“INVERSIONS WITHOUT END UPON OTHER MEN’S JOURNEYS”: CORMAC MCCARTHY, HERMAN MELVILLE, AND MORAL NAVIGATION

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ABSTRACT

In the swiftly growing field of McCarthy studies, two divergent camps have staked their claims, both of them finding ample material in the author’s stories of isolated grotesques, unrepentant killers, and haunted seekers. On one side are Vereen Bell and his seminal work *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, which posits that the cosmos within this author’s prose is markedly chaotic where violence is met with a resigned if not disinterested awareness. On the other side one finds Edwin T. Arnold, who maintains that McCarthy’s fiction contains a clear moral order, an unmistakable distinction between good and evil, and even a capacity for man’s spiritual salvation, saying the novels exhibit “a conviction that is essentially religious” (46).

*Blood Meridian*, perhaps McCarthy’s finest novel, is often the site of this critical dispute. Exceptionally violent and philosophically grim, it seems to lend itself to Bell’s interpretation. Yet this interpretation of the novel largely hinges upon the reader’s acceptance of Judge Holden’s rhetorically magnificent and profoundly pessimistic speeches as being the true essence of the narrative. Ultimately, one must resist Holden’s seductive nihilism in order to discover the underlying premises at work, which leads me to align with Arnold’s camp and to see McCarthy’s novel as an impressive and complex moral parable.

An exhaustive analysis of this work alone, however, will not cede new ground. I propose that also examining the major work of Herman Melville will give keener insight into a reading of *Blood Meridian*; in other words, by comparing *Blood Meridian* to *Moby-Dick*, I will demonstrate how McCarthy has infused his novel with the same problems of “moral navigation” (to borrow a term from Yvor Winters) that Melville meditated on in his work. This will emphasize McCarthy’s Western as being concerned with morals and man’s conflicted perception as well as bolster claims made by Arnold and those in his “camp.”
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INTRODUCTION

“For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!”

—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

“If much in the world were mystery the limits of that world were not, for it was without measure or bound and there were contained within it creatures more horrible yet and men of other colors and beings which no man has looked upon and yet not alien none of it more than were their own hearts alien in them, whatever wilderness contained there and whatever beasts.”

—Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*

In the swiftly growing territory of Cormac McCarthy studies, two divergent camps have staked their claims and, like two ignorant armies clashing by night, they defend their conflicting arguments with what amount to confused alarms. On one side are Vereen Bell and his seminal work *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, which posits that the cosmos within this author’s prose is markedly chaotic where violence is met with a resigned if not disinterested awareness. In essence, Bell argues that the novels are without conventional plots or moral framework. On the other side, one finds Edwin T. Arnold, whose anthology *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy* (co-edited by Dianne C. Luce) sought to be a corrective antithesis to Bell’s work. Arnold maintains
that McCarthy’s fiction contains a clear moral order, an unmistakable distinction between good and evil, and even a capacity for man’s spiritual salvation, saying the novels exhibit “a conviction that is essentially religious” (“Naming” 46). Much of the raging debate results from the author’s infamous refusal to explicate his novels for readers; in a Wall Street Journal interview, McCarthy states that he never reads one of his books after it has been published, explaining, “Things I’ve written about are no longer of any interest to me, but they were certainly of interest before I wrote about them” (qtd. in Jurgensen). Thus, by the time one of his works goes into circulation, he has already folded his tent and stolen away to chart the next frontier.

Consequently, one can only turn to McCarthy’s writing for answers. With ten novels, the prestige of a recent Pulitzer Prize, and a writing career that has spanned more than forty-five years, McCarthy has inspired academic debate like few other contemporary literary figures. Scholars have compared him to the likes of Faulkner, O’Connor, and Dante; American culture critic Steven Shaviro gushes that McCarthy is “our greatest living author: nomadic wanderer, lucid cartographer of an inescapable delirium,” and even Harold Bloom, Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University, assents saying, “I venture that no other living American author […] has given us a book as strong and memorable as Blood Meridian,” citing what is often referred to as McCarthy’s masterpiece (146; 254-55).

Perhaps McCarthy’s finest novel, Blood Meridian is regularly the site of critical dispute; this extraordinary hybrid of Southern Gothic and American Western traditions has persistently shocked readers and critics since its publication in 1985. The story centers on the unnamed “Kid” who lights out for the territories, falls in with two doomed scalp hunting expeditions into the wilderness of the American Southwest and Mexico, and soon becomes dogged by the malevolent
and verbosely nihilistic Judge Holden. Exceptionally violent and philosophically grim, this novel seems to lend itself to Bell’s interpretation that the author has given us a vision of massacres without meaning and savagery without remorse. This interpretation though largely hinges upon the reader’s acceptance of Holden’s rhetorically magnificent and profoundly pessimistic speeches as representing the true essence of the narrative. Convinced of Holden’s possession of such “narrative perspective,” Robert L. Jarrett discloses the consequences of Bell’s reading: “If the judge operates in the narrative as a symbolic spokesperson for Reason’s struggle for supreme knowledge of an authority over nature, he also articulates an ideology of conquest that defends unlimited war as the supreme arbiter of the conflict between unrestricted wills—national, cultural, or individual” (83, 81). Bloom puts it more succinctly, calling Holden “a theoretician of war everlasting” (255). Ultimately, the judge embodies a force resolved to corrode life and meaning at every turn, both within the novel and without.

However, much like Satan of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, whose bravura speeches duped Blake, Shelley, and other Romantic poets into considering him “a moral being […] far superior to his God,” McCarthy’s Holden actively distracts readers with his byzantine suppositions and persuasive language into an utter misinterpretation of the work (Shelley). One must resist Holden’s seductive nihilism and his attempts to obscure reality with his own imposed truth in order to discover the underlying premises at play. It is precisely this defiance that characterizes the Kid’s own moral struggle within the final third of the novel. Hence, readers must at last align with Arnold’s camp in seeing *Blood Meridian* as an impressive and complex moral parable.

As stated before, only a close reading of *Blood Meridian* can reveal the answer to McCarthy’s purported nihilism. Yet, an exhaustive analysis of this work alone will not cede new
ground; scholars such as Arnold, Shaviro, and others like John Sepich have already completed excellent studies of the novel. In an attempt to gain fresh footing in the book’s perennially rekindling disputes, one must also examine the themes of nineteenth century novelist and McCarthy’s literary forerunner Herman Melville and his major work *Moby-Dick*. In other words, an in-depth comparison of *Blood Meridian* to *Moby-Dick* will demonstrate how McCarthy has infused his novel with the same problems of “moral navigation” (to borrow a term from Yvor Winters) that Melville meditated on in his work.

Not surprisingly, the grandiose style and epic scope of *Blood Meridian* have led some critics to compare it to Herman Melville’s mammoth *Moby-Dick*; Bloom sees Melville’s seafaring adventure as an analogue of McCarthy’s Western, calling it an “indisputable ancestor,” while Dana Phillips points out how “McCarthy’s novel realizes some of the unfulfilled potential of *Moby-Dick*” in terms of using violence and death to characterize American history (235, 439). Yet these analyses, in themselves, contain their own unfulfilled potential. Whereas these and other writers have compared plot points, key characters, and writing styles, very little has been written about the profound influence Melville has had on McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* in terms of finding an overwhelming darkness in the heart of mankind and each soul’s challenge to navigate the chaos of the particular with reference to morals or absolutes. To put it succinctly, McCarthy’s surreal and hellish desert of the American West is his version of Melville’s ever-shifting sea of the unknown.

In fact, Yvor Winters argues in his essay “Herman Melville, and the Problems of Moral Navigation” that this spiritual routing is the crux of Melville’s epic. Without a doubt, McCarthy’s novel, with its “dread pilgrims” tracing and retracing journeys across a “purgatorial waste,” pivots upon this very same axis (88, 63). The Kid operates as McCarthy’s neutral
character, wavering between cruelty and mercy, who must ultimately choose between salvation and damnation by the novel’s close. Amid the incessant pandemonium of the brutal onslaughts and raids, the Kid eventually comes to the realization that he must master the untrained impulse thereby defying Judge Holden and his religion of war. Remarkably, McCarthy affords the Kid a type of spiritual redemption through a quiet acceptance of death, underscoring his own affirmation of a moral nature and an acceptance of order in spite of the world’s relentless turmoil.

If *Blood Meridian* is McCarthy’s most puzzling novel, then its depths have not yet been accurately approximated much less reached. We may indeed need Melville, that other writer of epics who charted the dark abyss in man’s heart, as our guide. Any serious study of *Blood Meridian* must acknowledge the presence of *Moby-Dick* weaving its way through McCarthy’s gruesome and grueling chapters. For when one reads in McCarthy about the “lone albino ridge, sand or gypsum” that rises “like the back of some pale seabeast surfaced among the dark archipelagos,” one cannot help but see the haunting omen of the white whale at the beginning of Melville’s novel, that “grand hooded phantom, like a snowhill in the air” (251; 22). And like the “Spirit Spout” that heralded the submerged whale, these surface allusions announce greater depths and richer connections.
OF CRITICS AND CREWMEN

While the lush literary themes and motifs of *Blood Meridian* seamlessly glide through the novel’s immeasurable depths, the scholarly work on the surface is strikingly chaotic and confused. Ever since 1985, critics have dropped hook, line, and sinker into the sea of this western epic; held countless gams at International Conferences dedicated to Cormac McCarthy studies; and kept cautious watch out for portents of the author’s ever elusive meaning. And like the contending crews of the *Pequod* and the *Jungfrau* in hot pursuit of the old bull whale, these academics often have to compete for their kill. Vereen Bell commands one remarkably robust crew of critics, which asserts that all of McCarthy’s novels verify a nihilistic viewpoint.

Shuffling off a conventional reading of these books, Bell maintains “Cormac McCarthy’s novels are as innocent of theme and of ethical reference as they are of plot,” which suggests that the author eludes critical convictions (31). While McCarthy may certainly create realistic characters that invite readers to identify with them, their fictional lives do not imply any type of significance; “In McCarthy’s world,” writes Bell, “existence seems both to precede and preclude essence, and it paradoxically derives its importance from this fact alone” (31). Thus, Bell lays out the foundational principle of his reading of *Blood Meridian*. Enthusiastically, his steadfast crewmen echo this sentiment.

In his book *Cormac McCarthy’s Western Novels*, scholar Barcley Owens compares *Blood Meridian* to “pure anoesis,” saying it is “sensation without understanding, devoid of ethical or mythic comfort” and depriving it of any moral structure (7). Thus, the narrative progression of wandering, slaughter, and decay is merely a journey the reader must experience but not dissect for either philosophical maxims or meanings. To look for beliefs in the work is futile since, as Bell states, McCarthy is “intuitive” and “unideological” (31). Despite how the very idea of a man
without beliefs is beyond belief, Dennis Donoghue extends this view of a dispassionate, even
detached, McCarthy to the author’s characters, explaining that the high style of *Blood Meridian*
has to “speak up for values the characters could not express” (417). In other words, he claims the
novel’s brutish characters are incapable of meaningful introspection or, more importantly,
weighing moral alternatives; Donoghue essentially argues that the novel must give the illusion of
substantial reflection in spite of the fact that it is ultimately a vacuous gesture on McCarthy’s
part—shape without form, shade without color, if you will.

Distancing himself from the speculation that McCarthy is unideological, author John
Cavelti takes matters to another extreme in his essay “Cormac McCarthy: Restless Seekers.” Not
only is McCarthy ideological, says Cavelti, he is obsessed with “white guilt,” imbuing his works
with a sense of shame and cultural regret (174). This reading pegs McCarthy as a regionalist,
which Owens insists is an accurate classification for the author, stating, “[McCarthy] is a
regionalist—first a Southern writer, a native of Tennessee, and since the publication of *Blood
Meridian* a western writer who has adopted the Texas border and its aesthetics” (xii). While this
is quite a diversion from Bell and Donoghue’s claims, Cavelti quickly falls into rhythm and toes
the line saying McCarthy’s “despair” results from his “overpowering sense of the brevity,
fragility, and impermanence of human order in face of the vast but profoundly beautiful abyss of
the cosmos” (168). Again, we find McCarthy’s fiction characterized by lacks: a lack of meaning,
a lack of expression, a lack of introspection, and so on. According to these critics, for McCarthy
and his characters, the very idea of salvation rings as hollow as a conventional denouement.
However, this tendency toward “anti-interpretation” renders them without reference, and they
thus proceed like Captain Ahab as he charts an erratic and speculative voyage for the White
Whale, “threading a maze of currents and eddies, with a view to the more certain accomplishment of that monomaniac thought of his soul” (Arnold “Naming” 45; Melville 167).

Of all the harpooners in the hunt for McCarthy’s meaning, Edwin T. Arnold has wielded the most accurate lances, aiming always for the heart of the issue. Almost alone in the chase, Arnold opposes Bell’s deductions and resoundingly affirms a substantial moral sense in McCarthy’s fiction as well as an opportunity for salvation. These novels’ characters wander not out of despair but, as Arnold states, in search for meaning; “McCarthy’s protagonists,” he writes, “are most often those who, in their travels, are bereft of the voice of God and yet yearn to hear him speak” (“Blood and Grace” 14). Dispelling the notion that McCarthy can be contained and thereby limited by the “regionalist” label, Arnold argues that his writings “easily transcend any notion of region” due to “the essential religiosity at the core of his writing” (“Blood and Grace” 12).

But Cormac McCarthy is not a Christian writer in the conventional sense, and, as evidenced by his novels, his beliefs do not evoke the same orthodoxy as that of other noted Catholic authors like T.S. Eliot or Flannery O’Connor. In a recent interview for The Wall Street Journal, McCarthy offers a telling (albeit brief) glimpse into his beliefs when he says, “I have a great sympathy for the spiritual view of life, and I think that it’s meaningful. But am I a spiritual person? I would like to be” (qtd. in Jurgensen). Here he sounds very much like one of his characters, pursuing a source of meaning and perhaps even redemption. Arnold maintains that “McCarthy is a mystic in the way his favorite writer Melville is a mystic, acknowledging and in fact honoring the majesty of the astounding and awful as well as of the simple and beautiful” (“Mosaic”). This comparison to Melville is both telling and rewarding because it prompts one of the most basic and important parallels between Blood Meridian and Moby-Dick. Historian and
literary critic F.O. Matthiessen points out Melville’s antithesis of land and sea, saying they represent the diametrical oppositions of “a life of safety and the search for truth” (417).

