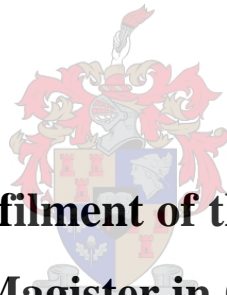


A reading of *Blood Meridian* (Essay)

and

***The Book of War* (Novel)**

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degree of Artium Magister in Creative Writing at
Stellenbosch University.**

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Declaration

By submitting this work electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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SUMMARY

Two separate texts are submitted towards the degree of MA in Creative Writing. The first is this essay, *A Reading of Blood Meridian*. The second is a novel, *The Book of War*.

Essay

The general focus of the essay is the theme of free will in *Blood Meridian* and the techniques with which the narrative elements of character, story, style and voice are deployed to focus the reader's mind on this theme.

The central question: is the meaning, the final message, of *Blood Meridian* that as individuals human beings lack agency and that as groups they are shackled to a common destiny?

The hypothesis is that *Blood Meridian* contains significant patterns, oppositions and dialectics, designed to place arguments for and against agency in the mind of the reader, but that the book's response to the theme is inherently and structurally ambiguous.

Novel

The novel was written before the essay. It was written in direct response to *Blood Meridian* and to the realization that *Blood Meridian* was a text rooted in history.

Like *Blood Meridian*, *The Book of War* is based on, grows out of, first person accounts, specifically Stephen Bartlett Lakeman's *What I saw in Kaffir-Land* (1880) and William Ross King's *Campaigning in Kaffirland: Or Scenes and Adventures in The Kaffir War of 1851-1852* (1853). The novel takes characters devolved from Lakeman and places them in King's journey through the war. These characters create, around a child called the kid, the social backdrop of a coming of age tale.

The novel uses its source texts as a lens through which to view, and tell the story of, the War of The Prophet (Eight Frontier War 1850-53). Readers seeking to answer the question: Why

is South Africa a violent society? might find at least part of the answer in the nature of, and the relationships between, English, Xhosa, Dutch, Khoi and Mfengu cultures in the 19th Century.

THANKYOUS

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1 - INTRODUCTION

In this introductory section the reader will find a sketch of the initial critical reaction to *Blood Meridian* at the time of its publication by Random House in 1985, and a formulation of the central question and hypothesis of this essay.

1.1. Reception and Reputation

Blood Meridian was first published in 1985 by Random House. Writing in the *New York Times*, Caryn James (1985) stated that the text:

distances us not only from the historical past, not only from our cowboy-and-Indian images of it, but also from revisionist theories that make white men the villains and Indians the victims. All men are unremittingly bloodthirsty here, poised at a peak of violence, the "meridian" from which their civilization will quickly fall.

James inferred that the principle characters, the kid and the judge are "our own dead fathers, whom Mr. McCarthy resurrects for us to witness." (James 1985) She describes their opposition in the narrative as a carefully built dialectic resulting in a "stylistically dazzling but facile conclusion." (James 1985) Her concluding remark is equally dismissive.

There are, of course, no answers to the life-and-death issues Mr. McCarthy raises, but there are more rigorous, coherent ways to frame the questions. (James 1985)

The book did not sell well, but its reputation grew steadily over the years to the point where *Time Magazine* (Grossman, Lacayo n.d.) included it in its list of a hundred best novels of all time. Harold Bloom has described it in an interview with Peter Josyph (2000: 9) as:

an attempt, like *Moby Dick*, like Whitman's *Song of Myself*, like *Huckleberry Finn*, at being the ultimate American saga. And maybe it is.

Asked his assessment, Bloom tells Josyph (2000: 9) that *Blood Meridian* is not only the ultimate Western but that,

if [he] had to speak of one work of imaginative literature by a living American, [he] would have to call it *Blood Meridian*.

According to Edwin Arnold and Dianne Luce (Arnold and Luce, 1993: 7) initial commentators, however, emphasised the violence of the book. The novel:

struck many readers as being devoid of moral or even meaning.

Terence Moran, writing in *The New Republic* found it tedious:

This novel, despite its chronicling of appalling horrors and its straining for apocalyptic effects, is boring. (Arnold and Luce, 1993: 7)

Blood Meridian has been called a theological purgative and an allegory "on the nature of evil" (Arnold and Luce, 1993: 8). The impression is of a work which offers little in the way of what Lear called for when he requested an ounce of Civet to sweeten his imagination. Harold Bloom (Josyph 2000: 8) describes an abortive first attempt to read the book where he could not continue because it gave him bad dreams:

I was first given *Blood Meridian* many years ago by Gordon Lish, who is quite mad. Gordon loved it, simply because he loves anything that shows how violent America really is. I read about half of it and although I was very impressed, I couldn't go on because I started to have nightmares. I began it a second time, and again I didn't get through it because I started to dread the slaughter too much

This essay will argue that *Blood Meridian*, with its central theme of agency, is in fact a demonstration of a human ability to make moral choices in even the most unpropitious of historical contexts.

1.2. Central Question

The central question of this study is this: does *Blood Meridian* lead its reader to conclude that it ⁱ lives in a brutal world, devoid of agency or free will, and obedient to a clockwork design which dictates the outcome for the whole and each part therein?

This question of agency is posed in the text in various ways, some more explicit, some less. The judge, when we first encounter his philosophies, appears to argue for absolute destiny. (BM: 85) ⁱⁱ Glanton, the narrator tells us, asserts the authority of his own will. (BM: 243)

On a symbolic level, the undying judge could be seen as emblem of destiny, evil as a prevailing first cause after which all is inevitable. The kid, who never reveals his name, could be seen as emblem of coming of age, of growth into manhood and wisdom. The character, on which ethical themes converge, has meaning only in so far as he can be assumed to have agency.

If a prophet prophecies an event, and that event occurs, there has been a demonstration of inevitability. On the level of story, the Tarot prophecy and its fulfilment at the Yuma ferry is, for some but not for all characters, a narrative dramatisation of questions of fate and destiny in action. If fate is fixed, in what sense can humans be said to choose? The principle characters of *Blood Meridian*, however, rise above their prophesied fate to do battle with the query at the thematic core of the novel: do humans have the freedom to make moral choices?

1.3 Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this essay falls into three parts:

1. *Blood Meridian*, its text and narrator, are the creations of a writer who, having read widely and deeply on the subject, has placed the question of free will as the central theme of the work.
2. The novel itself is a demonstration, a showing rather than telling, that the question is unanswerable. The novel shows us that ambiguity is the only possible response.
3. The theme of agency is central because *Blood Meridian* is hinged on the moral development, in adverse circumstances, of its protagonist, the kid. For the kid to develop ethically, he must have agency.

Central to the argument of the essay is that scenes of prophecy or divination, if the prophecy proves true, become demonstrations of the action of group destiny and individual fate. In *Blood Meridian* the Tarot prophecies are generally accurate. A journey is started and fortunes are told. The journey continues, climaxing in the intricate fulfilment of the prophecy at the Yuma ferry. On one level at least, the action of the novel has demonstrated that agency is impossible.

Significant characters, however, avoid having their fortunes told. The judge is excluded because, manipulating the action, he does not to take a card. The kid is given a card but the words of foretelling are lost to the wind. The kid and the judge are, to varying extents, placed outside of the text's central metaphor for the negation of free will.

They are placed instead in the centre of a dance. In the final sequence of *Blood Meridian* the judge welcomes the kid to a dance:

He rifled a great drink down his throat and leaned back against the bar.

You're here for the dance he said. (BM: 327)

In the final section of this essay I will argue that the dance refers to both the blood "ritual" (BM: 329) which concludes the action of the novel and to the novel itself. The dance, the dialectic, remains, in the cases of the kid and the judge, ongoing.

Blood Meridian deals with the imponderability of human agency by starting a process of dramatic enquiry. Once started, it can never end. The reader is confronted with the unanswerability of certain questions, and, in the epilogue, left to gaze on those riddles in an eternal present.

2. THE TEXT AND NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Blood Meridian is a novel. Questions about the possibility of agency have relevance only in as much as the reader is taken by the text. They have relevance only so far as the narratee, listening to the voice of the narrator, believes that voice.

In this section will be found an overview of the techniques by which this trust in the reliability of the narrator is achieved.

Section 2.1. sketches the dramatic action of the novel, highlighting thematic elements.

Section 2. 2. deals with the qualities of the narrator and is divided into further sub-sections dealing with the narrator's rare intimacy with characters, its lack of interiority and narratorial judgment, its general distance from characters, its reliability, and, with special attention to auditory qualities, its perceptibility.

2.1. A summary of the action

Blood Meridian tells the story of an unnamed child referred to for majority of the text as the kid. His birth kills his mother in 1833. Aged fourteen, he runs away. He is shot. He recovers and takes a boat to Texas. We are told that there will never again be a social milieu savage enough to properly test if human agency can shape the world or if human hearts are shaped by destiny and are just "another kind of clay". (BM: 5)

In Nacogdoches, Texas, the kid encounters Judge Holden, who falsely accuses a preacher. The kid meets Toadvine, fights with him and joins him in burning down a hotel. He wanders through Texas, establishing a reputation as a fighter. He is invited to join a filibustering mission into Mexico. A disordered Mennonite prophesies an end which proves broadly correct. The filibusters are attacked by Comanche warriors. The kid survives to be arrested in Chihuahua and to meet Toadvine in prison.

The kid and Toadvine volunteer to join the Glanton gang, who are commissioned to harvest Native American scalps on behalf of the governor of Chihuahua. At Glanton's right hand is Holden, the judge. Setting out, the gang encounters a group of jugglers who read their fortunes using Tarot cards.

An ex priest, Tobin, tells the kid that the gang first met the judge when they were pursued and out of gun powder. The judge led them to a volcano where he manufactured powder out of sulphur, urine and other ingredients. The judge records historical and natural artefacts in his ledger, always destroying the original. He must own the land and all "autonomous life" (BM: 199) must be destroyed. Only his will must prevail. The kid questions him, wanting to know what the judge judges.

The scalp hunting is initially successful, but the gang commence to murder impartially. Pursued by the forces that originally commissioned them, they take the Yuma ferry and amass wealth by murdering and robbing its customers. The Yumas retake the ferry, killing, in fulfilment of prophecy, most of the gang. The kid and Tobin head west and are threatened by the judge for their weapons. The kid, offered several opportunities to kill the judge, does not.

The kid is imprisoned in San Diego. In a dream induced by spirits of ether he is visited by the judge and an accomplice, a "coldforger". (BM: 310)

The kid sees Toadvine and David Brown hanged in Los Angeles. He wanders for decades, offers help to an old woman, and shoots a teenager. He is called, for the first time, the man. He arrives, aged 45, in Fort Griffin. The judge, who has not aged, awaits him. He tells the man that they are the last living members of the Glanton gang. He is disappointed, accusing the man of harbouring mercy for the heathen. The man says the judge is nothing. He goes to the jakes. The judge is seated there, naked. He rises, grasping the man in an embrace. He latches the door closed behind him. Subsequent visitors to the jakes react with horror at what they see there.

