicative of the attitudes of the period, when none but the most skilled or respected could enter such places truly unafraid or at ease. "Having a good time" in the old West was as much about a sense of anticipation as it was whores, card games or alcohol. The kid knows all of this and enters anyway, just as having seen the judge at the bar he will not leave town and run: where could he run that the judge could not find him?

The interaction between the kid and the judge now reaches its climax; indeed one could argue that the final chapter is the culmination of the philosophical argumentation that has informed the narrative throughout. The judge's motives remain unclear: whether or not the judge has come to the bar with the specific intent of raping and murdering the kid is not

an easy one to answer: if the judge's origins are remote, his motives are even more so. What is clear, however, is that he is determined to take full advantage of the meeting. His ruthless pursuit of the kid comes as little surprise: in order to complete his "training" of the kid there must be there must be a final encounter, a reckoning between the two. There can be no logical ending to the novel without such a reckoning. The more nihilistic view of the novel would no doubt suggest that such a meeting has little relevance: whether the kid falls victim to the judge or some other quirk of fate, he will finally be claimed by the West. Resistance against the raw power of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and all that accompanies it is impossible without a blood price, and the judge states as much in his explanation of ritual:

> One could well argue that there are not categories of no ceremony but only ceremonies of greater or lesser degree and deferring to this argument we will say that this is a ceremony of a certain magnitude perhaps more commonly called a ritual. A ritual includes the letting of blood. Rituals which fail in this requirement are but mock rituals. Here every man knows the false at once. Never doubt it. That feeling in the breast that evokes a child's memory of loneliness such as when the others have gone and only the game is left with its solitary participant. A solitary game, without opponent. Where only the rules are at hazard. Dont look away. We are not speaking in mysteries. You of all men are no stranger to that feeling, the emptiness and despair. It is that which we take arms against, is it not? Is not blood the tempering agent in the mortar which bonds? The judge leaned closer. What do you think death is, man? Of whom do we speak when we speak of a man who was and is not? Are these blind riddles, or are they not some part of every man's jurisdiction? What if death if not an agency? And whom does he intend toward? Look at me. (347)

In this sense, the whole novel has been a ritual; every drop of blood has led inexorably to the final conclusion of the ritual, what Sara Spurgeon has named the "Eucharist of the hunter". The most tempting view is to see the kid as a form of prey, rather than the hunter. This is a role that seems to fit the judge's will to power and the kid's failure to stand up to the judge throughout the novel. It confirms what many have argued, that the kid lacks the power to effectively challenge the judge. If, however, one regards the struggle between the two protagonists as having meaning beyond death, if the death of either protagonist is not an exercise in nihilism, then the outcome becomes clear: the kid kills the judge in order to complete the teaching he has received up until the very moment he enters the jakes. As the judge so succinctly asks: "What is death if not an agency?" (347).

The issue of choice is at the very heart of the struggle between the two. The judge's scientific ordering and will to dominate representation is purely Darwinian, obedient to the fundamental tenets of natural law: survival of the fittest, adaption or destruction. By resisting such a philosophical viewpoint, the kid clearly embodies the ideals of libertarian thinking: his free will is ultimately responsible for the chain of events that has led him to the bar and governs his actions after he enters the jakes. His killing the judge confirms the judge's theory of the true nature of the human condition: that idealism is impractical when one is confronted by a force that threatens one's survival. In such instances, all the idealism that fosters beliefs like libertarianism, restraint and democracy becomes of secondary concern to preservation and prosperity. The killing of the bear is a stunning reversal of natural law; the bear is unable to defend itself against the callous and dispassionate force that kills it. The bear, therefore, lacks agency. Conversely, the kid's resistance proves his agency and even the act of killing the judge, despite forever confirming the truth of the judge's philosophy, is also a choice.

Some might argue that it would be especially fitting if the kid did die at the hands of the judge, either as a reminder of the futility of resistance in the face of such evil, or as some kind of heroic last stand against tyranny. Neither seem plausible to me, for different reasons. The first idea, that there can be resistance to evil is a valid one, but self-sacrifice is usually not interpreted in such terms; it is usually seen as a triumph for evil more than a triumph for good. The idea of an example inspiring a new generation of heroes would tie in nicely with my ideas about legacy. Yet I resist the temptation to agree with such a reading as I believe the kid cannot be seen as morally pure: there are no heroes in *Blood Meridian*, only survivors and a multitude of dead. For this reason, the death of the judge, as in keeping with his *Übermensch* status, is unusual and adds significant import to the novel as a whole. As O'Connell so brilliantly points out:

> The end is usually read as a rape/murder by the judge, who then returns to the bar. However, it could also be a triumph for the kid, who as the fully grown man warns people away from the jakes and then turns and walks towards the light. The triumphant reading makes perfect sense when connected to the prophecy at the kid's birth. In the Yuman legend, the Hero Twins return to the human world after their sojourn against the monsters. However, the kid is no storybook hero, any more than he is a fairybook beast. Instead, his own development and resistance are contingent upon the choices available to him and what stories he finds acceptable. (181)

It is my contention that the judge, realizing his pedagogical mission has failed by all other means, must now sacrifice himself in order to remain (as he does at the conclusion of the novel) dancing forever in the minds of the man and the reader. The kid's final development from kid to man are only accomplished through violent regeneration and thus confirm the judge's dominant male pedagogy will continue after his death.