McCarthy’s novel begins with this very same premise: the Kid abandons hearth and home for the untamable frontier, certain that he will forge both an identity and a way in the world.
TRAVERSING THE WILDS, WITHIN AND WITHOUT

Arguably a relevant precursor of McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* and a companion piece to *Moby-Dick*, Melville’s poem “John Marr” reads like an obituary for its title character: an old man living among windy spaces on the American frontier, overwhelmed by a longing to return to the sea of his youth. In many ways, Marr resembles an aged Ishmael decades after being orphaned by the *Pequod*, and he has clearly chosen the “life of safety” mentioned in Matthiessen (417). Gone is the world that had been confined between stern and rudder, and his new home amid “staid people” is a poor substitute for the stormy capriciousness of a sailor’s life (212). In a section that sounds almost like an uncanny prediction of McCarthy’s own imagery, Marr reflects on the West, describing how the American Indians “had been coerced into the occupancy of wilds not very far beyond the Mississippi—wilds then, but now the seats of municipalities and states” (213). Using the figure of the buffalo, Marr describes the expulsion of the natural world, saying “the bisons [sic], once streaming countless in processional herds, or browsing as in an endless battle-line over these vast aboriginal pastures, had retreated, dwindled in number, before the hunters, in main a race distinct from the agricultural pioneers, though generally their advance-guard” (213). Melville emphasizes the bygone nature of the once feral frontier, using words like “battle-line” and “retreated” to characterize the wildlife diaspora as akin to war. For Marr, and perhaps even Melville, the taming of the West had been purchased by violent means.

In a starkly poignant scene, Marr considers the landscape while images of his past employment awaken and color his contemplation:

Blank stillness would for hours reign unbroken on this prairie. “It is the bed of a dried-up sea,” said the companionless sailor—no geologist—to himself, musing at twilight upon the fixed undulations of that immense alluvial expanse bounded
only by the horizon, and missing there the stir that, to alert eyes and ears, 
animates at all times the apparent solitudes of the deep. (214)

Here, the land has been emptied of its vitality and, like an outstretched corpse, deprived of its 
final mystery. In this poem, one cannot help but hear Melville’s own personal lament for 
civilization’s razing of the American West vis-à-vis his own preference for the ocean’s dark and 
restless obscurity. Hence, domestication is accompanied by devastating ennui for Marr and 
Melville, and so both men turn away from the West and to the sea for solace. Winters explains 
that this antithesis of land and sea operates as the chief symbolism of Moby-Dick: “the land 
represents the known, the mastered, in human experience; the sea, the half-known, the obscure 
region of instinct, uncritical feeling, danger, and terror” (200). But Cormac McCarthy would 
argue that man’s dominance over nature is only an illusion, that the West has hardly been won. 
For all of the vicious eradications and extinctions performed upon this crude stage of sagebrush 
and scorched outcrop, the frontier is everlastingly formidable. This is precisely the major 
symbolism of Blood Meridian: the unconquerable terrain and its equally brutish correlative in the 
hearts of men.

Certainly one of the novels’ most memorable elements, McCarthy’s descriptions of the 
harsh landscapes conjure up images not unlike the hellish panel of Bosch’s The Garden of 
Earthly Delights triptych. To witness the limitless sweeps of land and traverse the winding roads 
that cross it is to also tread the expanses of one’s own heart. Throughout Blood Meridian, 
McCarthy adapts Moby-Dick’s use of outer geography as representative of the inner, leaving 
intact Melville’s claim that the world within and without are accurately described in terms of 
darkness. McCarthy’s description of “the unanimous dark of the world” echoes Melville’s own 
account of Ishmael when he “stood in the middle of a dreary street shouldering [his] bag, and
comparing the gloom towards the north with the darkness towards the south” (185; 23). This tableau anticipates Queequeg’s shrewd declaration that “it’s a wicked world in all meridians,” the shadow that so characterizes existence representing an ever present evil there (60). Just as darkness permeates the earth, so does it saturate man’s heart; standing in a chapel and gazing at memorials to those lost at sea, Ishmael dolefully reflects, “Methinks that what they call my shadow here on earth is my true substance” (45). It is interesting that, while arguing how his crudely shaped body is not his true essence, Ishmael chooses shadow—a term of darkness—to characterize that part of himself that rises above the physical terrain of existence rather than opting for, say, a whiff of cloud or even smoke. Matthiessen notes how this belief that both the world and man’s heart are shrouded in darkness is fundamental to understanding Melville’s prose, pointing out how at the end of his life the novelist checked a passage from philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s book Religion and Other Essays (1890) that read: “Taking an unprejudiced view of the world as it is, no one would dream of regarding it as a god. It would be more correct to identify the world with the devil…” (qtd. Matthiessen 407). According to Matthiessen, this demonstrates how Melville had been haunted by the mystery of evil all the way up until the end of his life.

Anyone familiar with the tremendous amount of historical and literary scholarship McCarthy pored over in order to pen Blood Meridian wouldn’t be surprised to come across Schopenhauer in his studies. Without a doubt, either by directly reading Religion and Other Essays or by proxy through an extensive acquaintanceship with Melville, McCarthy demonstrates a familiarity with the German philosopher’s tenet and reaffirms this bleak view of the world in his own novel. During the Kid’s first wanderings, he comes across a hermit who tells him, “[Man’s heart] aint the heart of a creature that is bound in the way that God has set for
it. You can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man the devil was at his elbow” (19). In other words, man is not only capable of evil but exhibits a penchant for it. Thus, for both Melville and McCarthy, Ishmael’s alchemic dictum—“as if darkness were indeed the proper element of our essences”—rings true; man’s soul is clouded with ink of the profane (58).

Acknowledging John Martr’s “dried-up sea” imagery, McCarthy renders his desert as if it were Melville’s tumultuous ocean. Several times throughout Blood Meridian, the sky is compared to aquatic iconography: one evening, the sun sets behind “reefs of bloodred clouds” and, later in the novel, the morning vista is described as “[o]ut there dark little archipelagos of cloud and the vast world of sand and scrub shearing upward into the shoreless void where those blue islands trembled and the earth grew uncertain” (21, 50). Then there is the land itself which, aside from appearing to extend infinitely in all directions, contains unknowable depths like the sea: “that night as they lay in that ground each heard, all heard, the dull boom of rock falling somewhere far below them in the awful darkness inside the world” (111). In other places, the comparison of the desert to the ocean is more obvious; for example, when Glanton’s gang discovers an ancient Anasazi dwelling, the narration states, “Lodged in faults and crevices a hundred feet above them were nests of straw and jetsam from old high waters,” hearkening back to a time before the Anasazi when the land had been part of the ocean floor (139). Even the remnants of human savagery left on the plains resemble the vestiges of a violent sea. Coming across the butchered victims of a Comanche attack, the gang can barely make sense of the massacre only because “the iron axletrees marked the shapes of the wagons as keelsons do the bones of ships on the sea’s floors” (220). In this short description, one can almost hear Ahab’s taunt to the Sperm Whale’s head:
Of all divers, thou hast dived the deepest. That head upon which the upper sun now gleams, has moved amid this world’s foundations. Where unrecorded names and navies rust, and untold hopes and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions of the drowned; there in that awful water-land, there was thy most familiar home. (249)

Here, Ahab seems to envision the whale as Charon, ferrying souls through the depths of Styx to the bedrock Underworld. Extending this image to Blood Meridian, McCarthy’s characters appear to ride through their own sun-bleached Hades, finding omens in every discarded cadaver and tanned carcass.

Indeed, “hell” would be an apt term for the setting of Blood Meridian. Often, the descriptions of the land veer into the hallucinatory, even supernatural: below the gang as they ride into an especially scorching tract of desert “smoldered the plains of San Agustin stretching away to the northeast, the earth floating off in a long curve silent under looms of smoke from the underground coal deposits burning there a thousand years” (138). In this account, hell seems to have breached the boundaries of earth. McCarthy compounds this image and even goes so far as to suggest that supernatural beasts may roam the wild when, at the foot of a volcano, many of Glanton’s men notice “little cloven hoof-prints in the stone clever as a little doe in her going” (130). Yet, as the teller of this volcano anecdote asks, “[W]hat little doe ever trod melted rock? […] it may be that there has been sinners so notorious evil that the fires coughed them up again and I could well see in the long ago how it was little devils with their pitchforks had traversed that fiery vomit for to salvage back those souls that had by misadventure been spewed up from their damnation onto the outer shelves of the world” (130). Building on one another, these
descriptions set the narrative in a purgatorial realm worthy of Dante, and McCarthy’s characters become the damned discharge spoken of at the volcano.

In his essay “Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy’s Moral Parables,” Arnold asserts that many of McCarthy’s protagonists find themselves wandering in “Dante’s ‘nowhere’ zone of the uncommitted” because they do not possess the courage to free themselves from their liminal states (57). The connection to The Inferno is apt, especially in light of McCarthy’s repeated measures to compare the blasted heath of the American West with the outskirts of Hell. And within this dried-up sea peopled by violent mercenaries dwells a force capable of engulfing man’s being entire; about the wounded and dying Sproule, McCarthy writes that “although his eyes took in the alien stones about yet the greater void beyond seemed to swallow up his soul” (65). Evidently, McCarthy’s novel drives at meanings more profound than simply those of history’s bloody industries or the crimes that accompanied America’s westward expansion. Just as Arnold states how “the state of the soul […] is being examined and narrated” in the novel, Blood Meridian reads like a descendant of Bunyan’s allegory Pilgrim’s Progress in this respect (“Naming” 54). This directly contradicts Bell’s claim that McCarthy’s novels are “lurid and simple” or “paradigms without reference”; his works, especially Blood Meridian, descend from a rich literary tradition tracing through Dante and, of particular importance, Melville, gleaning complex themes and imagery from these forbearers (Bell 32).

Bell and crew would have readers believe that Blood Meridian’s scarcity of clearly defined motives and utter lack of charted journeys translate into an incontrovertible absence of meaning; Cavelti explains that these restless expeditions are simultaneously required of the characters and ultimately worthless: “[McCarthy’s] heroes learn that all quests are futile, but that they have no choice but to continue their search through a world that is becoming progressively
more complicated, more cruel, and more chaotic” (174). Certainly, the characters are uncommitted wanderers but they are not without a larger purpose; Arnold calls them “descendants of Ishmael,” and a comparison to *Moby-Dick* will elucidate their larger purpose (“Blood and Grace” 11). In her book *Melville’s Use of the Bible*, Natalia Wright enumerates the motivation for the journeys of Melville’s protagonists, saying “[A]ll are engaged in one intense, superhuman, eternal quest: the quest for the absolute amidst its relative manifestations” (77). Winters endorses this point in his own essay, saying that *Moby-Dick* is characterized by “the relationship of principle to perception, or, in other words, the problem of judgment” made evident in the “Lee Shore” chapter where the character Bulkington embodies the soul’s contest with the chaotic elements of the sea (202). Essentially, the *Pequod’s* erratic course across the globe gives the illusion of impulsiveness while in reality being driven by the single-minded, or “monomaniac,” purpose of slaying the White Whale (Melville 167). Likewise, the deceptively spontaneous travels of *Blood Meridian’s* scalp hunters represent a desperate effort to give their lives meaning. But, like Ishmael plainly states, “[I]n pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in the tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed,” Glanton’s men will be overpowered by their task as they are led into the repetitive maze of the phrase “They rode on” (196; *Blood Meridian* 44). And the same lack of absolute/moral references damns them as it does Ahab and his men. When he and Sproule stumble upon a crossroad in their wandering, the Kid stands “scanning the landscape for some guidance in that emptiness” (McCarthy 67). Narratively, they have been divested of a team and direction by a Comanche ambush; symbolically, they are for want of a clear moral purpose.
Contrary to Cavelti, the wanderings are the result of requiring references, both geographically and morally, not an absence of meaning.

As if faced with an existential crisis, McCarthy’s characters institute a type of meaning and order in their lives in the form of bounty hunting, a choice that makes them increasingly like Captain Ahab—“madness maddened”—with every new assault (Melville 143). Glanton, with whom Judge Holden rides, seeks the Apache leader Gomez, emblematically establishing an objective for his journey and motive for his actions however transgressive. The members of his gang, including the Kid, resolve to follow him despite the fact that their only stake in Gomez is monetary as opposed to personal. Hence, the Kid can only free himself from the doom that awaits Glanton once he disentangles himself from this plot and seeks out his own moral reference in that unforgiving terrain, or, to be more concise, discovers the need to independently weigh his moral alternatives.

Yet, Donoghue is convinced that McCarthy’s characters, the Kid included, are incapable of this act; he asserts that they are “like recently arrived primates, possessing each a spinal column but little or no capacity of mind or consciousness” (402). Arnold answers this allegation by stating that while they do not possess the eloquence of someone like the garrulous Holden, they are able to articulate their “spiritual devastation,” citing the example of the Kid, who in his later years “[begins] to speak with a strange urgency of things few men have seen in a lifetime and his jailers [say] that his mind [has] come uncotted by the acts of blood in which he had participated” (“Blood and Grace” 14; 305). In the end, readers find that a character’s silence is just as telling and meaningful as an eloquent monologue; the Kid eventually learns that in order to resist, all he must do is remain silent. Bloom tracks the Kid’s arc, saying: “McCarthy subtly shows us the long, slow development of the kid from another mindless scalper of Indians to the
courageous confronter of the Judge in their final debate in a saloon,” pointing out what is one of the novel’s most revealing and puzzling scenes (257).