The judge dances, saying, three times, that he will never die. He says that he never sleeps and the narrator tells us the same. "He never sleeps, the judge." (BM: 335)

An epilogue portrays a clockwork world in an eternal present.

2.2 The qualities of the narrator

Blood Meridian is, for those who are taken by it, remarkable in its effect. Its power is a function of the voice of the narrator and of the allusive nature of the text. Voice and text are the product of a widely read, informed intelligence. The text is interwoven with references to other texts, historical and literary. The voice is distinctive for its auditory qualities, especially its rhythm which alternates between the iambic simplicity of the King James Bible and the carnival rhythms of an accordion waltz.

In this section an attempt will be made to identify some of the techniques by which *Blood Meridian*'s effects are achieved. An argument will be made that we are in the hands of a narrative agent whose "rendering of the story.... the reader is supposed to take as an authoritative account of the fictional truth." (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 101) I will suggest, however, that the relationship with the reader created by the narrator of *Blood Meridian* goes beyond what would normally be covered by the term reliability.

2.2.1. Intimacy, distance and the reliability of the narrator

The narrator of *Blood Meridian* is not designed to speak down to us. It treats the reader as its equal, speaking into existence its ideal narratee. It does so with a certain venerable, old world authority.

After the first textual sign, the chapter heading, "1", there follows, centred, in bold type:

Childhood in Tennessee - Runs away - New Orleans - Fights - Is shot -
To Galveston - Nacogdoches - The Reverend Green - Judge Holden - An
affray - Toadvine - Burning of the Hotel - Escape. (BM: 3)

A reader might paraphrase this as, "I narrate, summarizing the events of chapter one: Childhood in..." Thoroughness, then, is an explicit quality of this narrator. The story will be told by an entity thoughtfully in command of its content.

The opening sentences reads:

See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt.

(BM: 3)

An external narrator, perceptible and present in the first three words (someone is asking us to look), appeals to us, asking us to witness with it, "the child." In the sentence, "see the child" is an unspoken subject, "you", the reader. The words could be paraphrased as: I ask you to see the child. The reader, implicit in the text, becomes a character through which the narrator focalizes. In the first three sentences of the novel is an intimacy between narrator and reader which flies in the face of the perception of McCarthy's narrative voice as distant and uninvolved, omniscient but "recessive." (Arnold: 45)

One paragraph on, the perspective shifts into a further intimacy. The first paragraph ends with the sentence, "The boy crouches by the fire and watches him." (BM: 3) This would not be out of place in any naturalistic, realist text told by an external narrator in a 19th Century novel.

Then:

Night of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. (BM: 3)

The perceptible narrative agent is now directly addressing, in first person, almost as creator/parent, the same child referred to in third person in the first paragraph. Implicit in the words, "night of your birth", is that the narrator has an intimate relationship with its creation, the child.

When the narrator speaks, "See the child", it speaks to the reader. When it speaks, "Night of your birth", it is possible that it speaks to both the child and the reader. It is possible that the reader is being asked to associate itself, for the duration of the tale, with the child. When the tale is done, the reader will be faced with the question: what would I make of such circumstances? Would I be able to say that I was free to choose, and therefore to develop an ethical response to the life I was presented with?

This intimacy between narrator and character, and between narrator and reader, will not occur again until the final pages of the text.

In the paragraph before the words "the end", the narrator slips into the present tense. "And they are dancing..." (BM: 335) The narrator is describing the judge who has just, a reader must surmise, killed the kid in the jakes in some last action only hinted at by the reaction of incidental characters. The narration continues in the present tense, describing the scene in the bar/brothel to which the jakes belongs.

Towering over them all is the judge and he is naked dancing, his small feet lively and quick and now in doubletime and bowing to the ladies, huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant. He never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die. (BM: 335)

Within the historical world of the *Blood Meridian*, within the worlds of McCarthy novels generally, characters who claim in bars never to die risk the likelihood of someone reaching for a weapon and proving otherwise.

The phrase, "he says", is used eight times in *Blood Meridian*. Three times it is used when a character is reporting what another character has said. It is used once by the narrator when referring to the Disordered Mennonite.

They'll stop you at the river, he says. (BM: 40)

In all previous cases, the person or people spoken to are specified. In the final sequence before the epilogue "he says" is used four times by the narrator when referring to the judge. Who the judge speaks to is not specified. The phrase is used three times in the last lines before the epilogue. It is used in these final instances with an incantatory iambic repetition.

He **ne/ver sleeps/**, he **says/**. He **says/** he'll **ne/ver die**. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favourite. He **ne/ver sleeps/**, the **judge/**. He **says/** that **he/** will **ne/ver die**. (BM: 335)

This is not the rhythm and tone of a narration whose purpose is to describe a conversation at a dance. A parallel is more likely to be found in a profound summation such as Shakespeare's

Albany telling the survivors around Lear's body, in the final words of the play, that they, "shall **ne**/ver **see**/ so **much**/ nor **live**/ so **long**."

Furthermore, the description is general rather than specific. We are not told that the judge is awake at this moment in time, but that he does not sleep at *any* moment in time: "He never sleeps, the judge ". We have an unusual situation in the text where a character speaks and the narrator repeats his words in agreement. Either the judge's un-named conversant is the narrator, or the narrator is privy to what always is, and is describing what always is.

In either event, the narrator is as bound up at the end with its creation, the judge, as it is in the beginning with its creation, the child. The reader lives, in the final lines of the book, in an unending present, observing, listening to, with the narrator, the judge eternal.

Despite the significant positioning of this intimacy of focalization, it is so rare in the totality of the text that it is easily missed in an overall response. In the main, the narrator presents events and actions as they occur. The narrator observes the characters via a focalization that is like a camera placed to impartially display the landscape and the actors therein.

What the camera sees, however, is a landscape as extreme and alive as the animal life it supports. We are shown a world so active that even shadows threaten agency, being, as they are,

stenciled across the stone with a definition austere and implacable like shapes capable of violating their covenant with the flesh that authored them and continuing autonomous across the naked rock without reference to sun or man or god. (BM: 139)

This is not an isolated example. The earth, the totality of matter, is seen as potentially conscious, active:

Under the hooves of the horses the alabaster sand shaped itself in whorls strangely symmetric like iron fillings in a field and these shapes flared and drew back... [a]s if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience. As if the transit of those riders were a thing so

profoundly terrible as to register even to the uttermost granulation of reality. (BM: 247)

Sentence by sentence, the narrator astonishes with the world it depicts and the thematic implications of that depiction. The technicalities of a limited third person point of view, the subtlety of the shifts in focalization, are subsumed in the reader's ongoing surprise at what is presented and the words with which the presentation is made. The effect achieved is not that the narrator is perceived as a reliable interlocutor, it is that the narrator is experienced as a powerful, rhythmic, nodal intelligence emanating from the perceived world, from the nature of things.

2.2.1. Lack of interiority and narratorial judgment

Following Rimmon-Kenan's (2002: 95) typology of narrators, the narrator of *Blood Meridian* is, in general, with the exceptions mentioned above, extradiegetic - it is above or superior to the story it narrates. It is also, with the same exceptions, absent from the story it narrates - it is heterodiegetic.

The narrator does not describe the psychological make up of the characters. Only on very rare occasions, as with the kid's dream of the judge and the coldforger (BM: 309,310), does the narrator represent the interior thoughts or feelings of the characters. The narration is almost always in the third person and it is omniscient in that, while rarely deploying it, it shows itself capable of interiority.

The narrator does not make moral judgements of the characters. The Comanche who attack the filibustering party, for instance, are described as:

...passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies... gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they

might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. (BM: 54)

The word "savages" might be perceived as pejorative, judgemental, but the actions of those described as savages are no worse than, and are viewed impartially along with, those actions performed by those characters described as scalphunters. The narrator of *Blood Meridian* stands outside of political frameworks and acknowledges all humans as both equal and barbarous. The colonizers and the Native Americans in *Blood Meridian* are equally savage. The matrix is human, where human could be taken to mean a species of slaughterous ape:

Men were wading about in the red waters hacking aimlessly at the dead and some lay coupled to the bludgeoned bodies of young women dead or dying on the beach. One of the Delawares passed with a collection of heads like some strange vendor bound for market, the hair twisted about his wrists and the heads dangling and turning together. (BM: 157)

Richard Pierce (Arnold and Luce, 1993: 5), a television producer who worked with McCarthy on a rare, for McCarthy, television project, remarked that, by "never presuming an author's license to enter the mind" of his characters, McCarthy was able to insure:

the almost complete inscrutability of his subject and subject matter, while at the same time investigating it.

The narrator shows the events and the reader is privileged to observe them and make, or not make, its own judgments.

2.2.3. Perceptibility of narrator; its rhythmic qualities

The narrator, while generally heterodiegetic and extradiegetic, is nonetheless perceptible on a number of levels. When it tells us that the child can neither "read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence" (BM: 3), it shows knowledge of interiority, and the reader perceives a narrator who has this knowledge. Likewise the narrator can be perceived when it summarizes passage of time. "A year later he is in St Louis." (BM: 4)

Beyond that however, the narrator is always perceptible in the style of its narration. If the primary purpose of narration is seeing (Bal: 18), then things are seen in a specific manner:

The jagged mountains were pure blue in the dawn and everywhere birds twittered and the sun when it rose caught the moon in the west so that they lay opposed to each other across the earth, the sun whitehot and the moon a pale replica, as if they were the ends of a common bore beyond whose terminals burned worlds past all reckoning. (BM: 86)

Here the narrator leads the reader into imagining a sight extraordinary in itself and then, by comparing sun and moon to ends "of a common bore" into a further inventive leap where sun and moon are openings into some larger cosmic pandemonium. The reader is invited to see, through extravagant simile, the world in a new way.

The narrator of *Blood Meridian* is persistently playful in its deployment of cadence. A prominent technique is the contrast between regular, stately iambic and carnivalesque, subversive, anapaestic or dactylic rhythms. Examples can be found as near at hand as the quotation above.

and the **sun**/ when it **rose**/ caught the **moon**/ in the **west**/

is a lilting anapaestic waltz.

a **com**/mon **bore**/ **beyond**/ whose **ter**/minals/ burned **worlds**/

is funereally iambic.

Because the narrator speaks in a voice full of portent, daring in its similes and extravagant and varied in its rhythms, the reader remains constantly aware of it as an intelligence, a vital force, with which it is in communication.

2.2.4. Conclusion

The narrator is generally distant from, and absent from, the story it narrates. The narrator does, however, on occasion, deploy radical shifts in perspective in order to attain a significant intimacy both with characters and with the reader. Although the narrator's mode can generally be regarded as non-perceptible, the narrator is strongly present throughout the text by virtue of its style, its rhythm and sound and word choice, by its accumulation and addition of sentence upon sentence and each joined to the next by the word "and" so that the word "and" acts not so much as a signifier of conjunction as it does as a drum upon which the music of the tragedy is beaten out.