The second idea, that the kid should be emblematic of some kind of heroic last stand would be incongruous, given the extent to which McCarthy has subverted the literary and artistic conventions of the Western genre up until this point. I would argue that if my reading of the end scene of the novel seems far-fetched then the idea of the kid emerging victorious like the typical romanticized gunslinger of fable is even more so. There is no glory in the defeat of the judge, only guilt at the satisfaction of the killing and the knowledge that whatever path he now follows the man has become a virtual reincarnation of the judge. He may lack the intellect and the talents the judge possessed but the man's origins have no longer become a mystery to us: the kid was born in Tennessee; the man was born in the jakes in Griffin (even though McCarthy refers to him as "the man" before that).

The jakes scene is where the judge finally forces the kid's hand, forces him to accept that his restraint was illogical and worse than any act that the judge may have committed because it went against every evolutionary and naturalistic law that governs life on this planet. More than this, it went against common sense: by letting him live and being aware of the judge's ability to be omnipresent, the kid knows he is possibly condemning himself to death. Nietzsche would say that restraint in the face of strength is weakness or cowardice but I would argue that restraint says far more about character than strength ever could. This is indicative of attitudes which promote violence in order to prevent violence; the Cold War theory of "Mutually Assured Destruction" is a prime example of this. The fact is, however, as the judge's attack on the kid proves, restraint cannot be exercised when survival is at stake; as O'Connell argues above, "his own development and resistance are contingent upon the choices available to him"(181). In such instances, the conditioning and morality that civilization imposes count for naught: this is demonstrated by the closing of the door of the jakes. We do not need to see inside the jakes to know what is taking place, whichever argument one accepts about the outcome of the struggle, it is bound to be horrific. It is an ingenious way of reminding the reader of the power of the imagination; the slamming of the bar latch is no less violent than Kurtz struggling to gasp "the horror, the horror."

The "ending" of the novel is not the end entirely. McCarthy chooses to insert an epilogue. This epilogue has attracted significant critical attention, largely because of what

Bloom calls the Promethean figure within it. I would argue that the epilogue is designed to show the improbability of taming the West, both in a literal sense and a figurative one. In the literal sense, the drawing of lines on a map, the building of railways, roads and in our contemporary world, the building of whole cities and all the modern conveniences that accompany them still does not change the need for adaptation. Survival in the desert still requires a level of ingenuity and wisdom no matter how many modern conveniences are at our disposal. In this sense, the timelessness of the West can never be reversed; it will remain an alien and foreboding landscape, one that will continue to challenge and destroy life at will. Even the judge, who earlier assured us of the results of building in stone, recognises this immutable law of existence in the desert "This desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but it is also ultimately empty. It is hard, it is barren. Its very nature is stone" (348).

The fact that the desert is dispassionate and cares nothing for the suffering it inflicts is a metaphor for the human interaction in the novel: there is not a single event that is tragic to the participants, not a single death or scalping that is mourned or cause for grief. In this regard, those who commit violent acts in *Blood Meridian* are not unlike the popular conception of Himmler's SS as "robotic killers." Even the death of the judge is not tragic and does not stem from any moralizing or willingness to do good on the part of the kid. Again, such inherent nihilism within the text points directly to a Nietzschean outlook: that ultimately meaning is manufactured for the express purpose of assuaging a need for order, and that the will to power is all that truly matters.

The epilogue is significant for another reason. As Bloom states:

> The strangest passage in *Blood Meridian,* the epilogue, is set at dawn, where a nameless man progresses over a plain by means of holes that he makes in the rocky ground. Employing a two-handled implement, the man strikes "the fire out of the rock which God has put there." Around the man are wanderers searching for bones, and he continues to strike fire in the holes and then they move on. And that is all. [...] Perhaps all that the reader can surmise with some certainty is that the man striking fire in the rock at dawn is an opposing figure in regard to the evening redness in the West. The Judge never sleeps, and perhaps will never die, but a new Prometheus may be rising to go up against him. (7)

Bloom is correct about the opposition but fails to recognise that the kid is the Promethean figure, who, having killed the judge, is already offering resistance to his world-view. There is no more to the novel because the man who was the kid has successfully challenged and