The fact that the Kid does not possess a clear moral purpose at the beginning of the novel renders him as one of McCarthy’s “neutrals,” who are characterized by a withdrawal from society that represents “spiritual despair and abasement” (“Naming” 58-59). Emphasizing the Kid’s neutrality, McCarthy writes how a near-fatal bullet to the chest has “finally divested [the Kid] of all that he has been” (4). From the start, the Kid is orphaned, not only by his desertion of an abusive home life but also by his emancipation from whatever identity and tattered traces of civilization were bestowed on him in his youth. Thus, the Kid’s wavering between ethical extremes constitutes the heart of Blood Meridian, and even when he becomes strangely absent in the narrative because he is overshadowed by Holden’s character readers are still meant to see in him the dilemma of “moral navigation” that Winters finds in Moby-Dick: “the process of living by judgment; that is by the perception of individual, shifting, and chaotic phenomena, but by perception trained in principle, in abstraction, to the point where it is able to find its way amid the chaos of the particular” (204).
LATERAL NARRATIVES

The Kid’s early brush with death initiates him into a life of violence and fraternity of blood. On the novel’s first page, we find the Kid, just fourteen years old, abandoning his home in the dark Tennessee woods and wandering towards western destinations, unaware of the evil that lurks there. This is an evil that McCarthy delineates in his prologue where he cites an excerpt printed in *The Yuma Daily Sun* dated June 13, 1982 that reads: “Clark, who led last year’s expedition to the Afar region of northern Ethiopia, and UC Berkeley colleague Tim D. White, also said that a re-examination of a 300,000-year-old fossil skull found in the same region earlier shows evidence of having been scalped” (n.pag). On the one hand, this foreshadows the Kid’s employment under Captain Glanton while on the other it demonstrates how this method of manslaughter is not customary to only one part of the world. Scalping is presented as a tradition practiced on the infernal Afar flats of ancient Africa, carried somehow westward through unknown migrations, and finally institutionalized by American mercenaries in the nineteenth century. In short, McCarthy introduces readers to one of the novel’s main concerns: the age-old menace of cold-blooded murder.

In a similar fashion, Melville commences *Moby-Dick* with some historical accounting. Entitled “Extracts,” this section chronicles the history of the whale, showing how this creature has permeated the world’s various mythologies since its earliest eras. Included are quotes by writers as diverse as Montaigne, Rabelais, and Dryden as well as passages from the Book of Genesis, *Hamlet*, and *Paradise Lost*. Melville firmly entrenches himself in the company of great thinkers, poets, and kings, all of whom shared some fascination or regard for the whale. *Moby-Dick* is an attempt to top them all. But more than that, this novel fixes on a figure that, although well-chronicled, retains a great sense of mystery. Winters explicates the lengthy “Extracts”
exegesis, saying this is one of many sections in which “we are shown the extent of time which the whale inhabits, as well as of space” (213). The whale is legendary, occupying the principal role in this production and, as Winters puts it, “[o]f all the creatures in the sea, the whale is the greatest, the most intelligent, and the most dangerous” (213). Through an analysis of *Moby-Dick*’s “Whiteness of the Whale” chapter, Winters establishes Moby Dick as “the chief symbol and spirit of evil” (201). Thus, the terror and violence of the White Whale can only be contemplated in myth and story. Likewise, McCarthy reflects on man’s instinctive malice through its mythic and historical manifestations. His novel, like *Moby-Dick*, serves as a symbolic exploration of this theme that begins with an acknowledgment of the historical implications of that journey.

Both stories then proceed through their initial chapters in similar ways. While these narrative connections may be interesting in that they attest to McCarthy’s debt to Melville’s example, they are far more significant in terms of how they create the foundation for later, more meaningful comparisons between the novels’ themes. Finding himself “growing grim about the mouth,” Ishmael travels to New Bedford in search of an expedition and ends up sharing a room at the Spouter Inn with the tattooed cannibal Queequeg (Melville 18). McCarthy’s Kid journeys west, stopping in St. Louis, New Orleans, and finally Nacogdoches where he has a run-in with the iron-branded Toadvine. That these novels’ protagonists meet these two savages is significant insofar as their relationships eventually ripen into boon companionships. Interestingly, McCarthy gives his convict several physical traits that parallel Melville’s harpooner. For instance, Toadvine’s head is “strangely narrow” with hair “plastered up with mud in a bizarre and primitive coiffure,” which is reminiscent of Queequeg’s “bald purplish head” with “nothing but a small scalp-knot twisted up on his forehead” (*Blood Meridian* 11; *Moby-Dick* 34). More
importantly, both characters’ faces bear markings: Toadvine has the letters “HT” and “F” branded on his forehead while Queequeg’s entire face is etched with “large, blackish looking squares,” which Ishmael gathers are ceremonial markings (*Moby-Dick* 33). Conversely, Toadvine’s inscriptions are brief publications of his criminal history, “HT” possibly abbreviating “hard time” and F “forced labor.” McCarthy sensibly avoids detailing Toadvine’s past and why he has been branded, leaving readers to assume the worst about his crimes. Nevertheless, the Kid befriends the convict after their drunken brawl. Ishmael seems to have fared little better, finding himself sharing a bed with a cannibal.

After the initial shock of Queequeg’s appearance wears off, Ishmael reflects on the “simple honest heart” within his companion’s soul, and, in one of the novel’s most pivotal and poignant scenes, they share a pipe in bed (55). In this moment, Ishmael discovers a joy that is “household,” meaning familial and intimate; he considers Queequeg to be something of a brother (58). Moreover, “household” can imply something familiar; Ishmael senses something recognizable and comforting in his tattooed friend. His words suggest that they are connecting on a profound level: where man recognizes man based upon his humanity. Thus, this intimate communion represents the truest salvation offered to mankind; it is like the striking of that light amidst the world’s “coarse outer gloom” (58).

*Blood Meridian* may lack the noticeably tender moments that pepper *Moby-Dick*, but that does not mean that the Kid and Toadvine do not express something akin to affection for one another. In a cantina shootout between Glanton’s hunters and a slew of Mexicans, “Toadvine and the kid [are] standing back to back with their pistols at port like duelists” (180). Following the Yuma Massacre in which Glanton has his head split “to the thrapple” by an axe, the Kid and Toadvine escape into the night together, the former carrying an arrow in his leg (275).
this scene of disorder and bloodshed, McCarthy gives us a moment of unexpected humanity when Toadvine rejects the notion of abandoning the crippled Kid: “The kid’s leg had stiffened and he hobbled after with a section of wagontongue for a crutch and twice he told Toadvine to go on but he would not” (278). Clearly, the ex-con cannot bring himself to leave his friend stranded, especially with a band of Yumas on their heels. Perhaps he has come to the realization that in a world of lonely wanderers a boon companion to cross the darkening straits with is a comfort and, more importantly, redemption. Just as Ishmael felt his “stiff prejudices” become “elastic” and “bend” as he shares a pipe with Queequeg, Toadvine and the Kid discover charity for one another despite their violence-weary natures; years of butchery have not stamped out the final vestiges of their goodness (Moby-Dick 58).

After all, theirs is a bloody business, comparable to the whale hunting of Moby-Dick. Several scenes of Blood Meridian detail the various massacres of the Glanton gang as they pursue Gomez across the bone-dry wastes. Eventually, they no longer distinguish themselves from the so-called savages they seek to eradicate. As the scalp hunters ambush a tribe of sleeping Gileños, the narration begins by saying, “Within that first minute the slaughter had become general,” depicting the scene as swift and utter pandemonium (155). Amidst the chaos, readers are directed towards one of Glanton’s Delaware trackers murdering infants: “[O]ne of the Delawares emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by the heels each in turn and bashed their heads against the stones so that the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew” (156). Not only is this scene meant to horrify readers but to also serve as an evocation of the Biblical retribution found in Psalm 137: “O Daughter of Babylon,/ doomed to destruction,/ happy is he who repays you/ for what you have done to us--/ he who seizes your infants/ and dashes them against the
rocks” (New International Version, Psalm 137:8-9). So the Delaware’s immitigable act can be characterized as vengeance for a parallel atrocity committed by the Comanche army earlier in the novel in which seven or eight dead babies hang from a tree with “holes punched in their underjaws and […] hung so by their throats from the broken stobs of a mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky” (57). Glanton’s mission is, thus, fueled considerably by revenge. To be sure, infants in Blood Meridian represent absolute innocence, and their slaughter proves that the world contains no havens for the meek from its brutal inhabitants.

Throughout the novel, Judge Holden revels in acts of infanticide, thereby designating himself the chief destroyer of innocence. After the attack on the Gileños, Holden takes for himself “a strange dark child covered in ash” whom he later scalps (160, 164). In an equally appalling scene, Holden purchases two pups for a gold coin only to immediately pitch them into a river (192). Ever the overseer of cruelty, Holden advocates that men purge their children of any and all innocence at the earliest opportunity, thereby preparing them for their roles in the game of war. When Tobin asks how one should raise a child, Holden replies:

At a young age […] they should be put in a pit with wild dogs. They should be set to puzzle out from their proper clues the one of the three doors that does not harbor wild lions. They should be made to run naked in the desert […] Wolves cull themselves, man. What other creature could? And is the race of man not more predacious yet? (146)

Holden’s reference to the wolf subtly hints back to the Kid’s genesis on the novel’s first page where the description reads: “Outside lie dark turned fields with rags of snow and darker woods beyond that harbor yet a few last wolves” (3). Symbolically, the Kid has been reared after Holden’s method and set loose in the world without moral bearing or critical intelligence,
possessing a disposition that is in most ways wolfish. One is even reminded of Plautus’s conceit *homo homini lupus*, or man is a wolf to man.

The comparison of men to wolves is apt given that the structure and habits of Glanton’s gang mirrors that of a wolf pack, constantly clashing for dominance in the ranks. After repeatedly being threatened and dogged, black Jackson beheads white Jackson with a single stroke of a bowie knife, restoring a crude form of order to the group (107). It is significant that just before this murder, the narration describes white Jackson as “circumscribed about by his companions and by the cries of wolves and providence of night,” suggesting an equality between Glanton’s men and the wolves that follow them (106). In another instance, four members of the gang, the Kid among them, are elected to execute the wounded, thus pruning away those who are no longer able to fulfill their duties to the pack (205-206). Furthermore, while camping in an old presidio, the men instantly recognize the call of a lone wolf: “In a night so beclamored with the jackal-yapping of coyotes and the cries of owls the howl of that old dog wolf was the one sound they knew to issue from its right form, a solitary lobo, perhaps gray at the muzzle, hung like a marionette from the moon with his long mouth gibbering” (117). They identify with the wolf’s cry and, perhaps, even his circumstances, knowing that without their position in the gang there is only lonely wandering.

Capable of equal savagery, the men of the *Pequod* find themselves compared to creatures of voracious appetites: sharks. After killing his whale, Stubb demands that Fleece, the cook, prepare him a meal of the whale’s fat. This places him squarely in the company of the sharks who, just moments earlier, were tearing away at the side of the whale’s carcass: “Mingling their mumblings with [Stubb’s] own mastications, thousands on thousands of sharks, swarming round the dead leviathan, smackingly feasted on its fatness” (236). The parallel between man and beast
is undeniable, and Fleece uses this likeness to preach to the crew and sharks alike. After describing the shark’s nature as ferocious, Fleece says: “I don’t blame ye so much for; dat is natur, and can’t be helped; but to gobern dat wicked natur, dat is de pint […] for all angel is not’ing more dan de shark well goberned” (238). Here, Fleece has touched upon the moral navigation that Winters finds at the core of Moby-Dick, which requires self-discipline and self-denial in the face of disorder. Like the shark, man possesses a bottomless stomach and insatiable appetite for his kill, so Fleece concedes that “[N]o use a-preachin’ to such dam g’uttons as you call ‘em, till dare bellies is full, and dare bellies is bottomless…” (238). Melville’s comparison encapsulates his philosophy of a wild and wicked mankind, an attitude shared by McCarthy in his own metaphor of men as wolves.

As Glanton’s men move among the dead collecting scalps in the aftermath of the Gileños massacre, the author gives us a stark image in the figure of a dying Indian warrior: “Blood bubbled from the man’s chest and he turned his lost eyes upward, already glazed, the capillaries breaking up. In those dark pools there sat each a small and perfect sun” (159). The sun’s reflection in the blood finds a correlative in Moby-Dick when Stubb kills the whale; Ishmael describes how the “slanting sun playing upon this crimson pond in the sea, sent back its reflection into every face, so that they glowed to each other like red men” (232). The term “red men” is not coincidental; here, Melville aims to compare the brutality of the whalers to the purported savagery of “red men” or American Indians. McCarthy deftly reconstructs this moment in his novel to echo Melville’s sentiment, showing how Glanton and his men are no more civilized than the Comanche and Apache war parties that prowl the desert. Moreover, the businesses that occupy both novels are equally appalling and violent.
In her dissertation *A String in the Maze: The Mythos of Cormac McCarthy*, Elizabeth Andersen calls the bounty hunting of *Blood Meridian* “the ultimate betrayal of one’s fellow man,” giving what appear to be unthinking acts of murder and privateering profound significance (13). Donoghue would disagree; he sees the novel’s refusal to comment on its extreme violence as both a stylistic strength as well as the author’s unabashed disavowal of morals. He writes, “The incidents in McCarthy’s novel are not discriminated, adjuncted for significance, or pointed toward a climax, a disclosure, or a resolution” (403). In short, Donoghue deems the acts of violence, scalp hunting in particular, as being liberated from ethical or moral reasoning. Yet Andersen sees what Donoghue cannot: that McCarthy’s cold, Old Testament-like style of recording events sans interpretation hardly disqualifies moral considerations; *Blood Meridian* lacks only the interpretive annotations and asides of *Moby-Dick*’s narrator Ishmael, not its clear moral order. As critic Kenneth Lincoln points out that “the novelist’s role is to chronicle, not to correct,” McCarthy attempts to neither purge history of its sins nor eradicate its significance (2).