This polysyndeton, repeated use of conjunctions to achieve an accumulative rhythmic effect, is a technique much deployed by the writers of the King James Bible:

And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark. (Genesis 7:22-24)

Echoing texts on which the foundations of a broader English speaking culture is built, *Blood Meridian* grafts onto itself the cadence and atmosphere of ancient myth. The reader taken by *Blood Meridian* does not so much experience the narrator as reliable as it experiences a rhythmic revelation spoken by a mentor/ prophet/poet, a nodal scribal wisdom exposing the real nature of the world, the bones of it, by the story told and by the manner of its telling.

The text spoken by the narrator is a creation and shows certain "marks of decisiveness" (BM: 329) or design. To be decisive is to decide, to choose, and to choose is to exercise freedom of will. The text of *Blood Meridian* contains significant patterns and repetitions which lead the reader to the thematic core of the work, the notions of agency and moral choice.

3. INTERTEXTUALITY

Freewill is a question that has puzzled writers and philosophers throughout recorded history, and *Blood Meridian* is a text that is rooted in texts that came before it. In this section will be found a brief examination of some of the more prominent work done on the intertextuality of *Blood Meridian*, with special reference to the agency related themes of prophecy and religion.

Section 3.1. deals with historical intertexts, and leans heavily on the work of John Emil Sepich who has written extensively on *Blood Meridian* and its creator. It demonstrates the historical rootedness of *Blood Meridian*, both in terms of events described, and of the characters involved.

Section 3.2. deals with literary intertexts, the judge's roots in Milton, parallels of prophecy with *Moby Dick*, and allusions to Shakespeare.

Section 3.3. deals with religious or esoteric intertexts and, with reference to the Tarot, Gnosticism and the epilogue of *Blood Meridian*, begins to fully integrate the theme of agency into the argument.

3.1. Historical Intertexts

Blood Meridian's rootedness in history gives it the factual leverage to work on the mind of the reader its examination of the possibility of ethical choice.

The search for source texts, both historical and literary, for *Blood Meridian* has been so extensive that that it has almost become a mini-industry in itself. Peter Josyph (2000: 15) quotes an aficionado who said to him,

"I found the source of the bear in *Blood Meridian*. I found it in Hawthorne!"

As Bloom points out, this search for sources, intertexts, and allusions can become absurd, "because the sources are almost infinite." (Josyph 2000: 15)

Blood Meridian is not, however, easily interpretable. The discovery of sources and influences adds to the growing appreciation which comes with successive readings and their associated increases in understanding. On first reading a narratee might understand *Blood Meridian* as some kind of hybrid of the genres of historical fiction and fantasy. While my own acceptance of the fictional truth was, on first reading, absolute, my disbelief entirely suspended, the manner of narration, the strangeness of word usage, and the grotesquery of the physical action, were such that it did not occur that the text could in any sense be construed as historically "true".

However, much of the physical action of *Blood Meridian* is a replaying, in different form, of events described in first person accounts of the American west. One could say that certain events in the historical fabula of the American West are re-presented in another form in the text of *Blood Meridian*. On the broad issue of scalping, to take a crude instance, Sepich (1999: 125) quotes a professional "Indian hunter" named James Hobbs:

"We scalped the Indians, though some of the party said it looked barbarous; but I kept on scalping, saying that business men always took receipts, and I wanted something to show our success"

In history, as in *Blood Meridian*, the state of Chihuahua paid for Indian scalps, and they paid good money:

Kirker's group was known to have killed as many as two hundred Indians in a single trip, bringing in one hundred and eighty-two scalps. Taking the averages, this is sixty times what the men would have earned in other employment. (Sepich 1999: 126)

This historicity implies, behind the narrator, a *reader* who sought out and read the history, which went back to first person accounts and picked among the uninterpreted evidence, whose concern was to construct a text containing a world not only extraordinary and internally consistent, but also a direct reflection of America's past. And because the present

evolves from the past, an insight into America's present. Concealed beneath America's view of itself, concealed beneath layers of mythmaking about the pioneer west and manifest destiny, lies the ur-narrative, a nation born, like most nations, of slaughter. (Slotkin 1971)

3.1.1. The origins of the judge

The judge, the only eloquent among the scalphunters, stands out from the other characters. He is like a monstrous, polymath infant, hairless and unaging. We are told that his name is Holden.

In 1956 a personal narrative by Samuel Chamberlain was published:

Chamberlain, later decorated as a Union general in the Civil War, had entered the nineteenth-century southwest as a private during the war with Mexico, and his adventures during the 1846-1848 conflict comprise the bulk of *My Confession*. (Sepich. 1999: 127)

Sepich (1999: 128) goes on to quote Chamberlain:

The second in command, now left in charge of camp, was a man of gigantic size called Judge Holden of Texas. Who or what he was no one knew but a cooler blooded villain never went unhung; he stood six feet six in his moccasins, had a large fleshy frame, a dull tallow colored face destitute of hair and all expression. His desires was blood and women, and terrible stories were circulated in camp of horrid crimes committed by him when bearing another name, in the Cherokee nation and Texas; and before we left Frontereras a little girl of ten years was found in the chapperal, foully violated and murdered.

Throughout the narrative of *Blood Meridian* the judge seduces, then murders, the young. In San Bernandino, a:

young Mexican girl had been abducted. Parts of her clothes were found torn and bloodied under the north wall, over which she could only have been thrown. In the desert were drag marks. A shoe. (BM: 239)

In Chapter XII after the slaughter of the Gilenos, the judge rides out at the head of the column, carrying on the saddle before him "a strange dark child covered with ash." (BM: 160). Some days later, the judge sits:

with the Apache boy before the fire and it watched everything with dark berry eyes and some of the men played with it and made it laugh and they gave it jerky and it sat chewing and watching gravely the figures that passed above it. (BM: 164)

In the morning the judge dandles the child on his knee while the men saddle the horses. He is seen alone with the child and ten minutes later Toadvine returns to find that,

the child was dead and the judge had scalped it. (BM: 164)

Chamberlain describes Holden as well educated, multilingual, a great dancer and musician and an expert in Botany, Geology and Mineralogy. *Blood Meridian's* judge and Chamberlain's judge conform on all of the counts above, but the historical Holden's hairless face has been developed in the text so that the judge has no single hair anywhere on his body. Chamberlain's Holden is a talker. *Blood Meridian's* judge is a raconteur who appears to encompass all knowledge and philosophy. Out of the historical Judge Holden, has grown an imagined judge who is both true to his ancestry and greater than the sum of his sources.

3.1.2. John Joel Glanton

The leader of the scalphunters is John Joel Glanton, as is the leader of the historical gang with which Chamberlain rode. Chamberlain describes Glanton as generally well suited to lead the gang, but given at times to extreme behaviour:

Drinking deeply he swore with the most fiendish oaths that we were all sinners bound to eternal Perdition, that it was his mission to save us. He then knelt down and... prayed with all the fervour of a hard shell baptist for the salvation of us all. Suddenly he sprang up and drawing his revolver opened fire on us right and left. (Sepich 1999: 129)

The Glanton of *Blood Meridian* shows no indications of Christian fervour, but in Chapter XIV he is taken, while drunk, with a "kind of fit" (BM: 191) and lurches out, "crazed and dishevelled" (BM: 191) and opens fire with his pistols. Character and historical figure share both name and a certain unpredictability with weapons.

3.1.3. Freemasonry and the Tarot

The Tarot scene is, as will be argued in section 3.3. a powerful narrative engine for *Blood Meridian*. Sepich (1991: 7) questions whether Tarot symbolism is an appropriate matrix in which to imbed a historical novel of the American west. He points out that the Tarot, via the philosophy of the Qabalah, shares a common lineage, and many symbols, with Freemasonry. The judge first appears in *Blood Meridian* in the Nacogdoches scenes set in the historical year of 1849:

twelve years after the Mason's Milam Lodge had been chartered in that town. Ranger Captain Ben McCulloch, with whom Glanton and Tobin and Doc Irving had ridden during the Mexican War... was in fact the Mason of Seguin, Texas, Lodge No. 109, for whom Lodge No. 273 (Mason, Texas) was later named... (Sepich 1991: 7)

Both the Masonic beliefs and the Tarot are rooted, Sepich argues, in arcane Qabalistic symbolism. That the Masons are established in the historical record is evidence that the Tarot, likewise, is:

knit into the historical United States and Mexican southwest, and (through McCulloch) into the Glanton legend itself. (Sepich 1991: 7)

3.1.4. Conclusion

The evidence for scenes and characters in *Blood Meridian* which are developments of scenes and characters in first person accounts of the west in the 1800s is extensive. Sepich (1999) finds, over the course of his essay, to name a pitifully small sample, sources for General Trias, Governor of Chihuahua, and for his erudition, for the Tarot reading tent show which travels with the scalphunters, for the juggler's tent being blown away, for Grannyrat's tale of the Lipan mummies, for the use of the word "thrapple" (BM: 275) to describe Glanton's end, for the voice of God in the cropping of the horses and for the quicksilver laden mules which are ridden off the pass into Jesus Maria.

A reader might conclude that there is little in *Blood Meridian* which is *not* a development of some kind of historical/textual artefact and, as the following section demonstrates, that which is not tends to spring from previous literary texts.

3.2. *Literary intertexts*

The text of *Blood Meridian*, like a sedimentary layer of the earth's geology, is filled with the fossils of previous eras, middened with archaeological data. We see evidence of the Miltonic in one stratum and of the Melvillean and Shakespearean in another, and out of these strata, like stone hand axes, stand the granitic outcrops of *Paradise Lost*, *Moby Dick* and the plays of Shakespeare.

Blood Meridian braids itself into the broader tapestry of English textuality.

3.2.1. Milton, Satan and the judge

Milton's *Paradise Lost* was written to justify the ways of God to man. *Blood Meridian* could be interpreted as an attempt to explain the ways of the world, and homo sapiens, to homo sapiens. Both texts, both dramas, are built around an emblem of evil.

Tobin says of the judge, when he was making gun powder so save the scalphunters from the pursuing Indians, that he:

delivered himself of an oration to what end I know not, then or now, and he concluded with the telling us that our mother the earth as he said was round like an egg and contained all good things within her. (BM: 130)

The judge uses brimstone from a volcano, charcoal and human urine, among other things, to make the powder. In *Paradise Lost*, the fiends of hell "somewhat in despair over their chances against God's angels" (Hungerford 2008),ⁱⁱⁱ are in search of a better weapon.