"defeated" the all-embracing "progress through violence" world-view offered by the judge. It is a pyrrhic victory: by killing the judge the kid confirms that survival is only the by-product of the will to power. Thus the judge cannot ever sleep and will never die, in a figurative sense. What is crucial, however, is that the Promethean figure has provided McCarthy's readership with neither hope nor solace; there is little comfort in being told, even so beautifully, that nothing of any substance can ever be achieved without sacrifice, that ultimately blood pays for all progress, be it scientific, religious, philosophical or indeed in literature; the fact that so much blood must be spilled in order for McCarthy to make plain this tragic realization is proof of it. The ambiguous ending of the novel is perhaps best summed up by Kenneth Lincoln who writes:

> Holden keeps dancing and will never die, a ballad refrain repeats at the ending. Is the Judge fate himself, lascivious evil, a terrestrial satan as anti-Christ, or just a hulking, albino, bald, pontificating fake magistrate who takes the place of a slain dancing bear? It's a strangely giddy, ambivalent, endless, and ominous ending about who lives or dies, what dances or doesn't, which kills or is killed down west. Nietzsche knew the nihilistic riff. (89)

Just as the philosophy Nietzsche created is open to various interpretations, the ambiguity of the end of *Blood Meridian* allows one to advance a reading at odds with the more conventional or accepted readings. Lincoln is quite correct to use the word "ominous" in describing the end, no matter which outcome one accepts as valid.

Conclusion

The conclusions to be drawn from this study, like the study itself, are by no means exhaustive. In selecting the three areas of focus that I have, I have attempted to concentrate on what I would argue are the three most important concerns of McCarthy's work, the ones most crucial to an explanation and understanding of *Blood Meridian*. This in no way suggests that these three concerns (or indeed my treatment of them) come close to covering the full ambit of this rich and complex work: no one study of limited length could do so. I sincerely hope that this one has met its own modest objectives.

Blood Meridian is still regarded by many as McCarthy's best work to date. This is despite the fact that he received the Pulitzer Prize for *All the Pretty Horses* (the first volume in the "Border Trilogy") in 1992, and has received widespread acclaim, even outside of academic and literary circles for his post-apocalyptic vision of human struggle in *The Road* (2008). *Blood Meridian's* continued popularity stems, I would suggest, largely from the fact that it positions itself within a cultural milieu that seems to swing from one extreme to the other. The American West has always been contested ground, both quite literally and in the sense of collective cultural memory. The time-honoured, highly flawed, Hollywood and Dime Novel serial representations of the West, whilst continuing to enjoy public support both in the United States and elsewhere, have been confronted with the harsh truths of a tortured past. Genocide, exploitation and forced removals aside, the allure of the West has been tainted not only by its history but through the use of its mythology as political currency. Once "Cowboy Foreign Policy" may have been the celebrated order of the day, but such ideals are now being confronted by a world that is tired of shameless attempts to disguise naked aggression and commercial interest.

It is important to reiterate, as I have argued throughout this study, that McCarthy is not a revisionist nor is *Blood Meridian* either a revisionist or realist work: it is merely a myth that purports, through the sheer force and majesty of McCarthy's prose, to be authoritative. I would argue that the fundamental question, which at this stage must unfortunately remain rhetorical, is whether or not McCarthy has effectively "cornered the market" as it were by creating such a work? Are we likely to see other authors rise to the challenge of presenting us with an American West that is neither forgiving nor worthy of emulation? Will there ever again, to borrow McCarthy's often quoted phrase "be terrains so wild and barbarous"? There are a great many who hope so, lest the American West be further used as political currency for the next disaster of American intervention. There are some, like me, who hope that *Blood*

Meridian is recognized and celebrated for what it is: a unique literary achievement. In the same way as there may be many novels about whaling but only ever one *Moby-Dick*, let it be so with Westerns and *Blood Meridian*. The figure of the judge looms large over any discussion of *Blood Meridian*; whether one is enthused by his philosophical musings or rejects them one cannot help but be captivated by them. I would argue that the judge's assertion that "war waited for man" (262) is true only in so much as men like the judge and the kid who becomes a man have always existed. The imperative towards conflict may have been bred into our DNA since prehistoric times, or perhaps environmental pressures dictate that our species is a particularly warlike one. But the prophetic nature of this alternative reading serves as a warning in another sense too: to beware the allure of men like the judge whom society takes great pride in producing. For the judge is educated and yet barbaric; civilised yet contemptuous of the limitations such civilising imposes; enlightened and yet capable of morally repugnant acts. There is a systemic imperative within society to create people like the judge because it is believed they are necessary for survival, a necessary evil that must be tolerated for the greater good. The kid is left, therefore, in an impossible position: should he succeed in killing the judge a great evil is removed at great personal or moral cost, to the peril of all. If the kid fails he will be destroyed by the evil he sought to destroy, allowing it to flourish. Whichever ending you accept as valid, the judge is the ultimate victor. The judge *is* still dancing and he *will never* die. He lives on as textual reminder of our great failure to progress to a state of true enlightenment.