In fact, many of McCarthy’s readers initially recoil from how vivid *Blood Meridian*’s violence is. Bloom, an avowed admirer of McCarthy, explains that even he could not finish the novel at first; “I will begin by confessing,” he writes, “that my first two attempts to read through *Blood Meridian* failed, because I flinched from the overwhelming carnage that McCarthy portrays” (255). Likewise, the first printing of *Moby-Dick* was met with similar resistance, although Melville’s critics objected to more than simply his depiction of violence. For example, in a review of *Moby-Dick* which appeared in an 1851 issue of the *Independent*, the reviewer (who enigmatically goes simply by “H.”) states that he cannot, in good conscience, recommend this or any of Melville’s works due to his own moral reservations when he writes, “[T]here is a primitive formation of profanity and indecency that is ever and anon shooting up through all the
strata of [Melville’s] writings” (605). Another review circulated that same year bemoans the tremendous amount of information Melville has packed into *Moby-Dick*, explaining how even “the finest writing will not prevent [the book] from being tiresome” (“Too Much for Our Money” 613). Yet, every bit of the novel is vital to its meaning, especially its graphic depictions of the violent whaling business. Matthiessen asserts that the story of whaling is indispensable due to its role as an anchor for Melville’s often-implausible narrative; he writes, “It prevents the drama from gliding off into a world to which [readers] feel no normal tie whatsoever” (416). The scalp hunting of *Blood Meridian* acts in this same manner, fastening McCarthy’s fantastic epic to historical truths. As countless critics and scholars have pointed out, McCarthy based much of his novel on the facts found in Samuel Chamberlain’s autobiographical *My Confession*, which “provides McCarthy with his core Glanton tales and the historical basis for his essential character, Judge Holden” (Sepich 1). Without this antecedent, *Blood Meridian*’s narrative could have easily been written off as far-fetched and its facts questionable.

If an anchor plunges to the seabed and secures the ship against the current’s drift, it also announces the depth of the waters. The whaling industry, with which *Moby-Dick* moors its meaning, symbolizes man’s hubristic inclinations. While analyzing the “latent energies” in Melville’s words, Matthiessen points out how whaling represents “a fundamental activity of man in his struggle to subdue nature,” which is a self-evidently impossible feat (423). This very same line of reasoning leads Winters to contend that Ahab’s mission to destroy the White Whale, a leviathan unique for its symbolic magnitude, is sacrilege: “[Ahab’s] monomaniac vengeance; in the major the will to destroy the spirit of evil itself, [is] an intention blasphemous because beyond human powers and infringing upon the purposes of God” (211). Therefore, the hunt for whales is an ill-fated effort to master and assert man’s dominance over a terrain that, in every
way, dwarfs his prowess: the sea. Recognizing this symbolic gesture, McCarthy takes Melville’s meaning one step further and uses scalp hunting to represent man’s attempt to dominate not only nature but mankind. This point leads us back to Andersen’s analysis of bounty hunting, which she further determines is “the means of self-determination, the one certain way by which man can collaborate with destiny and shape his own fate” (13). Once again, we are confronted by *Blood Meridian*’s dilemma: discovering one’s meaning in the wide wilderness of the world and unraveling the cords of doom that, like Melville’s whale-line, force “mortals to realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life” (*Moby-Dick* 229).

In this search for a means of salvation and escape, the Kid discovers that the world has many claimants to redemption, most of them false. Not long after his initial meeting with Toadvine, the Kid finds himself again on a lonely road, which eventually leads to Captain White, a former soldier who plans to conquer and civilize Mexico. Prior to meeting White, the Kid bathes in a river before being discovered by one of the captain’s men. While in the water, the Kid is described as “some wholly wretched baptismal candidate,” inaugurating his symbolic conversion into White’s military throng (27). White’s recruiter even speaks in a manner evocative of a religious convert, describing how White changed his life: “If I’d not run up on Captain White I don’t know where I’d be this day. I was a sorrier sight even than what you are and he come along and raised me up like Lazarus. Set my feet in the path of righteousness. I’d done took to drinkin and whorin till hell wouldn’t have me. He seen somethin in me worth savin and I see it in you” (30). By calling himself Lazarus, the recruiter places White in the role of Christ who, by Biblical accounts, raised Lazarus from the dead.

White’s expositions of his plans for riding into Mexico amount to his perverted Sermon on the Mount; his message advocates crushing the meek and conquering one’s enemies rather
than turning the other cheek. “What we are dealing with,” says White, “is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there’s no God in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves” (34). His remarks culminate in this maxim: “And do you know what happens with people who cannot govern themselves? That’s right! Others come in to govern for them” (34). In effect, White seeks to lead the charge for saving Mexico from itself, installing himself as a variation on Christ-the-Redeemer. Yet, as we learn later from an old Mexican, no amount of bloodshed can redeem the land: “This country is give much blood. This Mexico,” he explains. “This is a thirsty country. The blood of a thousand Christs. Nothing” (102). A great host of Captain Whites gallivanting into this war-torn wasteland will have no effect, rendering White a failed savior.

In fact, we are shown that far from being Christ, White is little better than a John the Baptist howling fruitless prophecies in the wilderness. In a scene that bears all the swiftness and absolute destruction of Moby Dick’s final stand against the Pequod, White’s gang is butchered by a horde of Comanche warriors in Blood Meridian’s fourth chapter, leaving behind only the Kid as sole survivor of the gory and delirious mayhem. Ishmael’s description of death as “a speechlessly quick chaotic bundling of a man into Eternity” aptly applies to McCarthy’s single paragraph-long account of White’s defeat: the phalanx of arrows cutting through the company, the frenzy of lances drenched in blood, the corpses sodomized by the savages (Moby-Dick 45; Blood Meridian 53-54). When the Kid is apprehended by Mexican authorities some scenes later, he is shown White’s decapitated head preserved in a mescaline jar, a fate that resembles Salome’s request for John the Baptist’s head. Moreover, White’s decapitation is foreshadowed earlier in the novel when the Kid comes across an abandoned church, which contains a statue of
the Virgin Mary holding a headless baby Jesus (27). Significantly, when White’s head is brought before him, the Kid denies ever knowing the captain saying, “He aint no kin to me,” and, thus, imitates Peter’s denial of Christ before the crucifixion (70). For all of his sermonizing and zealous designs to commandeer Mexico’s rule, White fails to successfully embody salvation, and the Kid, like Ishmael in the quiet “Epilogue” of *Moby-Dick*, is left an orphan and prone to wander.

However, his solitary wanderings only last so long; his imprisonment in Chihuahua and reunion with Toadvine results in his enlistment in Glanton’s gang, first described as “a pack of viciouslooking [sic] humans mounted on unshod indian ponies riding half drunk through the streets, bearded, barbarous, clad in the skins of animals stitched up with thews and armed with weapons of every description…” and Judge Holden “[f]oremost among them” (78-79). The sight of Glanton’s men echoes the vision of Comanche warriors as they bore down on White’s troops: “A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners…,” forecasting McCarthy’s eventual point that Glanton’s men are no more civilized than their barbaric counterparts (52).

Glanton commands a diverse group of men; among the two dozen or so mercenaries are two men named John Jackson (one black, the other white), a Welsh fugitive called Bathcat, two unnamed Delaware Indians, Tobin the ex-priest, Judge Holden, a Tennessean named Webster, and John McGill the lone Mexican. This diversity of races is reminiscent of Ahab’s crew on the *Pequod*, which includes New Englanders Starbuck, Stubb, and Flask; Queequeg the South Seas cannibal; Tashtego the Gay Head Indian; the African Dagoo; and the Persian Fedellah.

Matthiessen reveals how this range of cultures aboard one ship transforms the *Pequod* into a
representation of America, making Ahab’s tragedy a warning to the country; he says, “Melville created […] a fearful symbol of the self-enclosed individualism that, carried to its furthest extreme, brings disaster upon itself and upon the group of which it is part” (459). Even as the whaling industry contains metaphoric underpinnings, Melville’s use of diversity aims at a even more profound meaning; expounding on his theory of moral navigation in *Moby-Dick*, Winters asserts that the crewmen “represent various levels of normal human attitudes toward physical and spiritual danger, the highest being that of Starbuck, the first mate, who represents the critical intelligence” (208). In general, each character has been infused with a symbolic significance of man’s numerous responses to the challenge of mastering his dark, instinctive nature.

This explication is also true of Glanton’s men, who either acquiesce in or reject outright Holden’s notion that war is the ultimate game for stakes. Serving as Holden’s antithesis, Tobin provides the Kid with a philosophical alternative that alters our protagonist’s course over the final half of the novel. Confronted by the reality of a failed-Christ figure, inducted into a band of wolfish scalp hunters, and pledged in blood to Glanton’s mercenary campaign, the Kid’s crossing toward salvation will require him to choose a moral position and resist the brutal elements of nature and native alike.
At its core, *Blood Meridian* is a charting of opposing forces and converse conditions—
darkness and light, unthinking brutality and principled judgment, pandemonium and silence—
and, at all times upon this plane, the Kid acts as its origin, figuratively graphing moral
coordinates upon quadrants and axes that extend into ethical extremes. McCarthy implies this
aspect of the novel in a staggering image of daybreak: “[T]he 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” (*Blood Meridian* 86). This line unites the rival spheres, establishing a middle
ground—a neutrality, if you will—at their focus. As the novel’s subtitle—*The Evening of
Redness in the West*—suggests, the characters move not towards dawn and its symbolic rebirth
but towards the darkening west and its suggestions of death and departure. Throughout this slow
pilgrimage into shadow, the narrative dynamic hangs between the moral antipodes of Judge
Holden, chief minister of war, and the lapsed priest Tobin, who advocates spiritual resistance
through a willful ignorance of the judge’s manufactured truths.

It is only after he witnesses countless onslaughts and becomes the elected executioner of
his comrade Shelby that the Kid recognizes this contraposition of forces embodied by Tobin and
Holden as shown in this hallucinatory passage: “[H]e rode slumped and tottering and soon his
legs and arms were dangling and he jostled in his sleep like a mounted marionette. He woke to
find the expriest alongside him. He slept again. When he woke next it was the judge was there”
(219). Emblematically, the Kid has awakened to the reality of his situation. His characterization
as a marionette even has a double significance: first, it aligns him with the image of the lone wolf
earlier in the novel—described as “hung like a marionette from the moon with his long mouth
gibbering”—further illustrating McCarthy’s comparison of men to wolves and anticipating the lonely wanderings that await the Kid in the final chapters of the novel (117). Second, it suggests that the Kid is symbolically and morally a puppet and, as such, is susceptible to manipulation by an adept puppet master—a position that Holden vies for at all times.

Upon first glance, Judge Holden emerges as heir to Melville’s manic Ahab: formidable, terrifying, and dramatic. Revealing their shared symbolic roles in these narratives, Jarrett explains that “[w]ith a moral universe shrunk to reflect merely the will’s desire for absolute sovereignty over the external (whether man or nature), the judge is spokesman for as extreme and paranoid an individualism as Melville’s Ahab” (79). Endowed with Promethean ambition, both characters emerge from stories and legends as mythic personas. Just as Ishmael is told that the one-legged captain is “a great, un-godly, god-like man” who has “been in colleges, as well as ’mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; [and] fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales,” Tobin characterizes Holden as equally multitalented: “God the man is a dancer […] He’s the greatest fiddler I ever heard and that’s an end on it. The greatest. He can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer. He’s been all over the world” (Moby-Dick 78; Blood Meridian 123). Quintessential polymaths both, these men are able to command their surroundings and comrades. They even assume a quasi-clergyman role in parallel ritual scenes in which crew and company pledge themselves to the pursuit and execution of their darker purposes.

Delivered between binnacle and mainmast, Ahab’s fantastic speeches of the “Quarter-Deck” chapter culminate in a crude communion ceremony. As the men pass the flagon brimming with rum, Ahab ominously commands: “Drink and pass[…] The crew alone now drink. Round with it, round! Short draughts—long swallows, men; ’tis hot as Satan’s hoof” (141). He follows
this motion by demanding that his mates and harpooners cross lances and irons, creating what Ishmael calls Ahab’s “Leyden jar of his own magnetic life” (141). Judge Holden combines the two segments of Ahab’s rites when he demands that every man urinate into his explosive confection of sulphur, nitre, and coal as he mixes it by hand (132). Notice how McCarthy is unquestionably evoking the fallen angels of Paradise Lost, who in the heat of their battle with Heaven invent gunpowder: “Sulphurous and Nitrous Foame/ They found, they mingl’d, and with suttle Art,/ Concocted and adjusted they reduc’d/ To blackest grain […] part incentive reed/
Provide, pernicious with one touch to fire” (6:512-520). This very tableau serves as both a dark parody of and homage to Ahab’s ritual: Holden churning the conductive material of his own Leyden jar while surrounded by his men’s “lances.” William Spencer characterizes this scene as a “mock-communion” that symbolizes “man’s embracement of evil” while Sepich compares it to Goethe, saying “Holden’s gift of gunpowder has overtones of Mephistopheles’s gift to Faust” (102, 121). By means of ersatz sacraments, Ahab and Holden yoke their followers’ fates to a plunging millstone all while actively precipitating the collapse of moral order.

Yet to align Holden with Ahab would ultimately obscure his rightful purpose in the proceedings of Blood Meridian, characterizing him as an antihero of the novel rather than its principal antagonist. As Matthiessen and others have noted, Moby-Dick is Ahab’s tragedy in which he is “torment[ed] at the demonic element in the unseen,” thereby depicting him as a flawed and, thus, essentially human antihero (406). Winters even goes so far as to suggest that Ahab is Moby-Dick’s failed Jonah who is “damned” by his hubris (207). Holden, on the other hand, is only ambiguously human; just as Moby-Dick’s Stubb wonders aloud, “Doesn’t the devil live forever [?]” we find Holden at the end of Blood Meridian dancing while the narration reads, “He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die” (260; 335).
Hardly the hero in any capacity, Holden is more accurately aligned with Melville’s “chief symbol and spirit of evil”: the White Whale (Winters 201). It is only when Holden is established as the embodiment of evil and deception that the Kid begins to be cemented as the novel’s neutral everyman.