Satan tells them that:

Deep under ground, materials dark and crude,
Of spiritous and fierie spume, till toucht
With Heav'ns ray, and temperd they shoot forth [480]
So beauteous, op'ning to the ambient light.
These in thir dark Nativitie the Deep
Shall yield us pregnant with infernal flame,
Which into hallow Engins long and round
Thick-rammd, at th' other bore with touch of fire
Dilated and infuriate,^{iv} shall send forth
From far, with thundering noise, among our foes
Such implements of mischief, as shall dash
To pieces, and o'erwhelm whatever stands
Adverse... (Milton 1667)

As Hungerford (2008) points out, the judge advising the scalphunters is in the same structural position in the story as Satan advising the fiends. And both characters say essentially the same thing: what we need to destroy our enemy is contained in the bowels of the fiery earth. Tobin tells the kid that they were in an area where the rocks had been melted

and set up all wrinkled like a pudding, the earth stove through to the molten core of her. Where for aught any man knows lies the locality of hell. (BM: 130)

He goes on to say that the scalphunters were gathered around the judge like "the disciples of a new faith." (BM: 130) The narrative structure of *Blood Meridian* reflects the simple opposition of evil and good that occurs in *Paradise Lost*. The central idea of the earth as burning crucible of weaponry underpins both judge and Satan's rhetoric. To paraphrase Hungerford (2008), the narrator of *Blood Meridian* has a quality of portentousness which it gains from allusion to preceding works like *Paradise Lost* and *Moby Dick*.

The narrator of *Blood Meridian* is the creation of a reader who has read widely, historically, philosophically, scientifically and who, when writing, reworks texts that came before.

3.2.2. *Moby Dick*. Roots of the first prophecy scene in *Blood Meridian*.

In Chapter 19 of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael and Queequeg are accosted by a beggar named Elijah. Elijah talks in veiled warnings.

"...when Captain Ahab is all right, then this left arm of mine will be all right; not before."

"What do you know about him?"

"What did they TELL you about him? Say that!" (Melville 1851: 93)

When he learns that Ishmael and Queequeg are already committed as crew, Elijah becomes philosophical.

Ye've shipped, have ye? Names down on the papers? Well, well, what's signed is signed; and what's to be, will be;

and then again, perhaps it won't be, after all. Anyhow, it's all fixed and arranged a'ready... (Melville 1851: 94)

Elijah appears to know some secret about the Peqoud, its captain and its coming voyage. He says that the Peqoud's destiny is already decided. He refuses to specify however and Ishmael writes him off as a "humbug, trying to be a bugbear". (Melville 1851: 95)

In *Blood Meridian*, before the kid rides out with the filibusters, he encounters, with some of his fellows in a bar, "an old disordered Mennonite" (BM: 39). Like Ishmael, the Mennonite is in the business of prophesy, but he is direr in his warnings:

Do you cross that river with yon filibuster armed ye'll not cross it back...
The wrath of God lies sleeping. It was hid a million years before men
were and only men have power to wake it. Hell aint half full. Hear me.
Ye carry a war of a madman's making onto a foreign land. Ye'll wake
more than the dogs. (BM: 40) ^v

The descriptions of the clothing of the two prophets, with their unusual spellings, their echo of the word black, are almost parallel. Elijah is:

shabbily apparelled in faded jacket and patched trowsers; a rag of black
handkerchief investing his neck. (Melville 1851: 92)

The Disordered Mennonite is a:

thin man in a leather weskit, a black and straightbrim hat set square on
his head. (BM: 39)

As with Satan and the judge, the prophets are in the same structural position in their stories. Their warnings differ only in tone and specificity.

In both works the prophet figure introduces a theme of destiny, and therefore the potential denial of human agency. If you do X, says the Mennonite, Y is inevitable. What's to be is all fixed, says Elijah. In the words of Harold Bloom

...the parallelism is almost precise, down to some deliberate verbal
echoes. It's McCarthy's own defiance of his indebtedness. And he makes
it work. (Josyph 2000)

There is an allusion to *Moby Dick*, and *Moby Dick* is used as a stepping stone on the path to the theme of free will. It is in the detail of how its prophecies are played out that *Blood Meridian* conducts a kind of dramatic thought experiment with notions of agency. This first prophecy is cast in general terms and the rest of the book could be seen as a general fulfilment of it: the inevitable, bloody unleashing of the wrath of god as a result of taking a lunatic war into a foreign country. It is, in the broadest terms, a demonstration of the inevitability of destiny. The second prophecy replays the theme with greater intricacy. The examination of prophecy and its implications for agency will be expanded in section 3.3.

3.2.3. Shakespeare

Intertextuality is present in *Blood Meridian* on levels of text, story and fabula. As Bloom points out about historical sources, allusions can be tracked ad infinitum. I offer the following, and last literary, example. In *Macbeth*, told that his queen is dead, Macbeth responds:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (*Macbeth*, Scene V)

In *Blood Meridian*, the judge, asked if men or something like them exist on other planets, answers that the truth about the world:

is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby
bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick
in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras
having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory
tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a
mudded field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning. (BM:
245)

A tawdry theatrical, a chicanery in a carnival whose conclusion is inevitable, disastrous, meaningless. This is life. Thus spake the judge and Macbeth. And Cormac McCarthy, in an interview with Richard B. Woodward: "books are made out of books." (Woodward 1992) Sometimes, as with Satan and the judge, the intertextuality has profound implications, one text resonating with another in a dense harmonic, versions of history and myth painted over each other and sometimes fading so that past depictions appears like a palimpsest through the present brushwork. And sometimes it is the result of a way of being where texts are reworked, re-embroidered, in a continuous and organic process, an ongoing agon that began with the Sumerian inscription of Gilgamesh on clay tablets on the banks of the Euphrates.

Implicit in this agon is the notion of choice. The scribe, the writer, chooses those threads which are to be reworked, and by singling out

the thread of order from the tapestry [the writer] will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world ... (BM: 199)

The writer chooses. By choosing s/he takes charge, and, therefore, dictates "the terms of his[/her] own fate". (BM: 199)

3.3. Esoteric and religious intertexts

This section offers a more detailed analysis of the Tarot prophecy scene and its implications. It proposes the Tarot divination and the gang's end at the Yuma ferry as a dramatization of themes of agency, a dramatization which only partly answers crucial questions. It introduces the theme of the Gnostic deity, and examines the epilogue in terms of Gnosticism and agency.

3.3.1. The Tarot

The scene in which the disordered Mennonite appears is, as mentioned, the first of two prophecy scenes in *Blood Meridian*. The second occurs after the kid joins the Glanton gang

on its scalp harvesting venture. Glanton initiates the action by asking if the juggler tells fortunes. When the juggler offers Glanton a card, however, Glanton waves it away, indicating the gang members, "los caballeros". (BM: 92) Black Jackson volunteers and chooses a card showing, "a fool in harlequin". (BM: 92)

Sepich (1991: 3) argues that the motif of the Tarot fool is woven into the novel, appearing in images as diverse as:

Glanton's drunkenly lost wits, the Judge's intellect, the howitzer "trick" on the Yumas, the Judge's "ears like a fox," the "harlequin horses," the literal juggler, the Judge as the magician of the coin trick, the Indian "trick" on the gang at the ferry, the dwarf whore at the saloon in Griffin, and the Indian clown faces of the Comanche attack ...

The focus here, however, is on the specifics of the divination and the question of to what extent that divination demonstrates an absence of agency when it proves correct.

The player asks the blindfolded woman to name the man who chose the card. The woman, possibly through an unhinted-at trickery, but more likely demonstrating some form of visionary power, replies, "El Negro", the black. (BM: 92)

Black Jackson, "like a man arraigned", listens to the woman's Spanish and asks, "What does she say". (BM: 92) The judge interprets her words as meaning that in black Jackson's fortune lie the fortunes of all the gang. He suggests that the divination contains a warning against drunkenness. The gang is destined to be undone after a night of "drunkenness and revelry" (BM: 273), when gang members are killed as they rise up "drunkenly", and Glanton as he lurches upright. (BM: 274)

The player looks for a further subject, holding out the cards "as if they would find their own subject." (BM: 93) It seems that the cards themselves have agency.

The judge nominates the kid, who is given a card:

He'd not seen such cards before, yet the one he held seemed familiar to him. ^{vi} He turned it upside down and regarded it and he turned it back.

The juggler took the boy's hand in his own and turned the card so that he could see. Then he took the card and held it up.

Cuatro des copas, he called out. (BM: 94)

The four of cups. The juggler asks who holds the cards, and the woman, still blindfolded, still visioning, identifies the kid. The woman chants. The judge watches the reaction of Glanton and the others and he watches the kid and he laughs. Glanton does not laugh. The juggler looks at the kid with a "crooked smile". The kid, evidently frightened, says, "Get the hell away from me." (BM: 95) No one interprets the woman's words. Nor does the narrator give them to us, as it does in other cases, in Spanish. The characters lack of comment suggests that those who understand Spanish, the judge and, to some extent, Glanton, have heard a hint of something about which they prefer not to speak. Both are unapologetic killers and what is occurring is a guarded introduction of mercy as theme. (The theme of mercy/clemency, briefly addressed here, will be dealt with extensively in section 4.3.1.)

Sepich (1991: 2) points out that, after the massacre of the filibustering expedition, the kid and Sproule look for a place to sleep in a village sacked by the Comanches. The kid wanders into a house where he finds a picture:

cut from an old journal and pasted to the wall, a small picture of a queen,
a gypsy card that was the four of cups. (BM: 59)

The kid is twice associated with the *cuatro de copas*, which Sepich specifies as part of the subsection of the fours, indicating perfection, which are part in turn of a larger grouping, designated as: "Chesed," which is translated as "Mercy". (Sepich 1991: 3)

We do not learn the kid's fate in the mouth of the blindfolded woman however, and the kid is therefore placed outside of the fate/prophecy experiment whose results will be revealed at the Yuma ferry.

The woman asks whose fortune should be read next. The judge nominates Glanton. The juggler, knowing Glanton's reluctance, hesitates. The judge insists. Glanton's fate, however, is not easy to grasp. Glanton sees his card and the juggler reaches for it:

Perhaps he touched it, perhaps not. The card vanished. It was in Glanton's hand and then it was not. The juggler's eyes snapped after it where it had gone down the dark. Perhaps Glanton had seen the card's face. What could it have meant to him? (BM: 95)

The woman, who knows what she cannot see, interprets Glanton's card, chanting.

Shut her up, said Glanton.

La carroza, la carroza, cried the bedlam. Invertido. Carta de guerra, de venganza. La vi son ruedas sobre un rio obscuro... (BM: 96)

Sepich (1991: 4) provides a translation:

The coach, the coach, cried the bedlam... Inverted. Card of war, card of vengeance. I saw it without wheels over a dark river.

Chapter XIX of *Blood Meridian*, which deals with the gang's end at the Yuma ferry, nails home the point with a subtitle: "Carts without wheels." (BM: 260) At the Yuma Ferry an improvised craft is used to cross the Colorado. It consists of wagons with the wheels removed.