McCarthy himself remains something of an enigma. He is hardly the first novelist of fame to shun public life and opportunities to engage with his readership. His reluctance to explain his motives or concerns in writing *Blood Meridian* has continued to foster an ever-expanding library of theories and critical analyses. In this context, it is impossible to say whether any one particular unifying interpretation will ever become universally accepted; it is certainly not an objective of this particular study. What is important to note, however, is that conflicting theories or critiques may continue to polarise into allegorical versus anti-allegorical schools of thought. The results of such a polarisation must remain open to speculation. But just as the mythology of the American West has been adopted as political currency, so too may works like McCarthy's be adopted as currency by reactionary or even revolutionary movements. The scope of the work, its portrayal of the basic condition of humankind, the richness of its prose and its literary heritage mean that *Blood Meridian* could well precipitate a radical shift in the way we think about the American West.

It is also important to note that the work continues to attract new scholarship; this despite the fact that McCarthy has written several books since it was published and yet the volume of critical attention paid to it has not slackened in the least. *Blood Meridian* continues to provide fruitful ground for scholars from a myriad of backgrounds and even disciplines; in compiling the research for a project such as this one may encounter papers, theses and doctorates written by scholars of Law, Philosophy, Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science and International Relations. *Blood Meridian* has long since ceased to be the exclusive province of literary scholars and critics. As David Holloway argues

> There are any number of reasons why McCarthy's first western novel is a difficult book, not the least of which is its restless self-consciousness. *Blood Meridian* might be read as a critique of how we currently think about language. But it is also a novel that thinks hard about the language in which its own critique is formed, and about the difficulty of rewriting the past when contemporary intellectual fashion has dismantled any notion that some unifying causal energy might be glimpsed beyond the surface effects of historical change [...] What we have in *Blood Meridian,* and in McCarthy's western fiction generally, is a kind of straining at the limits of contemporary aesthetic practice, a pushing against the barriers of the mode of intellectual production in which McCarthy finds himself situated. (23)

With such a degree of testing of "barriers", it is hardly surprising that criticism of *Blood Meridian* has evolved and diversified to the extent that it has.

When I embarked on this project, I was of the opinion that this work was more than just a novel about a neglected child who enters a hellish world beyond the pale of civilization in which he encounters violence, loss and ultimately a semblance of humanity. This study has confirmed that the book operates on a far more profound level than that of the elegance of its style and the allure of its plot. The ride into McCarthy's myth provides us with an imaginative and often damning account of human interaction in a setting that is possibly as far removed as can be from the contemporary world. More than this, however, it provides us with a grim reminder that though there have been many victims of the expansionist "Cowboy Foreign Policy "of the United States, their number is likely to be added to in the not so distant future. At the time of writing this conclusion, the conflict in Syria, largely caused by such American foreign policy in a region that has become almost synonymous with the term "Cowboy Foreign Policy," continues to escalate and display the very worst of human nature. Tragic images of young children being rescued from the rubble of demolished buildings, boats of hapless refugees and the sheer indifference of those opposed to helping them have

come to dominate our perception of the crisis. Captain White's chiding admonition of "Hell, there's no God in Mexico" has become "Hell, there's no God in Afghanistan, Iraq or Syria," and we can only speculate as to where the next flashpoint or scene of tragedy will be.

Yet, as difficult as it may be to contemplate, McCarthy's work does offer a glimmer of hope. As Harold Bloom notes, "The Judge never sleeps, and perhaps will never die, but a new Prometheus may be rising to go up against him" (7). This promise of a challenge is left deliberately speculative by McCarthy, as much as the fate of Ishmael after he is rescued from the wreck of *The Pequod* is left unknown. The reader must ultimately decide whether or not a positive outcome is possible. I have argued, rigorously I hope, that the novel firstly does offer a positive ending, and secondly that such a positive ending is not only possible but necessary if the full import of McCarthy's work is to be recognized. I would further submit that this is not in the least a cliché, or an attempt to pander to the Western genre convention of a conquering hero riding off into the setting sun, having overcome adversity through sheer skill, moral purity and determination. If nothing else, McCarthy's rejection of convention throughout *Blood Meridian* should ensure that such assertions are quickly dismissed; *Blood Meridian* has continued to enjoy critical acclaim primarily because of its unconventionality.

Finally, I would like to think that this study has tried to do what all good literary studies of this type should: enhance connections between works where there were the beginning of connections, and make new ones where there were not. For ultimately, whether this study has fully succeeded in its objectives or not, it is my sincere hope that it has, at the very least, suggested that *Blood Meridian* will continue to offer new and exciting opportunities for scholars and critics for decades to come.

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