By all appearances, Holden is Melville’s renowned whale rendered bipedal and terrestrial, his most striking qualities being his enormous size and pallor: “like the moon so pale he was and not a hair to be seen anywhere upon that vast corpus” (167). As a direct nod to his source, Holden even becomes whale-like (albeit briefly) complete with water spout: “[W]hen he had submerged himself to the eyes he looked about with considerable pleasure, the eyes slightly crinkled, as if he were smiling under the water like some pale and bloated manatee surfaced in a bog while behind his small and close-set ear the wedged cigar smoked gently just above the waterline” (167-168). Here, McCarthy evokes Ishmael’s first sighting of Moby Dick: “He saw the vast, involved wrinkles of the slightly projecting head beyond. Before it […] went the glistening white shadow from his broad, milky forehead” (408).

As with the whale’s, the judge’s unusual whiteness complicates his designation as a malevolent force, the hue typically signifying purity and even holiness. Of course, Melville reveals the whale’s color to be deceptive, claiming that “for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honorable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of panic to the soul than the redness which affrights in blood” (Moby-Dick 160). Extended to Blood Meridian, McCarthy uses this very same concept to show that however horrific and violent the bloody deeds of the scalp hunters may be they pale in comparison to Holden. Furthermore, in this same “Whiteness of the Whale” chapter Melville unequivocally provides McCarthy with the inspiration for Holden when he
describes how “in many climes, whiteness typifies the majesty of Justice in the ermine of the Judge” (159). It is here that McCarthy’s Holden finds his true genesis regardless of Sepich’s claim that his historical precedent can be found in Chamberlain’s My Confessions; the autobiographical account merely serves an anchor for Holden’s soaring and symbolic diabolism in Blood Meridian (Notes on Blood Meridian 1). To be concise, the fact that his role in Blood Meridian is primarily allegorical means Holden derives greater significance from his association to Moby-Dick than his basis in reality.

In a deft maneuver, McCarthy avoids portraying Holden as a two-dimensional Vice in some tepid morality play—his judge is fascinating, even seductive at times. Arnold catalogs Holden’s complexities—“known to all men, a magician, a liar, a trickster […] a child molester and murderer, drawn to the very innocence he needs to destroy”—eventually pointing out that McCarthy endows him with a twisted sense of humor (“Naming” 62). Had Holden been irredeemably evil, he would have lost his potency. Like the White Whale, of whose vastness Ishmael says, “No wonder there had been some among the hunters who namelessly transported and allured by all this serenity,” Holden veils his religion of war in impossible riddles and sly remarks that render him fascinating (Moby-Dick 409). He is able to get away with such nihilistic adages as “War endures. […] War was always here ” only after he intimidates the hunters with his gargantuan intellect (248). And if the judge’s whiteness and promotion of war everlasting do not establish him as a force of evil analogous to Melville’s whale, consider the inscription of Holden’s rifle that reads, “Et In Arcadia Ego,” which aligns him with Death itself (125).

Like Glanton’s gang, readers often find themselves awestruck and dumbfounded by Holden’s frequent lectures; at once, his suppositions are a Cretan Labyrinth, and Holden, himself, is Minos’s Minotaur lurking around its every corner. In one such scene of note, Holden
expounds on the language of God, saying, “He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things” (116). Entranced by this lofty logic and ignorant of philosophical alternatives, those in attendance can’t help but agree; the narration reads, “The squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his speculations” (116). However, the judge reveals it all to be a ruse and “laugh[s] at them for fools,” having proved that they are no match for his rhetoric (116). Nowhere in *Blood Meridian* is there a more accurate depiction of those critics and scholars who have taken Holden at his word and designated him the thematic spokesman of the novel; here, McCarthy has inadvertently distilled the scholarship of Bell and crew, who, sensing solidarity with a fellow scholar that can quote “Coke and Blackstone, Anaximander, [and] Thales,” embrace Holden as one of their ilk (*Blood Meridian* 239).

Bereft of a logline and deprived of a quadrant, these critics, like Ahab, proceed heedless of reference. Rejecting the notion of salvation in *Blood Meridian*, Shaviro must lean on Holden’s philosophy for support, quoting one of his proverbs at length: he writes, “There is finally no mystery, not even in death; if we remain puzzled as to who we are, whence we have come, and whither we are bound, this is only because, the judge explains, ‘[a]s the dance contains complete within itself its own arrangement and history and finale there is no necessity that the dancers contain these things within themselves as well’” (329). Before he can strike out on a reading of this novel as categorically naturalistic, Barcley Owens must first and foremost establish Holden as “ideological narrator” (48). Both writers have happened upon an important aspect of *Blood Meridian*—Holden as a spokesman—but they instantly resign themselves to a nihilistic reading of the novel, which resists pursuing the judge’s symbolic significance any further. How like a negligent harpooner who waifs a dead whale, thereby signifying his possession of it, only to
abandon the collecting of it after additional game has been chased. To engage the possibility of Holden’s emblematic evil would lead them to the very same conclusion Spencer arrives at in his essay “Evil Incarnate in Blood Meridian; Cormac McCarthy’s Seductive Judge”: that McCarthy purposefully uses Holden to seduce readers in order to explore “the particular appeal that evil holds for the human race,” a conclusion Shaviro and Owens would chaff at for it would unravel their scholarship at the seams (100). Readers are meant to be fascinated by the judge in spite of his unpardonable atrocities just as they are meant to wonder at the majesty and power of the White Whale. For therein lies the basis for McCarthy’s unmistakable evocation of Moby Dick’s whiteness throughout his novel and the grounds for Holden’s beguiling orations.

Just as Moby Dick is equated with the impulsive and violent sea in which he swims, Holden is associated with the brutal, obliterating desert. One of his foremost undertakings in the novel is expunging existence from memory. He keeps on his person a notebook in which he records various artifacts or notes about his journey. In one such scene, he sketches a three centuries-old footpiece from a suit of armor found in the ancient dwellings of a long-extinct culture, noting its “profile and perspective, citing the dimensions in his neat script, making marginal notes” (140). Once he has detailed these items, he crushes the object and pitches it into the fire. He explains that it is “his intention to expunge [those items] from the memory of man,” which he expands on later by stating, “Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent” (140, 199). Essentially, Holden is an agent of erosion with regard to meaning and memory. In this respect, he is like the desert, which is always overwhelming the architecture and, consequently, civilization of mankind. In one scene, the Kid notes how nature is slowly reclaiming a series of dwellings: “Grass and prickly pear grew on the roofs and goats walked about on them” (30). Later, this is made even more apparent when the ruthless landscape
erases the evidence of the scalp hunters’ crimes: “The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell to any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died” (174). Here, one is reminded of Melville’s sea, which reacts to violence with a similar indifference; after Moby Dick sinks the Pequod, Ishmael writes how “the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago,” suggesting that without his testimony as a witness to the disaster the ship and its crew would have been expunged from memory (427).

It is essential to understand that Holden’s task is not without its reasons. By meticulously recording the items in his notebook, he is both naming and, therefore, claiming pieces of existence as his own. In essence, this is his Manifest Destiny, and Donoghue calls him “a scholar of sorts—a linguist, Darwinian note-taker, amateur biologist, reader of sign, a Nietzschean before he could have read Nietzsche, and so psychologically opaque that he seems a force of nature” (411). Like a true scientist, Holden explains, “Only nature can enslave man […] and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth” (198). The “Cetology” chapter of Moby-Dick attempts a similar feat with Ishmael classifying and detailing species of whales and other marine life. In his essay “Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy’s Moral Parables,” Arnold asserts that McCarthy uses the motif of naming in his novels to signify possession; hence, in Blood Meridian, Holden dominates his surroundings and company alike by naming them and becoming their “keeper or overlord” (50; 198). This is the conceit of Biblical Adam extended beyond its original purpose: God tells man, “[F]ill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground”; Holden, of course, groups man with the other common beasts that move on the ground (Gen. 1:28). It is significant
therefore that Holden is the only one in the novel who gives the Kid a name, calling him “Young Blasarius,” which jokingly refers to the Kid’s participation in the Nacogdoches hotel fire (94). Not only does Holden advocate merely the westward expansion and capture of the land and its indigenous peoples but the subjugation of all mankind to his will.

As an advocate of silence, Tobin is undoubtedly at odds with the verbose judge, and as a philosophical antithesis to Holden’s nihilism, the ex-priest represents a transcendent morality and a wary mode of religion. He finds a correlative in Moby-Dick as a reverse of Father Mapple, a connection that elucidates his proper role in the chaotic proceedings of Glanton’s campaign. Ishmael tells readers how “[Mapple] had been a sailor and a harpooner in his youth, but for many years past had dedicated his life to the ministry,” which in terms of Melville’s land-sea symbolism denotes a conversion from the uncertain life at sea to one of safety (46). In Blood Meridian, however, Tobin progresses in the opposite direction, abandoning the life of security in the church for the ethical landlessness of the West and thereafter becoming a hunter, rather than a proverbial fisher, of men. In Moby-Dick, Ishmael quips, “Long exile from Christendom and civilization inevitably restores a man to that condition in which God placed him, i.e. what is called savagery” (222). The godless wilds of the American West, likewise, reduce men to their primal states of unfeeling impulse; McCarthy says of the desert: “[N]ot 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,” placing this underlying conflict of the novel in the realm of the abstract and, in particular, the moral (4-5). Tobin serves as religion’s residual traces transported into the heathen wilderness.

Described as “the frockless one,” Tobin has abandoned the strictures of priesthood yet has not rejected his faith outright for he is the one who tells the Kid that the voice of God is
everywhere at all times: “God speaks in the least of creatures. [...] No man is give leave of that voice” (122, 124). This line reiterates Reverend Green’s notion that “[Jesus] said I will folle ye always even unto the end of the road,” suggesting that man is never without spiritual guidance or company (6). This clearly contradicts Holden’s insistence that “[t]he mystery is that there is no mystery,” which rules out the existence of divine phenomena (252). Contrary to critical claims of McCarthy’s nonpolitical style and Blood Meridian’s rampant nihilism, the fact remains that in order to understand this author and his novel one much understand his frequent employment of overtly religious themes, which are represented here in the figure of an erstwhile clergyman. Despite his resignation from organized religion and whatever intimations of spiritual doubts that signifies, Tobin expresses as orthodox a faith as any Father Mapple would, eventually using that faith as a weapon in his final stand-off with the judge, where he is described as “stumbling among the bones and holding aloft a cross he’d fashioned out of the shins of rams and he’d lashed them together with strips of hide and he was holding the thing before him like some mad dowser in the bleak of desert and calling out in a tongue both alien and extinct,” which readers may assume are Latin rites (289-290). By wielding this religious symbol, Tobin has emblematically taken up his faith as if it were arms against his enemy.

That Tobin derives from Father Mapple’s example is crucial to understanding his role in Blood Meridian, which is, by all accounts, indispensible to the Kid’s moral development. Mapple provides Moby-Dick with one of its initial omens regarding the White Whale, the memorials in his chapel reminding Ishmael that man instinctively senses the inherent evil of death which deprives him of any succor: “[H]ow it is,” he thinks, “that we still refuse to be comforted for those who we nevertheless maintain are dwelling in unspeakable bliss” (45). Equating Jonah’s being swallowed up with a soul’s plunge into the abyss, Mapple identifies the
Biblical whale as what Winters terms “the symbol of hell and death,” and Jonah’s fate foreshadows that of Captain Ahab (206). Thus, D.H. Lawrence’s claim that Moby Dick is not only “warm-blooded and lovable” but also the “last phallic being of the white man” reads like unrefined impressionism—there is no question that Melville clearly associates the symbol of the whale and its “ribs and terrors” and “opening maw of hell” with the ancient malignity of death (*Studies* 153, 169; *Moby-Dick* 48). This ability to identify evil stems from Mapple’s, and by extension Melville’s, knowledge of Christian doctrine, particularly Calvinism; Matthiessen details the extent to which Melville had been absorbed by “metaphysical speculation […] to express the human tragedy involved in the doctrine of ‘innate depravity’ that he had inherited from his Presbyterian youth” (243). Though he wasn’t by any means an affirmed Christian, Melville yet could not purge himself of his upbringing and instruction in the church as evidenced by his writings; Natalia Wright reveals how the novelist drew upon “Scriptual tradition […] far more when he wrote than others of much greater orthodoxy” (5). Like ex-priest Tobin, Melville had stripped off the vestments of organized religion, but was not given leave of the implications of that Faith. Arguably, Mapple speaks on behalf of his author and gives voice to those sentiments he could not rid himself of.

Arnold claims Tobin performs this very same function in *Blood Meridian*, saying, “Some readers assume the judge speaks for McCarthy himself, but Tobin, I think, comes much closer (or, at least, presents the other side of the dialectic)” (“Naming” 63). Here, Arnold cites that moment when Holden claims the world contains no mystery and Tobin responds with “As if he were no mystery himself, the bloody old hoodwinker,” which demonstrates that Tobin senses something amiss about the judge (*Blood Meridian* 252). Throughout the course of the novel, Tobin progresses towards an outright distrust of Holden; at first, he isn’t sure what to make of
the towering, pale enigma, telling the Kid, “I gave him my best study, the judge. Then and now. He appeared to be a lunatic and then not” (127). At one point, Tobin actually expresses a kind of admiration for Holden’s grandeur, saying, “Give the devil his due” (125). In this, he inadvertently echoes William Hazlitt’s misguided praise for Milton’s Satan: “[Milton] relied on the justice of his cause, and did not scruple to give the devil his due” (65). However, Tobin later encourages the Kid to shoot Holden, warning him that it will be his only chance to do so: “God’s blood, do you think you’ll best him any other way? Do it, lad. Do it for the love of God. Do it or I swear your life is forfeit” (285). Such drastic stakes can only mean that the contention between Tobin, Holden, and the Kid is the difference between salvation and damnation, the Kid’s murder of the judge analogous to a spiritual crusade because, as Tobin affirms, he’s doing it for God’s sake. One should note that the only other figure in the novel that rightly identifies Holden is Reverend Green, another religious figure, who tells his congregation, “This is him. The devil. Here he stands” (7).