Glanton, who, we are told elsewhere, claims agency (BM: 243), appears, like the kid, overtly frightened by the fortune telling. The woman chants:

Perdida, perdida. La carta esta perdida en la noche.

... The old malabarista was on his knees where he'd been flung. Perdida, perdida, he whispered.

Un maleficio, cried the old woman. Que vineto tan maleante...

By god you will shut up, said Glanton, drawing his revolver.

Carroza de muertos, llena de huesos. (BM: 96)

Sepich (1991: 4) translates "perdida perdida" as:

"Lost, lost. The card is lost in the night." And then, "An evil spell, cried the old woman." "What a villainous wind ..." Glanton threatens her.

"Funeral coach," she continues, "full of bones.

In as much as the cards have power, so does the woman. Even a card lost in the night calls up images in her. And these images have in them a glimpse of the future. Glanton's card, *la carroza*, the coach, is the Tarot's Chariot. Inverted as the woman specifies, it refers to tyranny, sudden defeat, misfortune, bad news and accidents. (Sepich 1991: 5) The scalphunters are slaughtered on a dark river, while using wheelless wagons as an improvised ferry.

Three cards arise in the divination. Two speak to the destiny of the gang rather than the fate of individuals. Black Jackson's warns of drunkenness and the gang are slaughtered while drunk. Glanton's card warns of a coach on a dark river and the gang ends using wagons as an improvised ferry on a dark river. The kid's card speaks of mercy and near the end of his narrative arc the kid demonstrates mercy to the old woman on the plain.

The Tarot scene acts, in conjunction with the Yuma Ferry scenes, as a demonstration of the scalphunters' entrapment in their larger destiny. This playing out of group destiny is simple and direct. The scalphunters are warned against drinking; they drink and they come to a bad end. On some basic level then, the action of the novel tells us, destiny is absolute.

Individual fate however, is specific, opaque. Black Jackson, who drew the fool, dies in a scow, picking, like a curious child, a coin from the bilgewater. He dies robed, with four long arrows in him which lift "like ceremonial wands". (BM: 274). Wands which might call to mind, for a Tarot-educated reader at least, the "Tarot's Four of Wands" (Sepich 1991: 3), but which were not mentioned in the divination. (The Four of Wands is a signifier of mercy or clemency, an important thematic element which will recur in this essay and be dealt with in detail in section 4.3.1)

The divination, when it comes to individuals, is as oblique as its outcome is nuanced. The Tarot/Yuma Ferry outcome, while it suggests that group destiny is a given, neither proves nor disproves agency. It offers hints whose ultimate result is to increase the reader's interest in the question. Moreover, the two central symbols of agency, the kid and the judge, are left outside

of the equation. The narrator, and the reader, is at liberty to address the theme of agency on further levels.

3.3.2. Gnosticism

The argument, resting on Leo Daugherty's *Gravers False and True: Blood Meridian as Gnostic Tragedy*, will now be made that, in the world of *Blood Meridian*, those who are free to choose, at least those whose ethics might make free will relevant, are those who contain the spark of the Gnostic god.

We read of the scalphunters that they sleep:

with their alien hearts beating in the sand like pilgrims exhausted upon the face of the planet Anareta, clutched to a nameless wheeling in the night. (BM: 46)

Daugherty, (1999: 163) rooting Anareta in Gnostic thought, writes that it was believed in the Renaissance to be the planet which destroys life and causes destruction.

..."violent deaths are caused" when the "malifics" have agents in "the anaretic place"... the implication is clearly that our own earth is Anaretic.

Daugherty (1999: 159) describes Gnosticism itself as a response to the questions, why do we experience the world as evil, and why is alienation such a common response. The Gnostic world (1999: 160) began in a condition of perfection and plenitude. It was made up of God and lesser divinities called aeons. This world was riven by a dark force opposing it. All things devolve from the original light and goodness (fire/spark) or from the opposing darkness and evil.

In the conflict some of the aeons fell and became lords or archons and took charge of the lower realms where humans live. The qualities of the archons are judgement and jealousy. Their energies are spent in satisfying ambition, vanity and lust for power. These archons

created the world as we know it. But humans have in them a spirit, a spark, which is not from the archons, but from god original. This spark:

is imprisoned in humans by the archons... and the result, on the earth, is obviously a state of affairs in which the good and the light are eternally trapped inside the evil and the dark. (Daugherty 1999: 160)

Humans, as a result, feel alienated and this alienation, for those that seek liberation, is the clue that such is possible, that the spark of god exists in them. Chapter XVII of *Blood Meridian*, which contains the quotation below, has the subheading, "the godfire": (BM: 241). The subheading refers to the following description of a fire:

[T]he embers paled and deepened and paled and deepened like the bloodbeat of some living thing eviscerate up the ground before them and they watched the fire which does contain within it something of men themselves insasmuch as they are less without it and are divided from their origin and are exiles. (BM: 244)

The allusion is luminous. The scalphunters, exiled like all humans from the good god, watch the fire which is an image of the Gnostic spark. Throughout the text, they stare at fires. They are "rapt, pyrolatrous" (BM: 111). The embers of the fire are the organs of the living god. Disembowelled, distant and uninvolved yet viscerally present in the coals, this is the Gnostic deity of *Blood Meridian*.

3.3.3. Gnosticism and the epilogue

After the story of *Blood Meridian* ends, after the kid has survived and travelled and aged and become a man and confessed to the dead woman on the plains and met the judge again and rejected his offer, after the naked judge has embraced and killed the kid in the jakes and gone on to dance naked, saying he will never die, there is an epilogue: A man moves across a plain, searching out and removing the fire which God has put in the stone. He is followed by

clockwork figures that cross his path one by one and it *seems*, we are told, that the row of holes which the man leaves behind him is a demonstration of causality.

Daugherty (1999: 150) writes that his first reaction to the epilogue was to surmise that the mysterious "man" was the judge, acting as a symbol for some evil Nietzschean cultural force, with humankind like clockwork puppets under its spell and following docile behind. Indeed, if we take from Nietzsche one simple thought: that that ultimate human urge, beyond sex or shelter or food, is for power, then the judge is a Nietzschean construct. The above interpretation of the man as the judge was discarded, however, and Daugherty (1999: 169) came to understand the epilogue as:

a brutal contrast between a man who is very much alive and a host of other people who are effectively... dead, and the picture it paints is one based directly on the sort of machine of which the watch or clock is the most familiar example. This is what the words "escapement" and "pallet" refer to.

The world and its inhabitants are seen then, as an articulated, cogged machine. Dougherty, (1999: 169) evoking the spectre of the author, points out that another device using an escapement is the typewriter. He goes on to offer a further possible interpretation, suggesting that the man is a Gnostic messenger of the divine, working, in the service of the alien god, to free spirit from matter:

This reading is, I think, clearly supported (if not indeed mandated) by the imagery of his striking and freeing bits of fire, imprisoned in the earth, which came from God... and by the Gnostic context provided by the novel proper, which not only implies his existence but mandates his eventual appearance. The "continuance" of which the digging man is in "pursuit" is the ongoing work of making his way back to the good, alien god - and of freeing and revealing imprisoned bits of holy fire... (1999: 169)

One has to note that the row of holes:

seems **less** the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality... (BM: 337)

In the absence of punctuation, nuances of meaning shift with the stress. **Seems** less? **Seems less?** **Seems less?** Taking a simple interpretation, however: the line of holes **appears** (with all the doubt implied by that word) **less** a pursuit of continuance and **more** a confirmation of cause and effect, a verification of the inevitable made manifest, a proof that agency is impossible.

That aside, Dougherty casts light on both the text and the ambitions of its creator. (A thought which will be explored in section 5.) *Blood Meridian* does not fit easily into the category of those myths which spring from of the Judaeo-Christian or Islamic or Buddhist or Hindu traditions. Gnosticism, with its bereft and distant deity, an unintentional and uninvolved creator, with its earthly world ruled by evil, containing only unaccountable sparks of fire, god particles, for the thinly scattered good to war with, provides a symbolic framework tantamount to the narrative.

3.3.4. Gnosticism and agency

Any discussion of the spark of god, of a human connection with some benevolent first cause, assumes an ability to choose. Agency is axiomatic, because, if we are mere machines, then any sense of a deity, benevolent or otherwise, is just, like the illusion of consciousness itself, a quirk thrown up by matter as it moves through space on paths designated in the nanoseconds when the singularity first started to expand. The universe is a sprung clock, a machine that made a machine that made a human machine that perceives itself to be, of its own will, pondering its nature and its origins. Regressions loom infinite and ethical questions are wiped from the board. *Blood Meridian* explicitly acknowledges these difficulties. In the judge's words:

[I]n this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has

its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others. (BM: 245)

A part of the whole cannot, by its very nature, comprehend the whole. (A reader might call to mind the conversation that arises out of the appearance of the ghost of Hamlet's father. ^{vii})

Blood Meridian acknowledges the possibility of the universe as a machine, but nonetheless persistently uses the image of fire to suggest the connection between humans and the Gnostic god, thus hinting at agency. Men separated from the godfire are exiles. (BM: 244) Just before black Jackson beheads white Jackson, the narrator tells us that there were some about the fire:

whose eyes gave back the light like coals socketed hot in their skulls...
(BM: 106)

At the end of Chapter XV, depleted in numbers, pursued by Trias, their former employer, for scalping the citizens they were paid to protect, the gang shelter in a stable. It is a scene of simple, biblical tenderness. The scalphunters ensure that a little foal has shelter for the night.

The shed held a mare with a sucking colt and the boy would have put her out but they called to him to leave her. (BM: 222)

The gang arrange their bedding and the boy departs with his lantern, leaving them in "profound and absolute darkness." (BM: 222) In this gloom, and in such company, the animals are understandably wary, the mare sniffing uneasily and the young colt stepping about. What happens when the men begin to undress is extraordinary.

[T]hey propagated about themselves a great crackling of sparks and each man was seen to wear a shroud of palest fire. Their arms aloft pulling at their clothes were luminous and each obscure soul was enveloped in audible shapes of light as if it had always been so. The mare at the far end of the stable snorted and shied at this luminosity in beings so endarkened and the little horse turned and hid his face in the web of his dam's flank. (BM: 222)

The scalp hunters, by both their immediate situation and their bloody history the darkest of humans, are revealed as luminous "souls", crackling with primal electric energy. They are not "like: souls, they do not "seem like" souls, they *are* souls. They chose to shelter the foal and its dam and now they wear a godly shroud of fire. There is no causal connection suggested, but the events are contingent and *Blood Meridian* is a text which shows, as has been mentioned, "marks of decisiveness" (BM: 329). At this moment in *Blood Meridian*, if not at others, agency would seem to be almost axiomatic.

4 CHARACTERS DESIGNED TO BE EXPERIENCED AS HAVING ETHICAL CHOICE

In this chapter will be found an examination of the central characters' claims to agency and ethical development. Three of these, Glanton, the judge and the kid, embody differing attitudes to the question.

The elements which make up a heroic protagonist in a certain kind of traditional tale: central placement; a significant name; a leadership role; skill with weapons; opposition to an antagonist; a narrative arc which involves learning or internal development; are divided, in overlapping sets, between the kid and John Joel Glanton. This fact alone nominates them for examination.

The judge, on the other hand, is the kid's antagonist. The kid in his mental and physical development is equipped for little but an attempt at survival. His strategy is to fly low under the radar, revealing not even a name. In his final meeting with the judge, the judge says:

Was it always your idea ... that if you did not speak you would not be recognized? (BM: 328)

Recognized as what? Is it possible that the answer is: recognized as having the potential for good? The judge has watched the kid throughout the story, and tried to subvert him. Visiting the kid in prison, he says:

Don't you know that I have loved you like a son?
He reached through the bars. Come here, he said, let me touch you.
The kid stood with his back to the wall.
Come there if you're not afraid, whispered the judge.
I ain't afraid of you. (BM: 307)

Throughout the story the kid has rejected the judge's seductions. The judge therefore, both in terms of what the narrator shows us by his actions, and in terms of what he himself says, (and he is a character that talks at length about agency, destiny, fate, autonomy, sovereignty)

qualifies for examination. Further, if the judge, with his roots in Milton's Satan, is an emblem of original evil, then the kid, his opposite, is likely to be an emblem of original good.

Ethics without agency, as has been suggested, is a thin gruel, and each character will therefore be examined in terms of both ethical issues and agency.

4.1. John Joel Glanton.

There are, perhaps surprisingly, glimpses of what might be termed ethical behaviour in the actions of John Joel Glanton. To no perceivable advantage to himself, Glanton allows the company of jugglers to accompany the gang. Glanton, although he calls Mexican soldiers niggers, admits no racism in his own gang. Black Jackson may sit at whatever fire he chooses, and he beheads the one man who questions his right. When Owens, owner of the eating house in San Bernadino, suggests separate tables for black and white, Glanton questions his intelligence:

Mr Owens, if you was anything at all other than a goddamn fool you could take one look at these here men and know for a stone fact they aint a one of em going to get up from where they're at to go set somewheres else. (BM: 235)

Glanton does not admit a class distinction between officers and men. Invited to dine alone with Governor Trias, he tells Trias' lieutenant that he and his men mess together. This assertion is backed up by his actions.

There is a great sense of human regret in the small scene in Chapter XIII where Glanton briefly crosses back into Texas where he is subject to arrest. He rides out alone into the desert and remains there as the shadows lengthen.

[Glanton] and the horse and the dog looked out across the rolling scrubland and the barren peppercorn hills and the mountains and the flat

brush country and running plain beyond where four hundred miles to the east were the wife and child that he would not see again. (BM: 172)

In terms of agency, we are told that Glanton accepts destiny as a given, but that he rides for his own with a grim determination. Can a man be determined without choosing to be so?

[Glanton] would live to look upon the western sea and he was equal to whatever might follow for he was complete at every hour. Whether his history should run concomitant with men and nations, whether it should cease. He'd long forsworn all weighing of consequence and allowing as he did that men's destinies are given yet he usurped to contain within him all that he would ever be in the world and all that the world would be to him and be his charter written in the urstone itself **he claimed agency** and said so and he'd drive the remorseless sun on to its final endarkenment as if he'd ordered it all ages since.... (BM: 243)

The character, the construct which is John Joel Glanton, contains within it the ambiguity or double sidedness inherent in the attitude of the text as a whole to questions of agency. Accepting his destiny, Glanton also chooses it. He is, therefore, "complete at every hour", a statement of wholeness and authenticity which the narrator makes about no other character. Glanton espouses the only common sense, existential, response to philosophical questions surrounding the notion of free will: I cannot prove agency. I can only, and will, claim it.

4.2. The judge

Three points can be made about the judge as character.

1. He lies, he is a "bloody old hoodwinker", (BM: 252), and argues whichever side of a question suits his purposes.
2. Although he has human aspects, and horrifically human appetites, he is not, finally, human, but rather a trickster/devil figure, an avatar of original evil.
3. The judge is an embodiment of will in action.

While the judge is making his argument for war as the ultimate game, war as god, he is told by Doc Irving that:

Might does not make right. The man that wins in such [mortal] combat is not vindicated morally. (BM: 250)

The judge replies:

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.
(BM: 250)

The judge then, is not a character in whom it would be fruitful to search for ethical development over the course of the narrative. The judge is the adversary of ethical development.

The kid, and the reader, first meet the judge in the Reverend Green's tent in Nacogdoches. We are shown the judge falsely accusing Green of sexually assaulting an underage girl and a goat. The judge boasts of it afterwards, admitting the lie to entertain the men in the bar. He has two hats with him. One is his own, the other presumably contains the contributions of the Reverend Green's congregation. These contributions are being used to buy drinks, which are, the barman says, "on the judge". (BM: 8)

We first hear something of the judge's philosophies when he acts the diplomat during Glanton's tests of Speyer's consignment of six shot colts. (BM: 82) A detachment of Mexican soldiery arrives to investigate the shooting. Glanton calls them "halfassedlooking niggers". (BM: 84) The judge turns to peacekeeping, conducting a ceremony of formal introduction in Spanish. His speech is a strange charade, containing elements of a theoretical discussion on notions of fate and history. He says that the potential disputants need not possess the facts of their case:

for their acts will ultimately accommodate history 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. Sergeant Aguilar is just such a party and any slight to his office is but a secondary consideration when compared to divergences in that larger protocol exacted by the formal agenda of an absolute destiny. (BM: 85)

The words "consistent with notions of right principle ", coming from the judge's mouth, carry a measure of irony. The judge claims that the protocols demanded by fate take precedent over any insult to the state of Chihuahua. The men know that his talk is fluff. A few smile and one guffaws. (BM: 85) The judge's real action in the scene is preventing violence between the Mexican soldiers, representatives of the scalphunters' client, and the scalphunters. As to what he *says*, destiny accepts no protocols. It is or is not. If it is, then insults to the state of Chihuahua are not relevant. They are, as the guffaw indicates, laughable. The judge argues, here, that destiny is paramount. Elsewhere he implies, and demonstrates by his actions, as following sections will show, the opposite.

4.2.1. The judge and the wilful control of history.

The judge is an emblem of Nietzschean will to power, and this urge is, in the text, strongly directed towards the will to control history. William Dean Clements (2009: 16), wrestling with an interpretation of the above quotation, writes:

Holden says that it makes no difference if the men comprehend the transpiring events, but it is necessary for these events to “find a repository in the witness of some third party”. Broadly speaking, Holden, through the use of his notebook, witnesses and testifies, becomes the repository he speaks of and exerts his control from his place as keeper and interpreter of the natural world.

Indeed, throughout the narrative the judge records natural or historical artefacts in his ledger, and, having done so, destroys the original. The judge's account will become, inevitably, the one history extant. This is, presumably, an act of will.

Throughout the text are references to the search for first causes, urstones (BM: 243), atavistic eggs (BM: 310), ultimate genesis. The scalphunters ride like:

men invested with a purpose whose origins were antecedent to them, like
blood legatees of an order both imperative and remote. (BM: 152)

In the case of the judge himself, there is no:

system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go.
(BM: 309)

It is as though the novel itself was a search for a first cause which could be said to act of its own will and throw the machine of existence into action. When the kid meets the judge for the last time, his head shines like "an enormous phosphorescent egg". (BM: 327) The light does not come, however, from within. It comes from the "lamp light" (BM: 327). The judge, in so far as he can be considered an agent of first cause, is the Gnostic darkness, opposite of the spark.

The judge argues for will as adeptly he does for the authority of destiny. His own will must prevail, and this implies agency in others. He places his hand on the land and says that is it his claim, and:

everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In
order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by
my dispensation. (BM: 199)

Life itself has agency, will, and against it the judge's will must prevail. The judge's every word, his every action, presumes free will and the possibility of moral choice. The judge is an embodiment of evil in action and forces his opposite into the open. If the text places the judge in direct opposition to the kid, it seems likely that the kid is an emblem of the god spark.

4.3. The kid

The kid is placed in the text in the structural position of a protagonist. The narrator focalizes via the kid in the first words of the text. The novel follows the entirety of the kid's path through the narrative and in general we are shown only those events where the kid is present. The kid is the one character which can be said to ethically develop over the course of the action. Throughout the action the kid is placed in subtle opposition to the antagonist, the judge. If the judge is an avatar of original evil, the kid is a symbol of the human potential for good.

The kid is associated with fire, and therefore with the Gnostic spark, just twenty-one words into the first chapter:

See the Child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt.
He stokes the scullery **fire**. (BM: 3)

Six lines on:

The boy crouches by the **fire** and watches him. (BM: 3)

The kid kills his mother at birth.

The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off. (BM: 3)

There is a shadow cast over the character and a reader, creating the character in its head, could conclude that the character "knows" it. The boy lives for fourteen years with his father who "lies in drink" and quotes from "poets whose names are now lost".^{viii} (BM: 3) Within this domestic milieu, it is possible that the facts of the mother's death would come up in conversation. The boy carries from birth a psychic wound which perhaps explains why, "in him broods already a taste for mindless violence". (BM: 3)

The character exists beneath the weight of his mother's death. He lives in a world whose first lesson is: death is built-in, it is in the fabric of things.

All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man. (BM: 3)

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In the boy's face the reader is asked to see the human past. The specific contains the general, and we are being told a story about a template of ourselves. What the boy will become, the man, is constrained, dictated by, the boy he is. Destiny is at work, but it will walk hand in hand with agency, its opposite.

At fourteen the child runs away from his father and his native Tennessee. A year later he is in Saint Louis. We are told, in a rare instance of physical description, that:

He is not big but he has big wrists, big hands. His shoulders are set close.

The child's face is curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent. (BM: 4)

The boy is shot in the back by a Maltese boatswain and then shot again just below the heart. He is tended for some weeks by a woman whom he betrays by leaving in the night because he has no money to pay her. He sleeps on the riverbank until he can find a boat that is going to Texas. He is now:

divested of all that he has been. His origins are 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. (BM: 4)

Never again will there be areas of experience so savage as to test whether the world/history can be shaped by human agency, or whether humans are clay in the hands of an implacable destiny. Can a boy, psychically wounded in birth, born into a time of utmost flux and barbarism, without the benefit of formal education and parenting, grow into a man who owns some kind of moral integrity?

4.3.1. Clemency and the kid.

The kid is woven into the Tarot symbology of the novel. He is twice associated with the four of cups or *cuatro de copas* and therefore with mercy. (Sepich 1991: 17)

The blindfolded woman who interprets the kid's Tarot card is described as sitting:

like that blind interlocutrix between Boaz and Jachin inscribed upon the one card in the juggler's deck that they would not see come to light, true pillars and true card ... (BM: 94)

Sepich (1991: 5) interprets this as a reference to the Tarot's High Priestess (or Female Pope).