In a moment of scholarly bravado, Bell sums up McCarthy’s lack of beliefs and principles (at least within his novels) in this way: “This is McCarthy’s metaphysic: none, in effect; no first principles, no foundational truth” (32). Disregard Tobin’s major role as spiritual advisor in the novel, and this sweeping statement gains traction. Yet, we cannot afford to have such a blind spot in our comprehension of Blood Meridian. As in Melville, it takes characters associated with Christian doctrine, Tobin and Green, to detect evil for it is only by their beliefs that they can discern good and evil. Natural law and its subsequent disorder, both of which Holden advocates, bestow no capacity for moral discernment on McCarthy’s characters; in light of such chaos, the heart finds no reference or absolute by which to navigate and, as Holden states, “War is god” (249). Bell recognizes this possibility while defending his nihilistic reading
of the novel saying, “[M]oral considerations seem not to affect outcomes; action and event seem determined wholly by capricious and incomprehensible facts” (32). As stated earlier, McCarthy is not a Christian author, and his writings cannot be reduced to religious fables buttressed by didactic lessons. However, Christian beliefs provide much of their bulwark; Arnold recognizes this as a prominent feature in all of McCarthy’s novels explaining, “Expressed largely in Christian terminology—sin, guilt, grace, and redemption—in the so-called southern novels […], these concerns have taken on a broader, more metaphysical quality in the later works, those set in the American Southwest and Mexico (Blood Meridian and beyond)” (“McCarthy and the Sacred” 215). Andersen echoes Arnold’s point, going so far as to state that McCarthy is overtly religious in Blood Meridian as he “presents the kid as an analogue of Christ and an Everyman figure whose progress in the novel represents every man’s progress through life” (199). Whether or not McCarthy means, in fact, to invoke Christ is immaterial; what is essential, though, to a reading of Blood Meridian as a moral parable is an understanding that it hinges upon the Christian sentiments that Tobin symbolizes and espouses in the narrative. Thus, readers find faith and secular wisdom often at odds.

Whereas Holden affirms the axiom that knowledge is power, Tobin rejects such a notion when he says, “Oh it may be the Lord’s way of showin how little store he sets by the learned. Whatever could it mean to one who knows all?” (123). Readers hear an echo of T.S. Eliot’s poem “Gerontion” in which the speaker questions the ultimate value of wisdom when he asks, “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” (line 33). Of Eliot’s line, author and critic Russell Kirk writes that “If faith is lost, then all is lost; but those who have eaten of the tree of knowledge cannot forget that they have learned the emptiness of the universe. Knowledge, not ignorance, is Gerontion’s undoing” (55). This is precisely McCarthy’s point: the question isn’t
whether or not knowledge presents man with a course towards salvation; Tobin wonders if
knowledge has anything to do with salvation at all. The insinuation here is that the more worldly
wisdom a man acquires, the farther he drifts away from God and towards Holden’s nihilism
because he has beheld that darkness of existence Kirk refers to.

Tobin states, “[God has] an uncommon love for the common man and godly wisdom
resides in the least of things,” arguing that mankind possesses an instinctive knowledge of good
and evil much like “the instinct of the knowledge of the demonism in the world” Ishmael finds
“even in a dumb brute” (123-124; 164). So not only does worldly knowledge have the potential
to draw man away from his faith in a divinity, it also clouds his inherent ability to carry out
moral considerations. This is exactly where Holden’s gift for obscurantism comes into play—he
willfully, not to mention successfully, confuses issues of redemption and man’s nature with lofty
suppositions in order to suppress objections to his doctrine of war and the will’s power to
dominate. He clearly demonstrates this tendency in the moments following his exposition on the
artifice of moral law: “The judge searched out the circle for disputants. But what says the priest?
he said” (250). Holden senses Tobin’s resistance, so he challenges him in front of the others as a
means of neutralizing his defiance. Significantly, Tobin merely replies, “The priest does not say”
(250).

At first, this brief response causes Tobin to appear overwhelmed, even lacking the
courage to challenge the judge on matters moral or otherwise. Yet, Tobin is only acting in
accordance with the counsel he later gives to the Kid. At that final shootout at Carrizo Creek,
while Holden begins cataloging the Kid’s crimes, citing jurisprudence and other laws pertaining
to his conviction, Tobin tells the Kid, “Dont listen […] Stop your ears” (293). Against Holden’s
rhetoric and intelligence, there is no triumph, so their only option is to remain silent; the Kid’s
truest defense is obstinate ignorance of Holden’s words and contrived facts. This hearkens back to Tobin’s point about godly wisdom in the least of creatures, which he qualifies by saying, “[I]t may well be that the voice of the Almighty speaks most profoundly in such beings as lives in silence themselves” (124). In other words, quietness is next to Godliness, and the Kid cannot be destroyed so long as he resists the snares and hidden oaths of Holden’s language.

In the final moments of the novel, we find the Kid, now “the Man,” standing at a bar next to Judge Holden, who, in his usual custom, is attempting to overpower our protagonist with his speculations and conjectures. Whereas Holden expounds at length upon the intricate complexities of history’s dance, the Kid merely rejects these notions with pithy responses like “Even a dumb animal can dance” (331). When Holden designates himself the sole “true dancer” who will withstand the degeneration of the dance, the Kid says, “You aint nothing”—a feat that Bloom calls “heroic” (Blood Meridian 331; Bloom 262). Even Donoghue, who cannot be convinced of morality’s role in Blood Meridian by any means, senses that the nature of the dispute between Holden and the Kid is metaphysical; he writes, “So the antagonism must be reckoned as primordial, one of principles rather than particles: it is a relation of moral archetypes, and in that regard the conflict must have been developing silently all along” (413). Hence, as in the case of Tobin’s terse reply to Holden’s challenge, the Kid’s silence here should not be misconstrued as an indication of his weakness. The Kid acknowledges and accepts the inevitability of his own death but does not resign himself to Holden’s nihilism as a result; his refusal to “[g]ive the devil his due” is his final challenge to the judge’s dogma of war (125).

Expanded beyond the conflict between Holden and his prey, we are reminded of how McCarthy shows us that the world contains no refuge for the meek from the corrupt. After a card player is knifed by his opponent but stays seated, Bathcat asks the barman why the injured man
doesn’t leave, and the barman replies, “[W]here would he go?” (103). The insinuation is that since the man cannot escape violence he accepts it and continues playing his hand. In the final scenes of the novel, the Kid becomes that card player, lacking a hiding place from death and accepting his end. Ahab, too, finds himself playing for grave stakes in his whale chase, having been overhead by Stubb muttering, “Here some one [sic] thrusts these cards into these old hands of mine; swears that I must play them, and no others” (379). Destiny is decided in the shuffling of the deck, and Fate’s demands are revealed in the turning of the card.
As he hangs between life and death, the Kid dreams of the judge, finding himself once again named by his adversary: “[H]e saw his own name which nowhere else he could have ciphered out at all logged into the records as a thing already accomplished, a traveler known in jurisdictions existing only in the claims of certain pensioners or on old dated maps” (310). Here, McCarthy unites the twin threads of mapping and naming, showing that the two are inextricably intertwined. In that the Kid is indebted to the one who can rightly name him, Holden becomes cartographer of conquest and conviction. Interestingly, it is by this very means of naming that man is granted the possibility of salvation and grace. Mapping is fundamental for within it lies McCarthy’s criticism of unrestrained scientific excesses, which symbolize man’s hubristic notion that he has conquered his spiritual wilds, a point that McCarthy no doubt borrows from Melville.

Science, by way of Holden’s method, seeks to eradicate life that exists autonomous of man’s knowing and cataloguing; Holden tells the gang, “[The earth] is my claim […] And yet 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” (199). Again, McCarthy uses the physical terrain as a metaphor for man’s inner geography. In this respect, the scientific attempt to quarter and claim the world according to geographic calculations is just as futile as man’s conquest of the untamed expanses of his heart. Melville’s sea resists the maps and measurements of man’s science; Ishmael waxes lyrical that “though but a moment’s consideration will teach, that however baby man may brag of his science and skill, and however much, in a flattering future, that science and skill may augment; yet for ever and for ever, to the crack of doom, the sea will insult and murder him” (224). In other words, the sea of the unknown within and without will always maintain its dark mysteries. Meanwhile, man’s attempts to master
it, signified by his charts and navigational instruments, have somehow blunted man’s awe and respect for nature or, as Ishmael puts it, “man has lost that sense of the full awfulness of the sea which aboriginally belongs to it” (224). Matthiessen explains that Melville’s fixation on “the brutal energies in nature” aligns him with other scientific minds of his day, yet he “could at no point rest content with the kind of truth that was to be found in science” (407). For Melville, maps are man’s greatest chasing after the wind.

McCarthy approaches this concept from an angle not unlike mapping; he uses clothes as the metaphorical fencing in of the body and an outward sign of man’s alleged control over his instincts. As with mapping, readers are shown that clothing hardly civilizes a man. When the Comanche first approach White’s army, they’re described as wearing the attire of their past victims: “wardrobed out of a fever dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided calvary jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings and a bloodstained weddingveil…” (52). One immediately thinks of Moby Dick who wears the lances and whale lines of former assailants: “and like some flag-staff rising from the painted hull of an argosy, the tall but shattered pole of a recent lance projected from the white whale’s back” (409). The use of military apparel and matrimonial garbs suggests that these foundational institutions of civilization have been routed out of the West. At once, this horde of savages becomes an extension of McCarthy’s brutal landscape symbolism: a violent force indistinguishable from the eroding power of its natural surroundings. Once again proving themselves to be just as vicious as the Indians they hunt, Glanton’s gang continues to rape and pillage the city of Chihuahua despite having bathed and “arrived in good order, shaved and shorn and turned out in their new boots and finery” (168). Thus, clothes are woven atlases that endeavor to record and confine the
Moreover, they present man as whole and collected, a state that Ishmael shrewdly rejects when he remarks, “[W]e are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly need mending” (79). This is contrary to Glanton’s hubristic conviction that he is at all times complete: “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 he’d drive the remorseless sun on to its final endarkenment as if he’d ordered it all ages since, before there were paths anywhere, before there were men or suns to go upon them” (243). McCarthy intends this philosophy to appear inherently misguided by nearly quoting Ahab, who says in the “Quarter Deck” chapter, “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me” (140). The authority Glanton means to appropriate would reduce him to chaos where navigation would be rendered void for lack of roads and men to travel them. He seeks not to navigate the ways of the world but to be rid of them altogether—to forcefully negotiate his liberation from Holden’s labyrinth by striking down the sun. In attempting the impossible, Glanton, McCarthy’s Icarus, dooms himself to that beheading at the Yumas ferry landing. Thus, he is fatally cracked about the head and beyond all mending.

Published some years after Blood Meridian, The Crossing nevertheless expands on McCarthy’s use of maps. In it, the author writes:

The world has no name […] The names of the ceros and the sierras and the deserts exist only on maps. We name them that we do not lose our way. Yet it was because the way was lost to us already that we have made those names. The world cannot be lost. We are the ones. And it is because these names and these
coordinates are our own naming that they cannot save us. That they cannot find
for us the way again. (387)

Such a line could very well have been found in Blood Meridian, its emphasis on naming equated
with a notion of salvation. Here, McCarthy provides readers with a tool for deciphering Holden’s
convoluted logic. As there is no manmade means of redemption—“because these names and
these coordinates are our own naming they cannot save us”—the objective of routing out the
very atoms of existence for proper classification is beyond man’s abilities, and the judge’s
avocation of doing so is his method of deceiving men. The heart’s darkness is the White Whale,
and Fleece tells us, “[B]y Gor, none on you has de right to dat whale; dat whale belong to some
one else” (Moby-Dick 238). Thus, Winters calls Ahab’s hunt for the whale “an intention
blasphemous because beyond human powers and infringing upon the purposes of God”; equally
blasphemous is Holden’s notion of simultaneously mapping and conquering the heart (211).

McCarthy calls man’s heart “alien,” and his hermit says, “[M]an can know his heart, but he don’t
want to. Rightly so. Best not to look in there” (138, 19). This is precisely the Kid’s challenge and
means of salvation: to acknowledge and name his sins while conceding that the limits of his heart
will remain unknowable. Arnold claims that “in McCarthy’s highly moralistic world, sins must
be named and owned before they can be forgiven; and those characters who insist on the
‘nothingness’ of existence, who attempt to remain ‘neutral,’ are those most in need of grace”
(“Naming” 54). The source of the Kid’s failure lies in this point—he cannot find the courage
necessary to break out of his designation as a neutral everyman and fully accept redemption. Put
another way, while the Kid leans away from Holden and towards Tobin, he ultimately flinches in
this oscillation and topples short of spiritual deliverance.
While Tobin provides the Kid with the means to shield himself from Holden, silence alone cannot save the Kid—it is a defense devoid of action, and he must mount an offensive against Holden’s convictions by, of all things, naming. McCarthy’s novel ends with a puzzling image of a man crossing the desert and preparing the way for fences, which Arnold reads as a reiteration of Holden’s role as representative of a darker nature, writing, “Fences will neither hold the judge nor constrain the force he calls to in each of us. But moral choice remains; the judge can still be faced” (“Naming” 65). That moral choices still exist is important for it steers the epilogue away from being some sort of nihilistic affirmation. Indeed, the Kid does not successfully confront Holden, but his failure does not result in the collapse of moral order as Jarrett suggests by characterizing the judge’s final dance as one of “victory” (83). McCarthy’s depiction of the Kid’s failure prefigures those of other men who will traverse this wasteland and run across the judge during those travels; the crossings, both physical and moral, in McCarthy’s works are always without terminus and often solitary.

Just as Ahab and his crew avoid the “friendly and social contact” of gamming with fellow ships, Glanton’s gang flies all such hospitality and travels as a solitary unit; coming across a band of southbound ciboleros, they merely exchange information about their intended destination before moving on (Moby-Dick 196). McCarthy notes how “these parties divided upon that midnight plain, each passing back the way the other had come, pursuing as all travelers must inversions without end upon other men’s journeys,” indicating that travels are somehow circular (121). Melville reveals this to also be true for his seagoing whalers: “Round the world! There is much in that sound to inspire proud feelings; but whereto does all that circumnavigation conduct? Only through numberless perils to the very point whence we started, where those that we left behind secure, were all the time before us” (196). McCarthy and Melville challenge the
notion of man’s progress, both geographical and moral, through a representation of endless excursions. For them, navigating the chaotic elements of the unknown, by sea or by land, inevitably ends where the journey began. Were the earth flat, or “an endless plain” as Ishmael puts it, these forays into the dark heart of humanity would pave the way for progress and civilization, effectively “singling out the thread of order from the tapestry” Holden promotes as the truest means of conquering the world (Moby-Dick 196; Blood Meridian 199).