On her card:

two pillars flank the veiled priestess, the two great columns of bronze, named Jachin and Boaz, which stood at the threshold of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The pillars represent a dialectic, a balance of opposites:

of which reality is made--fire and cloud, light and darkness, positive and negative, Mercy and Severity--and the opposites of the other, fatal tree which grew in Eden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. These opposites, "Mercy and Severity," knowledge and the lack thereof, are in many instances opposites represented in the world of *Blood Meridian* by the kid and the Judge. (Sepich 1991: 5)

The kid's eyes are "innocent". (BM5). He is accused of clemency by the judge:

You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen. (BM: 299)

(This specific accusation, like much of the judge's talk, is difficult to substantiate. The narrator rarely focalizes via the kid when the scalphunters are killing. It is the nature of the gang, however, that any who did not do their part would be killed.)

William Dean Clements (2005: 41) lists evidence for certain humanities on the part of the kid. The kid risks his life by staying with Sproule after the slaughter of the filibusters. He does this in spite of his contempt for Sproule:

I know your kind, he said. What's wrong with you is wrong all the way through. (BM: 66)

The kid volunteers, when no one else will, to take the arrow from Davy Brown's leg. When the gang is pursued and the four gravely wounded, who would slow them down, must be culled, the men draw lots. The kid draws a short straw. Two of the four are Delaware Indians, and are killed by their own tribesmen. The third is Mexican who would die anyway. The kid finds himself responsible for Shelby, whose hip joint has been destroyed, but is clear in the head. The kid does not kill Shelby. Instead, he hides him, leaving him with precious water from his own canteen.

4.3.2. The kid does not murder

Chapter XX has among its subheadings, “How the expriest comes to advocate **murder**”. (BM: 277). After the destruction of the gang at the Yuma ferry, the kid finds himself at a waterhole with Tobin and Toadvine. Holden has specie and offers to buy the only weapon in the company, the kid's gun.

Five hundred dollars, he said. Powder and ball included.

The expriest was at the kid's side. Do him, he hissed. ...You'll get no second chance. (BM: 285)

"Do him". It is clear from the chapter headings that the act suggested is, in the eyes of the narrator, murder. The kid does not take the opportunity to carry out Tobin's instructions. And when he gets a second opportunity some days later, Tobin is reconciled to it.

If I kill him we can take the horses.

You'll not kill him. Don't be a fool. Shoot the horses. (BM: 291)

The kid does not kill without provocation outside of the context of what he presumably sees as war. Looked at from the point of view of the character, and, by evidence of its chapter headings, the narrator, to kill the judge in cold blood would be murder and therefore it is not done.

4.3.3. The ethical development of the kid.

The kid starts the story with a taste for violence and an ability to use his feet in a fight. On meeting Toadvine, rather than step off the path to the jakes, he kicks Toadvine in the jaw. (BM: 9) The next day he kicks a hotel staff member at Toadvine's suggestion.

Kick him, [Toadvine] called. Aw, kick him, honey.

He kicked. (BM: 13)

Together, the kid and Toadvine burn down a hotel, an action noted with approval by the judge who later, in a reference to fire (Sepich 1993: 14), calls the kid Blasarius. (BM: 94)

The kid is invited to join the filibusters because word of his savage assault on a Mexican barman has spread:

Was you the feller knocked in the Mexer's head yesterday evenin? I aint the law. (BM: 29)

Once the kid has joined the scalphunters his personal violence becomes lost in the larger historical tide. Often the kid is not mentioned at all within the set pieces of brutal action. Towards the end of the novel, however, is a clear indicator of moral development. The kid comes upon the scene of a massacre of some pilgrims. Among them is an old woman whom he takes to be living.

[He] spoke to her in a low voice. He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had travelled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her

to a safe place, some party of her countrypeople who would welcome her and that she would join them for he could not leave her in this place or she would surely die. (BM: 315)

The woman is dead, but the kid does not know it as he speaks. The speech is an act of basic compassion, emphasised by the iambic simplicity of the last seven syllables. On the previous page he has been called the man for the first time.

Then he led the animal up onto the ridge and they went on, the man watching the tableland ... (BM: 314)

This is a character changed, in more than his designation, from the thoughtless adolescent who kicked Toadvine in the head at the start of his journey, or shoved a broken bottle into the eye of the already defeated Mexican barman.

The novel's thematic technique is to pit ideas against each other, and this structural ambiguity is to be found even in the construction of the kid. In Chapter X Tobin offers the kid a delicate analogy for the still small voice of god, "which speaks most profoundly in such beings as live in silence themselves." (BM: 124)

No man is give leave of that voice.

The kid spat into the fire and bent to his work.

I ain't heard no voice, he said.

When it stops, said Tobin, you'll know you've heard it all your life.

Is that right?

Aye...

At night, said Tobin, when the horses are grazing and the company is asleep, who hears them grazing?

Don't nobody hear them if they're asleep.

Aye. And if they cease their grazing who is it that wakes?

Every man.

Aye, said the expriest. Every man. (BM: 124)

Every man, and the kid is our Everyman, hears the voice of god. What else could prompt the kid to offer shelter to the old woman? The old woman, however, is dead. The action of the novel offers the kid a moral: ethical development must be its own reward. Soon afterwards, "the man" (BM: 321) in a last exhausted act of self defence, kills Elrod, a child of the same age as the kid/man when his journey started. He justifies it to himself:

You wouldnt of lived anyway (BM: 322)

The man has lived too long. He travels through remnants of the massacre of America's last buffalo herds. The bounty of the natural earth reduced to bones. In this world, even the children are terrifying. Disputing the provenance of the kid's necklace of ears, Elrod says:

Docked them nigger's ears so they'd know them when they run off. (BM: 20)

A world of slaves whose ears are removed for the purposes of identification. Elrod, indeed, is an adept at categorizing the colonized other into hierarchies of value. The ears, he suggests, like some cunning lawyer disputing evidence, might not even be of a wholesome American nature.

Them ears could of come off of cannibals or any other kind of foreign niggers. (BM: 321)

Elrod is a fund of prejudice and misinformation. The kid, in this as in all things in opposition to the judge, has become a weary keeper of truth, of the history which will soon begin to be obscured:

They wasn't cannibals. They was Apaches. I knowed the man that docked em. Knowed him and rode with him and seen him hung. (BM: 321)

Knowing the kid's story, we know that he speaks the truth. The kid, and not the judge, is the keeper of history.

4.3.4. The kid's questioning of the judge

At the end of Chapter X Tobin concludes his story of the gang's meeting with the judge and the kid asks his crucial question:

What's he a judge of? he said.

What's he a judge of?

What's he a judge of.

Tobin glanced off across the fire. Ah lad, he said. Hush now. The man will hear ye. He's ears like a fox. (BM: 135)

The asking of a question is an event, a node of dramatic action. It changes the world, which awaits an answer. Moral and thematic questions converge upon the character that is the kid. The issue of what the judge judges is not referred to again for some two hundred pages. After the gang's end at the Yuma ferry the kid and a few other's escape and the kid makes his way, with an arrow in his leg, to the coast at San Diego. He is arrested and imprisoned. He finds a doctor who removes the arrow. During the delirium of his recovery the judge comes to him in a dream. He is accompanied by a man the kid cannot properly make out.

[H]e was a coldforger who worked with hammer and die, perhaps under some indictment and an exile from men's fires, hammering out like his own conjectural destiny all through the night of his becoming some coinage for a dawn that would not be. It is this false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favour with the judge and he is at contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter. Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end. (BM: 310)

Daugherty (1999: 166) writes that he found the passage impenetrable on first reading. He interprets the night not ending to mean that the judge never judges the image adequate enough to render the specie current. And surely this is what the judge would want? However, the judge is a warrior:

who wants only war and the continuous night of war - in opposition not only to "true coinage" but to any coinage involving him. "The markets where men barter" exist, of course, but the judge believes them derivative, not primary - derivative of the war culture which is the true culture upon which the markets (themselves only arenas for decadent symbolic war games) depend. (Daugherty 1999: 166)

This questioning of capitalism finds an echo in the brief image of the "sutler" that follows the filibustering expedition, and keeping his commissary:

He's a wry and grinning tradesman good to follow every campaign or hound men from their holes in just those whited regions where they've gone to hide from God. (BM: 44) ^x

Daugherty (1999:166) sees the sutler as a "debased and predatory camp follower: a predator on predators" and concludes that the judge is the judge:

of any and all attempts, especially on the part of those who seek his patronage, to place him within the financial system.

The judge considers all such attempts invalid:

It is not merely that he positions himself outside all tabernacles filled with "money changers"; rather he positions himself outside all temples, period - to stand "beyond that uttermost edge of the world"...

Daugherty (1999, 166), missing the context of the scene, reasons that the judge judges things according the criterion of their being within or without his will. The scene, however, does not depict the judge. It depicts how the kid sees the judge in a dream. And the narrator visits the interior of its protagonist so rarely that a reader can infer that the exception is significant.

We are shown the kid's subconscious as it wrestles with the question Tobin did not answer. The kid intuits what becomes of those who fall prey to the judge's philosophy. They become accomplices, collaborators. They try to ingratiate themselves and, slaves of capital, are imprisoned in the treadmill of money creation. The scene shows the kid changing, growing

in knowledge of the world. It represents the kid's unconscious judging the judge. The scene is a clear marker of progress in understanding.

To ask a question, and the kid twice asks his crucial question about what the judge judges, is a choice, a demonstration of agency. Seeking to understand, the kid questions and his subconscious provides an answer. This represents a growth towards a character who recognizes evil when he sees it and who offers mercy to the old woman on the plain.

5. AGENCY, AMBIGUITY AND THE AUTHOR

Evidence has been provided to support the argument for a pattern of symbols and narrative devices built around the theme of agency with the kid as a force for good and the judge as a force for evil. Examples have been given in support of the notion of the novel as a dialectic, a playing out on multiple levels, of arguments for and against agency. In this final chapter ambiguities are teased out, and an argument is made for the agency of the author.

Blood Meridian's general modus operandi is to present to the reader, in various ways, on various levels, two thoughts in direct contradiction to each other: First, humans are free to choose, and second, fate is absolute. Within this larger dialectic, the kid is an ambiguous emblem of ethical agency.

The kid has grown from the boy to man in a world of unmitigated horror. He has learnt, against all odds, some qualities of mercy and the world has provided him little reward beyond the fact of survival. The one person who he reveals himself to, shows genuine clemency for, he discovers to be a corpse. He comes to his tired end in Fort Griffith across a plain of bones where the last of the buffalo herds have been slaughtered. The natural wonders of America are being laid waste. In this context, the kid, emblem of agency, accepts, perhaps even welcomes, his fate at the judge's hands. He chooses not to leave, and chooses, therefore, the fate which the design of the novel has made inevitable for him. Agency is demonstrated and, simultaneously, it is proved impossible.