Yet, these traces of civilization are like outposts in the immense, inhospitable tropics. It is significant that Melville characterizes this portion of man’s soul as an “insular Tahiti” in that Melville had been jailed on that very island after a failed mutiny aboard the Lucy Ann and no doubt witnessed firsthand the American and European impulses to civilize it (225). In spite of the vainness of enlightening his inner darkness, man must nevertheless conduct such journeys in order to understand the nature of evil; Melville writes, “[A]ny way you may look at it, you must needs conclude that the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last. […] And the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself…” (218). While he acknowledges that doing so will run the risk of being sunk by the beast, keep in mind that Melville tells Bulkington, “[B]etter is it to perish in that howling infinite, than be ingloriously dashed upon the lee” (97). Thus, in the like cosmoses of McCarthy and Melville, man’s voyage out is Sisyphean: an endless, insufferable struggle to acknowledge and name the evil in his heart while also leaving that terrain unclaimed and unconquered.
MEANINGFUL WANDERINGS AND THE SYMMETRY OF DEATH

Once we understand the basic ideas of Blood Meridian—the opposition of Holden and Tobin, the correlation between the brutal landscape and man’s inner geography, and the need for recognizing and naming the darkness of the heart—we can follow the pivotal events of its final acts with great facility. The novel’s second half is marked by two significant scenes of wandering, both undertaken by the Kid, that indicate his moral development. After embarking on these journeys, the Kid comes to understand the inevitability and magnitude of death as what Arnold calls a “meaningful transition” (“McCarthy and the Sacred” 216). Anyone attempting to argue that Blood Meridian is a moral parable must finally address these scenes for within them lie the strongest refutations against those critics and scholars who characterize the narrative as observably nihilistic. For example, Shaviro claims that the story is one of “horizontal movements: nomadic wanderings, topographical displacements, variations of weather, skirmishes in the desert” and uses this notion of the world’s endless circumference to conclude that “Blood Meridian is not a salvation narrative; we can be rescued neither by faith nor by works nor by grace” (147, 148). We may confidently reject such a notion once we have charted the pair of wanderings that lead up to the Kid’s death and seen how they only confirm McCarthy’s point about moral navigation—a point rendered void without the recognition of the author’s indebtedness to Melville.

Although punctuated by miraculous events, the Kid’s first lonely wandering ends with his return to Glanton’s gang, he being incapable of acknowledging the moral dilemma that confronts him and its implication of lonesome exile. Defying Donoghue’s designation of McCarthy’s characters as “recently arrived primates,” the Kid is unable to execute his wounded comrade Shelby after he has been selected to do so; he experiences unspoken moral reservations (402). By
the time he finally abandons Shelby, the Kid has lost sight of Glanton’s gang on the horizon and only happens to come across another fellow hunter, Tate, because Tate’s injured horse is unable to keep up with the others. Pursued by Elias’s troops and beset with having to navigate a blinding snowstorm, the Kid commences a brief journey of tremendous spiritual significance. The Kid reveals the gravity of his predicament, saying, “We get turned around we might just run plumb into the Spaniards” and consequently resorts to rudimentary navigation: “We could pull for the high country. As long as we keep goin uphill we’ll know we aint got in a circle” (210). McCarthy is directly acknowledging the circular movements of man’s moral journeys, which he adopted from Melville, showing how the Kid can liberate himself from such ceaseless circumnavigation once he breaks away from the exclusively horizontal road that Donoghue claims the characters are limited to. Moreover, by recognizing his quandary and finally resorting to navigation, the Kid has symbolically comprehended his moral dilemma.

The ascent out of the wilderness ends up depriving the Kid of Tate’s company once they are ambushed by Elias’s scouts. Undeterred, he treks up the mountainside to the top, and readers begin to see traces of spiritual significance in the Kid’s journey as the description reads, “The stars burned with a lidless fixity and they drew nearer in the night until toward dawn he was stumbling among the whinstones of the uttermost ridge to heaven…” (213). Salvation seems to alight upon him when McCarthy describes how “[i]n the predawn light [the Kid] made his way out upon a promontory and there received first of any creature in that country the warmth of the sun’s ascending” (213). At this height, he has a God’s-eye view of the desert below as he sees two armies clash in silent pandemonium. This perspective is meant to suggest that of God’s, and the kid “watch[es] all this pass below him mute and ordered and senseless until the warring horsemen were gone in the sudden rush of dark that fell over the desert” (213). Put another way:
while the events of the world appear chaotic and manically indiscriminate from the ground, they take on a form of order when seen from above man’s limited viewpoint. Metaphorically, the Kid stands upon Bacon’s “vantage ground of truth” where he can “see the errors, and wanderings, and mists, and tempests, in the vale below” (1552-1553).

If the Kid’s ascent does not invoke Moses on Sinai, consider the burning tree he finds in the desert upon his descent: “It was a lone tree burning on the desert. A heraldic tree that the passing storm had left afire” (215). Without a doubt, this is the burning bush of Exodus, its designation as “heraldic” insinuating that it bears a message—some divine meaning. The Kid’s journey to this tree is even characterized as a religious pilgrimage plagued by predatory beasts:

The solitary pilgrim drawn up before it had traveled far to be here and he kneeled in the hot sand and held his numbed hands out while all about in that circle attended companies of lesser auxiliaries routed forth into the inordinate day, small owls that crouched silently and stood from foot to foot and tarantulas and solpugas and vinegarroons and the vicious mygale spiders and beaded lizards with mouths black as a chowdog’s, deadly to man, and the little desert basilisks that jet blood from their eyes and the small sandvipers like seemly gods, silent and the same, in Jeda, in Babylon. (215)

Here we see the meanness in the least of creatures spoken of by the prophetic hermit earlier in the narrative, and they surround our protagonist as he kneels almost as if in supplication before the burning tree. Yet, they do not attack him because the light creates a mystical armistice: “A constellation of ignited eyes that edged the ring of light all bound in a precarious truce before this torch whose brightness had set back the stars in their sockets” (215). Only in miraculous terms can this scene be discussed; Arnold asserts that for all of the violence and bedlam in
McCarthy’s novels there is still the possibility of wondrous moments like this saying, “The world is a wild place in McCarthy’s fiction, and its God is a wild and often savage and mostly unknowable God, but a God whose presence constantly beckons” (“Blood and Grace” 14).

The symbol of light operates in *Blood Meridian* as it does in *Moby-Dick*, representing a source of communion and salvation. Melville gives his fullest treatment of this motif during the scene in which Ishmael and Queequeg share a pipe at the Spouter Inn. Lighting the match dispels the “coarse outer gloom” as well as the dark thoughts, or “self-created darkness,” that preoccupy the narrator (58). Eschewing his former prejudices both against smoking in bed and his tattooed bunkmate, Ishmael thinks, “For now I liked nothing better than to have Queequeg smoking by me, even in bed, because he seemed to be full of such serene household joy then” (58). The light purges the disturbing outer darkness, and the reader understands that these moments of communion, even affection, likewise repel the shadows of the world, if only for a moment. Author Elizabeth Hardwick calls this scene “[a] pastoral, somehow tropic lyric, a paean to comradeship,” underscoring Melville’s tone and giving the shared pipe a redemptive, perhaps even mildly triumphant, effect (72). *Blood Meridian* contains an appreciably similar scene in which the hunters undress in the dark and emit tiny flashes of static electricity. Like the room at the Spouter Inn, the shed in which Glanton’s men stand has a “profound and absolute darkness” (222). This is also a spiritual darkness, and the static electricity exudes a supernatural quality: each man wears a “shroud of palest fire” and “each obscure soul [is] enveloped in audible shapes of light as if it had always been so” (222). Arnold explicates the magnitude of this striking scene in a manner not unlike Hardwicke’s, stating, “[McCarthy] implies a spiritual essence and connection, a temper or affinity that resides in ‘each obscure soul’ and links one with another in
a common bond of being” (“McCarthy and the Sacred” 222). Therefore, light denotes a union between men, a latent humanity often obscured by savage instincts and atrocious deeds.

During that lonely night on the desert, the burning tree holds the shadows and their hellish nocturnal menagerie at bay on that desert floor while providing the Kid with a momentary refuge from the darkness that pursues him. This is neither the false light of the campfire that Holden passes through “as if he were in some way native to their element” nor the “artificial fire” of the Pequod’s try-works that make the crew glare “like devils in the forking flames” (McCarthy 96; Melville 328). Just as the world contains within it false claimants to salvation like Captain White it also has those sources of light that deceive the senses; McCarthy writes of a campfire that appears to move in the distance: “For this will to deceive that is in things luminous may manifest itself likewise in retrospect and so by sleight of some fixed part of a journey already accomplished may also post men to fraudulent destinies” (120). In other words, a man who reckons his progress by a fire past will confound his course and light out for mistaken destinations.

In the case of the heraldic tree, the Kid makes his way toward, not away from, it, using the light as a point of reference. Significantly, this fire also seems to move in the distance: “When he went on again the fire seemed to recede before him” (215). The light becomes the symbol of his destiny that constantly eludes him. Note how wolves, McCarthy’s symbol for savage men, come between him and this blazing destiny: “A troop of figures passed between him and the light. Then again. Wolves perhaps” (215). Emblematically, these are Glanton and his men, distracting the Kid in his pursuit of his ultimate purpose, even temporarily obstructing his vision of it. McCarthy follows this last line about the wolves with “He went on”—a variation on the infamous repetition of “They rode on” that appears throughout the novel (215). The Kid’s
journey towards the burning tree is thus equated with the vicious wanderings of Glanton’s gang, which we have already established as the symbol for the men’s desperate attempts at a meaningful existence. The Kid’s light lies ahead, not behind, and beckons him to follow it.

The Elysian peace of the mountaintop and the blazing tree on the desert floor seem to warn the Kid against his returning to Glanton’s troop. Only in solitude is he able to witness the signs of God. That next morning, the Kid is once again without a geographical (and moral) reference; sitting crossed-legged by the withered tree like some expectant of Godot, the Kid observes how “the spire of smoke from the burnt tree stood vertically in the still dawn like a slender stylus marking the hour with its particular and faintly breathing shadow upon the face of a terrain that was without other designation” (215). This stylus, or marker, has been spent, and the Kid is free to navigate according to his own choosing. Yet, he abdicates his free will and opts, instead, for the predetermined doom that awaits Glanton and his men. Hence, it isn’t long before the Kid finds and follows the horse tracks of what he hopes is comrades, discovering two horses he assumes are “the packhorses purchased in Ures” (217). By now, it is clear that his intention is to navigate his way back to the gang, using the discarded animals and corpses like clues in a macabre scavenger hunt.

Tracks come to symbolize the threads of fate carved through the wilds of this wasteland as seen in how the Kid cannot force his horse to waver from them even as it dies: “He tried to coax it out of the track to catch the other horse but it would not quit the course it was set upon” (217-218). How like the horse the Kid is: unable to resist the pull of fate; in the last acts of the novel, tracks will lead him back to the remaining members of Glanton’s gang, who will be massacred at the Yumas ferry landing, and later lead him to the desert well where Holden will barter for his soul. Indeed, tracks thread together the sequence of events that lead up to his
twenty-eight year exile. It is by these tracks that men make their “inversions without end” that McCarthy describes earlier in the narrative (Blood Meridian 121). In contrast, shadows, or what Ishmael calls man’s “true essence,” point characters away from their doom, and they need only the will and courage to follow them (Moby-Dick 45). In a poignant scene, Glanton studies his shadow on the desert floor, which calls him home: “[F]our hundred miles to the east were the wife and child he would not see again. His shadow grew long before him on the banded wash of sand. He would not follow” (172). Hubristically presuming his own completeness and disregarding omens, Glanton makes no effort to acknowledge his moral responsibilities and navigate his way out of Holden’s snares.

Similarly, the Kid’s first bout of exile proves too much, demanding more of him than he is willing to give—a weakness which Arnold argues is characteristic of many protagonists in McCarthy’s novels (“Naming” 46). Melville even tells us that to be a lone castaway induces madness; he writes of castaway Pip, “The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up but, drowned the infinite of his soul” (321). The same fate threatens anyone cast solitary upon McCarthy’s desert sea. By the end of his second stretch of wandering, the Kid can no longer postpone his confrontation with Holden and death. And unlike his first bout which was the result of a snowstorm, he precipitates his own second exile by refusing the judge’s offer at the desert well at Alamo Mucho. Before this, the Kid appears to waver in his outright distrust of Holden, audaciously telling Tobin, “You think I’m afraid of [Holden]?” and then holding a horse while the judge bludgeons it with a rock (219). Even at the beginning of the scene at the well, the Kid is still hesitant to either refuse or embrace Holden and everything he stands for.

Like some perverse King Lear, Holden approaches the well at Alamo Mucho naked and crowned with river mud and straw, the imbecile, his grotesque Bedlamite, lurching alongside
him; McCarthy calls them “things whose very portent renders them ambiguous. Like things so charged with meaning that their forms are dimmed” and even alludes to Shakespeare with “like some scurrilous king stripped of his vestiture and driven together with his fool into the wilderness to die” (281-282). Appropriately, Donoghue claims, “From here to the end the judge emerges as Cormac McCarthy’s most audacious creation, the historical personage transformed from a name and a few memorable details into a comprehensive force,” pointing out how now, more than ever, the character exceeds the limits of his original in Chamberlain’s account (411).

What he offers the Kid, Toadvine, and Tobin is another mock communion: standing ankle-deep in well water, bearing meat, and enjoying the cool shade of the pit, he says, “Come down [...] Come down and share this meat” (283). Toadvine, whom Holden calls by his rightful name “Louis” and thereby signifies his ownership of him, caves to the judge’s offer and partakes of the food and drink, leaving the Kid and Tobin standing up at the lip of the pit, symbolically the moral high ground (282).

The language employed by Holden and Tobin during the following moments abounds with spiritual implications, and it soon becomes clear that the two men contest for the Kid’s soul. First, Holden challenges Tobin’s assumption that the Kid is on his side:

    We’ve just the one pistol, Holden.
    We? said the judge.
    The lad here. (284).

Ostensibly, Holden is pointing out that whereas there is only one gun between the two of them the Kid is the one in possession of it; however, beneath the surface, the judge questions the alliance Tobin alleges in his statement. When Holden warns Tobin about his influence over the boy, the ex-priest replies, “I’m no priest and I’ve no counsel [...] The lad is a free agent” (284).
Interestingly, two lines later, Holden again refers to Tobin as “Priest,” showing that he has ignored not only Tobin’s disavowal of the term but his disputation that he has any sway over the Kid as well (284).

As the conflict between the opposing forces of the novel comes to a head, the Kid finally and wholly rejects Holden. If he betrays a small amount of uncertainty at the beginning of this debate—“The kid had set one foot over the edge of the pit and now he drew it back”—he displays a new sense of resolve when he abandons Toadvine and strikes out westward with Tobin (284). Yet the Kid does not shoot the judge at the end of this scene or later when he has the opportunity to do so. “You’ll get no second chance lad,” warns Tobin at the well, illustrating how this is the Kid’s defining moment when he must finally mount an offensive against Holden or forever forfeit. Ultimately, he falters, and the judge ominously smiles on. Convinced that he can still best Holden, the Kid tells Tobin that their enemy is a mere mortal; he states, “He ain’t nothing. You told me so yourself. Men are made of the dust of the earth. You said it was no pair…pair…” before Tobin adds, “Parable” (297). The insinuation here is that Holden is something greater and darker than man as Tobin retorts, “Face him down then […] Face him down if he is so” (297). The Kid’s inability to act decisively against Holden may suggest that he knows that he cannot kill the judge; Ishmael clearly explains how “to chase and point lance at such an apparition as the Sperm Whale was not for mortal men. That to attempt it, would be inevitably to be torn into a quick eternity,” and McCarthy’s protagonist is faced here with an impossible task that lies beyond his abilities: to murder the avatar of evil (154). In other words, the Kid is no Ahab and will not be caught up in what Melville calls “audacious, immittigable, and supernatural revenge” (158). Thus, the specter of Holden will always lie before the Kid now, which Tobin implies by saying, “He’ll be waiting at the next well” (299).
Compared to the action-rampant scenes in the desert, those that follow in San Diego seem inconsequential. Yet, it is when the Kid stands gazing at the twilit Pacific and a pair of horses on the beach that McCarthy presents readers with a moment of unparalleled beauty. The narration reads: “The colt stood against the horse with its head down and the horse was watching, out there past men’s knowing, where the stars are drowning and whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea” (304). Here at the end of McCarthy’s desert we find the beginning of Melville’s great ocean, and the Kid watches the horizon as if peering into the novel’s precursor. A critic like Bell would not grasp the significance of this scene, convinced as he is of how McCarthy’s characters are unthinking and unreflective because we cannot see their thoughts. Of the McCarthy’s protagonist in Child of God he writes, “Since his inner life is closed away from us he seems like a dreadful unconscious,” and no doubt this would apply to the Kid who is equally enigmatic (34). Such an assertion distracts readers from the immensity of scenes like the one on the beaches of San Diego. Here, the Kid watches the horses, which are McCarthy’s symbol for the relationship between a parent and child. Even though, as Bell points out, we cannot see his thoughts, the focus of the narration leads us to conclude that the Kid recognizes his tragic lack of filial constraints or parental guidance.

A major theme in McCarthy, Arnold tells us, is the dynamic between parents and their offspring, explaining how “McCarthy writes about the passing down of heritage or the failure of that passage,” with morals constituting a large part of said heritage (“Mosaic”). But on the novel’s first pages, we see the Kid divested of his family—his mother dying during childbirth, and his father and sister left behind in Tennessee—and bereft of that heritage Arnold alludes to; therefore the Kid must make his own way in the world and discover morals for himself. In this author’s fiction, that very mission is always doomed as McCarthy himself says, “I don’t think
goodness is something that you learn. If you’re left adrift in the world to learn goodness from it, you would be in trouble” (qtd. in Jurgensen). His point: the cruel, unforgiving landscape will lead a man to Holden’s religion of war if he is forced to fashion moral knowledge out of the bones of things. With this in mind we can see how McCarthy sets up the Kid to be a neutral everyman in his complex parable when he writes, “All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man” (3). In essence, this statement shows how violence becomes the heritage passed down through the generations when Nature takes the place of the father. Such is the moral of Holden’s story about the harness-maker who murdered a young traveler; the judge ends his tale with this warning:

The father dead has euchred the son out of his patrimony. For it is the death of the father to which the son is entitled and to which he is heir, more so than his goods. He will not hear of the small mean ways that tempered the man in life. He will not see him struggling in follies of his own devising. No. The world which he inherits bears him false witness. He is broken before a frozen god and he will never find his way. (145)

A father’s life must, in a way, be a parable for the son—it should instruct and advise the child to avoid his mistakes and recklessness. In this way, man distances himself from his heathenish instincts with each successive generation. Yet everywhere the world is peopled with orphans who take to the wilds and are weaned on the brutal energies of Nature. The Kid, himself, creates just such an orphan in the last section of the novel when he murders Elrod out of self defense. Brought to view Elrod’s corpse and killer, his younger brother Randall is told, “[T]ake a good look at the man that has made you a orphan” (323). Presented with his dead brother’s gun and hat, he turns to look back only once before following the funeral procession out to the
“bonestrewn waste toward a naked horizon” (323). Randall goes into the wilderness alone, armed, and insane—an inversion upon the Kid’s own journey.

The price of resisting Holden and war after one has been pledged in blood as the Kid has is exile. Melville often employed the motif of exile in his prose, deriving it from his Presbyterian upbringing. Wright explains that exile was the novelist’s favorite Old Testament theme because it possesses “chastening powers” (19). In McCarthy, exile has a similarly sobering effect. At the beginning of his exile, the Kid, like Pip in *Moby-Dick*, is stricken with lunacy, and those who hear him describing his past treat “him with a certain deference as one who had got onto terms with life beyond what his years could account for” (312). Eventually, he becomes detached from the world, traveling to places so far removed that they “toasted the ascension of rulers already deposed and hailed the coronation of kings already murdered and in their graves” and carrying on his person a Bible he cannot read (312). In effect, the Kid becomes fugitive from time and history; fittingly, the narrative flashes through the ensuing twenty-eight years, losing track of his comings and goings here and there, until he is forty-five and enters Fort Griffin where he finds Holden waiting for him. Melville could very well have been describing the aged Kid when he says of the old sperm whale, “our Ottoman enters upon the impotent, repentant, admonitory stage of life, forswears, disbands the harem, and grown to an exemplary, sulky old soul, goes about all alone among the meridians and parallels saying his prayers, and warning each young Leviathan from his amorous errors” (306).

The Kid’s arrival at Fort Griffin is by all appearances his descent into the Underworld. Like some city of the dead, it’s ringed about by “enormous ricks of bones, colossal dikes composed of horned skulls and the crescent ribs like old ivory bows heaped in the aftermath of some legendary battle, great levees of them curving away over the plain into the night” (324).
The mention of “some legendary battle” reminds one of the razing of the American West in Melville’s “John Marr,” which is referred to in terms of armed conflict, and these skulls become bleak trophies of man’s war against the wilderness.

To avoid an ending that evokes a nihilistic view of existence, McCarthy gives the scene a striking symmetry that corresponds with the opening moments of the novel. Christopher Lee Forbis enumerates these similarities at length, pointing at how the Leonid meteors appear at the Kid’s birth and then at his death we find “[s]tars were falling across the sky myriad and random, speeding along brief vectors from their origins in night to their destinies in dust and nothingness” (Blood Meridian 333). The Kid comes to see man’s existence in the “bitter arcs” of the stars and even reads the trajectory of his life there as well; just before entering the jakes, he takes one last look at the night sky no longer troubled by its emptiness: “he looked again at the silent tracks of the stars where they died over the darkened hills” (15, 333). It is crucial that readers recognize the order that death creates out of this symmetry: the Kid’s death is predicted at his birth. Arnold concludes that “in the world of McCarthy, the only true destination is death,” and so this is the final ascent out of the wilderness and monotony of life’s infinite circumnavigation (“Blood and Grace” 11). The Kid is certain of this ordered finality, which is why he tells the prostitute just before heading toward the jakes and the judge, “I’m all right now”; he is referring neither to the service she has just performed nor her recommendation that he have a drink but, rather, his eagerness for closure (332). Done with the compass, done with the chart, he seems to say, and thus his navigation and exile ends. Interestingly, the fifteenth-century English morality play Everyman contains a similar ending, its title character having been abandoned by all of his comrades in the hour of his death save one—Good Deeds—who tells him, “All earthly things is but vanity:/ Beauty, Strength, and Discretion, do man forsake/ Foolish friends and kinsmen that
fair spake,/ All flee…” (“The Morality Play of Everyman” 43). McCarthy’s Kid sees the vanities of the world passing in that starry void and he approaches Death’s open arms alone in fulfillment of his own bloody morality play.
CONCLUSION

By way of a clichéd image, Barcley Owens warns readers against too deep a study of *Blood Meridian* while also managing to sum up the anti-interpretive trend of criticism that has long defined McCarthy studies: “We can try every fly in our academic hats, plumb every intertextual hole in search of beautiful fish, but after such analysis, we certainly end up with less than we begin with on that first wild ride down the river” (xiii). In other words, if McCarthy’s novel contains narrative mysteries, they will remain mysteries until the last, and scholars are best advised to leave those depths undiscovered. But Owens is mistaken to compare *Blood Meridian* to a mere river; it is without question a narrative sea. And how like one of Melville’s Pantheists he sounds:

[B]ut lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible [*sic*] form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. (136)

Confronted with the profound obscurity of the abyss, the Pantheist oversimplifies, concluding that every fathom of the ocean must be as peaceful and idyllic as its tossing surface. But Melville warns the idealist about the fate that awaits such negligent daydreaming: “Over Descartian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at midday, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever” (136). On
such treacherous terrain as the shifting sea, one cannot let down his or her guard. Likewise, the passage through McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* demands the same vigilance and gravity of its readers. The puzzling forms that flit and dive just below its surface require close scrutiny and awareness. And if we were to take Owens at his word, we’d surely be lost.

Without a doubt, *Blood Meridian* is among the most challenging novels of the twentieth century, and one may easily make the argument, as Bell, Donoghue, and others tirelessly have, that it affirms a nihilistic view of existence. Such a critic need only cite one of Judge Holden’s numerous monologues as textual evidence. In the absence of authorial commentary on these matters, that same critic could easily claim that Holden does, in fact, play the role of “ideological narrator,” speaking on behalf of McCarthy (Owens 48). From here, the interpretative permutations begin moving in every direction, describing the novel as a postmodern account of a Nietzschean power struggle or even as a Vietnam War allegory (Jarrett 83; Owens xi). Yet a comparison of McCarthy to Melville limits the range of reasonable interpretation and rescues the field of McCarthy studies from indiscriminate wandering. Placing *Blood Meridian* side by side with *Moby-Dick* not only reveals a tangible moral order in the former but the same challenge of moral navigation transferred from the sea to the American West.

Wolves with voracious appetites though they are, McCarthy’s characters still possess the capacity for ethical reflection and action. If they are hesitant to perform these moral duties, it is for want of courage and guidance because to traverse those wilds requires uncommon resilience and constant alertness. McCarthy shows readers that the heart is an often fierce and wicked place; of Glanton’s men, he writes, “For although each among them was discrete unto himself, conjoined they made a thing that had not been before and in that communal soul were wastes hardly reckonable more than those whited regions on old maps where monsters do live and
where there is nothing other of the known world save conjectural winds” (152). Thus is man’s heart like a frontier that can never totally be civilized or rightfully named. Into this wilderness, McCarthy thrusts his nameless Kid, neutral everyman and reluctant protagonist. His challenge reflects that of the reader’s: to navigate the ever-shifting landscape of life according to references geographical and moral. It is only once he discovers this duty that he uncovers the means of his salvation; but it’s a salvation he is incapable of purchasing because the price is too high and will demand more of him than he is willing to give. The Kid fails to receive clemency, yet clemency it remains nonetheless.

Of course, Owens balks at the idea of mercy in the novel and the notion that McCarthy is a moralist, stating, “To twist Blood Meridian away from its evident purpose doesn’t make sense” (12). Essentially, he sees an interpretation of the narrative as a parable as akin to wishful thinking or the projection of alien values on a book that visibly rejects such labels. Thus, he places himself squarely in Holden’s camp, who claims the world contains no order: “[T]he 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” (245). He calls life a “fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras,” which recalls Owens’s designation of the novel as “pure anoesis, sensation without understanding” (245; 7). Here, it is essential that we do not forget how Holden laughs in the faces of his believers, having made fools of them all.

Where McCarthy’s lack of commentary leaves open the possibility for critical confusion and commotion, we must use Melville as a reference. Keeping the nineteenth-century novelist’s themes and symbols in mind makes our interpretive circles just; they are our logline and compass in the chaotic storm. What begins with noticing how McCarthy briefly refers to Melville as one of his particular favorites in a 1969 interview with the University of Tennessee Daily Beacon
ends up elucidating one of his most complex and taxing narratives (Jordan 6). To be
overwhelmed by this novel is understandable and perhaps even expected; but to despair and call
the lack of conventional narrative closure a symptom of nihilism, as Bell and crew have done, is
a diminishment of its power or, as Arnold puts it, “a reduction of McCarthy’s exceedingly rich
fiction” (“Naming” 45-46). Just as the land is “scorching” to Bulkington’s feet, so should the
nihilistic oversimplification be to the critic’s, and he should avoid this false port of call, seeking
instead the “landlessness” wherein Melville finds “the highest truth” (96, 97).
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