5.1. Agency and ambiguity

Within the text of *Blood Meridian* are many hints at, and suggestions of, the possibility of agency. In the epilogue is a demonstration of its opposite. Clockwork beings follow a row of holes which verify a theory of implacable causality, each void, bereft of fire, owing its existence to, coming inevitably from, the one before.

The text presents a complex argument embodied by characters placed in opposition. The contest between the kid and the judge is not equal. The kid is uneducated and illiterate. The judge encompasses all knowledge. The kid is mortal, the judge, by his own claim and the physical evidence, is not. When they meet for the last time the kid/man is forty-five, but the judge, "seemed little changed or none in all these years". (BM: 325) He is like, "some other sort of man entire."

And yet the judge cannot subvert the kid. The judge, desiring to seduce and convert, resorts at last to an action that is in itself an admission of defeat. The kid, given his historical context and story, given how he stands instinctively against the judge from the first moment he sees him lie about The Reverend Green, can be experienced by a reader as a miracle of moral development in unfavourable circumstances.

Yet the world of the novel is implacable, Gnostic. Evil prevails, and any evidence of morality or agency, any sparks of god, are exceptions whose very existence proves the rule of the opposite.

In so far as an active will can be discerned in *Blood Meridian*, it is the judge that exercises it. What the judge desires, that Glanton should get a card for instance, is what the judge contrives to occur. Simultaneously, the judge himself is just a cog in some larger mechanism, which is part of another in infinite regression. When infinity enters an equation, definite answers become infinitely elusive. This ur-riddle, this ambiguity, is knitted into the novel's structure. The characters become:

like things whose very portent renders them ambiguous. Like things so charged with meaning that their forms are dimmed. (BM: 281/2)

5.2. Agency and the writer

The writer named the kid and put the name in the text. The writer discovered the judge in history and developed him in the text. In section 2.2.1. the intimacy between narrator and judge was explored. I noted how, in the final paragraphs before the epilogue, the judge and

the narrator speak with one voice, the judge saying that he never sleeps, the narrator repeating the words in agreement, intoning them in biblical iambs. (BM: 335)

The narrator is a character created by the writer. It is the first character to be discovered, which is why writers speak of needing to find a voice in order to begin a book. The writer imaginatively inhabits the character of his narrator, and via the narrator, the other characters presented. Implicit in the shamanistic nature of the act of writing is that, in the act of creation, the writer is one with his characters.

In the case of *Blood Meridian*, a reader could conclude that, finding the character of the judge easy to inhabit, the writer has been, by the end of the text, infiltrated by it. The writer is like a dancer inhabited by the spirit of the mask he has donned. The puppet has come to life and now pulls the puppet master's strings in the carnival of blood.

In his final conversation with the kid (BM: 329), the judge says that if the majority of the dancers have no reason, known to themselves, to be present, and yet they are present, then they must be present by the:

reason of some other ... can you guess who that other might be?

No. Can you?

I know him well. (BM: 328)

What can this "other" be that the judge knows so well, except the writer? Who, except the writer, can be reasonably be accused of assembling the characters present at the dance at the end of *Blood Meridian*?

The writer is one with the judge when the judge answers the kid's assertion, "You aint nothin", with: "You speak truer than you know." (BM: 331) It is the writer who knows better than anyone that the judge *is* nothing, a construct, a paper person against a "paper skyline." (BM: 4)

The judge, regarding the room and its occupants, calls it an orchestration for an event, a dance, a ceremony. It is not necessary for the dancers to know their roles. The dance knows their roles, just as the book knows the roles of the kid and the judge. The overture to the

dance contains, "certain marks of decisiveness". (BM: 329) These are marks of design. The overture to the dance contains the slaying of an enormous bear. A "lean blonde bear" (BM: 136/7) was shot in the beginnings of the narrative. The judge speaks of the ceremony and dance which will climax in the murder of the kid. The narrator speaks, on behalf of the writer, of the text as a whole which will climax with the killing of the kid. Both judge and writer are a long way down the road and seeking closure. Both judge and writer, with wry reference to outrage and slaughter preceding, assure the reader that events to come will:

not appear strange or unusual even to those who question the rightness of the events so ordered. (BM: 329)

A reader may question the ethics, but, given what has come before in book and dance, not even a slaughter performed by a naked devil in a wooden shack above a pit of excrement, a slaughter too appalling for description, not even the murder of the one potential spark of god and hope allowed by the narrative, will surprise.

Through the scene, which is a ritual replaying of the narrative as whole, a ritual which requires "the letting of blood" (BM: 329) the judge and the narrator are intimate, the judge saying, "what is death if not an agency", (BM: 329) when we know so well that agency is the writer's theme. A reader, intuiting the process of creation, could almost deduce that the judge had a kind of agency in the creation of the text. The writer, in defence, reclaims his authority with a last word, the epilogue.

Blood Meridian is a machine designed to search for evidence of free will. It searches back for first causes and finds them built on others in infinite regression:

[W]hen God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature that can ... make a machine. And a machine to make the machine. (BM: 19)

The book contains, in the great domed head of the judge, its own first cause within it, an engine of evil which seeks to find the evil in the kid. And yet that first cause implies by its very existence an impartial god antecedent to it:

Was it always your idea, [the judge] said, that if you did not speak, you would not be recognized.

You seen me.

What the judge sees, recognizes, in the kid, and what he has to destroy, is the spark of god.

If the text of *Blood Meridian* is only a machine, it is an extraordinary machine, springing from a world of texts which created a reader which created a writer which created *Blood Meridian* which creates, and contains, the world that created it.

The story contains also, on the simplest of levels, a battle of good against evil. Attempts are made to kill the spark, but the spark is not easy to extinguish. The kid is exhausted out of existence as much as anything else. The kid offers mercy to an old woman, only to realize that she is dead. Not long after, in weary self defence, he kills a child aged as he was when he started his journey. He walks through fields of buffalo bones, the great natural wealth of America laid waste. He comes to an abysmal frontier town of desperate men and woman and meets the judge, Satan, the representative and cause of all the horror he has witnessed. He listens to the judge's philosophies and urgings and tells him with stoic simplicity: "I aint studyin no dance" (BM: 327), "I aint with you" (BM: 328), "I don't like craziness" (BM: 330), "You aint nothin." (BM: 331)

It is typical of *Blood Meridian's* determined ambiguity that those last three words can be interpreted to mean both: you are nothing, and, you are not nothing. The question cannot be answered. It can only be eternally asked.

Within those constructs under discussion then, which can finally be said to demonstrate agency? The judge is presented at times in the text as a force of will, but is ultimately unreal, inhuman. He does not sleep or age as humans do. He says he does not die and while the slaughterous ape survives he will not die. He is the potential for evil and stupidity within human nature, that quality which ensures that humans are always, somewhere upon the spinning globe, at war. Because he is not human, his agency, or lack thereof, is not relevant. A human lives in a body. A human dies. For a human, questions of agency and ethics are foundationed on the inevitability of death.

The kid has the spark of god, and therefore agency, in him, but he is much constrained by his situation, his context, his lack of education, his reality. Both judge and kid, furthermore, are finally nothing, constructs, paper people having existence only in the reader's head. Behind them is the ghost in the machine, the enormous, pale, gleaming, mysterious ovum which has communed with the reader, which has created the narrator which has dramatized the debate.

Does the writer have agency? Or is he a coldforger, capital's wage slave, conspiring to create of previous of texts a product that will produce demand in the market? (BM: 310) This interpretation would suggest that the scene containing the kid's dream operates on a level beyond the character development of the kid. If the coldforger is an emblem of the writer, and the judge judges its efforts to render its product exchangeable, then the judge, creation of the writer, is judging the writer's work. The writer is a **coldforger**, working without the Gnostic spark. Its work is never, can never, be good enough, and therefore, the night, for the writer, by its own estimation as well as its created character's, never ends. This interpretation is directly opposed to Daugherty's (1999: 170) depiction of the author of *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic, god-sparked saint.

[Cormac McCarthy] has always been, after all, something of a Stendhalian editorialist as a narrator - affirming among other things that he is a particular, rare sort of "supply-side" producer of very serious stories: a solitary obsessive who, in his alienation from this Anareta world, this killing planet, and in fidelity to the real god, has a "can do no other" (because Called) purpose, and who cares not a whit for the "market."

What the writer *can* claim is to be the originator, the imaginer of the world of *Blood Meridian*. The writer, as much as any human, gives her/himself the:

task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry and will by the decision alone... take[n] charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (BM: 199)

But those are the judge's words and so ambiguity persists. The writer might be more readily compared to a traveller who meets another and parts with him:

each passing back the way the other had come, pursuing as all travellers
must inversions without end upon other men's journeys. (BM: 121)

The text of *Blood Meridian* is a reaction to texts before it. Its creator is a cog in a larger machine. He is, simultaneously, or was at the time of creation, a pattern maker, a node of textual knowledge, a singularity which willed into existence one world of the many which it contained for it contained all worlds and there is nothing new under the sun. In the words of the judge, the dance:

contains complete within itself its own arrangement and history and
finale.

And it contains its creator, "the one true dancer". (BM: 331) As in the dance, so in the book. We are shown, in the epilogue, and elsewhere, that agency is impossible. We are shown, in the figures of John Joel Glanton and the kid, and in the writer implied behind them, that choice is all we have.

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End Notes

ⁱ Understanding that there is a gender bias built into the structure of the English language I have tended, in this essay, when referring to readers and narrators, to favour the ugliness of "it" over the presumption of "he" or "she".

ⁱⁱ (BM: page number) refers throughout to the primary text.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Hungerford citations refer to a web text, a transcription of her lecture.

^{iv} Infuriate, as Hungerford points out, is very much "a McCarthy word."

^v A general prediction proved generally true by the subsequent behaviour of the Glanton gang and others in the narrative to come.

^{vi} Because he has seen the image before.

^{vii} HORATIO: O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!

HAMLET : And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (Hamlet Act 1 Scene V)

^{viii} A possible allusion to *Paradise Lost*.

^{ix} Cf Wordsworth

MY heart leaps up when I behold

A rainbow in the sky:

So was it when my life began,

So is it now I am a man,

So be it when I shall grow old

Or let me die!

The child is father of the man:
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

It is an ironic allusion. *Blood Meridian* is, in a sense, a refutation of Wordsworth's poem. Or a question offered in return: But what if we take **this** child, "the kid"?

^x It should be noted that a certain kind of commercial language crops up, in the dialogue of the scalphunters, throughout the text. For instance:

What is your life worth? he said.
In Texas five hundred but you'd have to **discount** the note with your ass. (BM: 83)

...for not even Glanton had been willing to **underwrite** this third trial. (BM: 240)

I don't threaten people. I told him I'd whip his ass and that's as good as **notarized**. (BM: 267)