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Violence Begetting Reverence:
Natural Evil as “the Pulsebeat of the World”
in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*

By

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Acknowledgement

For my mother who told me “read”
For my father who is not here to witness the pinnacle of my academic endeavors

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Introduction

"When the lambs is lost in the mountains, he said. They is cry. Sometimes come the mother.
Sometimes the wolf."¹

An obscure book from an almost obscure author, *Blood Meridian: or The Evening Redness in the West*, was not instantly acclaimed,² and given the subject matter and manner of expression, one may understand how readers were either too overwhelmed by the novel to immediately respond or were too put off by the probing questions it asked. Either way the reader engages with it, *Blood Meridian* continues to haunt long after it has been put away.

This continuous haunting, a lingering uncertainty, has left critics and scholars trying to unravel the novel’s meaning. The judge, being at the core of the text’s ambiguity, stands at the epicenter of the work, requiring that most interpretations consider him. There has been much said of the great, white, smiling and dancing, cultured, yet indisputably ruthless Judge Holden of Cormac McCarthy’s fifth novel. Yet the judge does not neatly fit into any box constructed for him, and indeed, the text itself has declared of Holden, “whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there system by which to divide him back into his origins for he would not go” (309 McCarthy). Though the judge is a prime reason the novel is

¹ McCarthy, 65

² Steven Frye,70

subject to such discomfort, the possibility of "evil" at the text's foundation and the violence it seems to occasion ultimately plagues readers.

Many *Blood Meridian* critics seek to understand the novel's profound darkness and bloodshed as more than simply the result of "evil," for this term reveals in its inadequacy when defined as merely the opposite of that which is good. In the introduction of the first major collection on McCarthy, Edwin T. Arnold and Diane Luce contend "*Blood Meridian* makes it clear that all along Mr. McCarthy has asked us to witness evil not in order to understand it but to affirm its inexplicable reality" (7). Though McCarthy is obviously trying to move readers to some understanding, it is this inexplicability that has been subject to fervent and varied interpretation. Despite this enigma at the novel's core, critics like Vereen M. Bell have charged McCarthy with nihilism in his use of empty symbols. According to Petra Mundik, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* dubs the novel as metaphysically meaningless, and herein lays *Blood Meridian's* crime with those seeking a higher meaning in its cryptic pages. Regarding the instances of lavish violence that geyser throughout this novel, Steven Shaviro asserts "what is most disturbing is that they fail to constitute a pattern, to unveil a mystery or to serve any comprehensible purpose" (*qtd.* in Masters 114). This lack of a pattern or connection between the void symbols Bell has cited does not discount the novel's meaning. In their *Sacred Violence*, Wade Hall and Rick Wallach assert that "Arnold refutes critical accusations of nihilism, and structural shapelessness which have often been levelled against the novelist, as well as contentions that his characters perform mindlessly or primitively" (Hall and Wallach xvii). Arnold argues that working at the center of the *Blood Meridian* is a kernel of morality, for though the kid does not overtly challenge the judge—save his verbal dissension—"moral choice remains" (Arnold 46). Arnold perceives an ongoing dialectic between the "choice" of morality

and the complete abandon which the judge propagates (emphasis added). However, Arnold affirms that the universal concept of “evil” must be re-evaluated in the light of this novel.

While Arnold holds that the judge “is clearly satanic” (62), Leo Daugherty, a contributor to Arnold's collection, raises the judge to the level of the divine. Daugherty’s “Graver’s False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy” assumes the root of *Blood Meridian*’s evil lies in the false god of Gnostic theology. In the realm of his argument, the condition of evil is *a priori*. In the Gnostic belief system, evil is the basis of existence while good is a secondary element of the cosmos. For Gnostics, "evil was simply everything that *is*," making the term "too small" because it can only contain the "strikingly domesticated, manageable, partitioned-off personification of evil" (162). Gnostic theology purports three realms overseen by two gods. The true god sits above the other two realms, indifferent to the created world. The demiurge, situated between the true god and the lowest realm, rules over “all that is created," sometimes calling forth archons³ for assistance in maintaining humanity’s ignorance of the true god. Though Daugherty is unclear on whether or not the false god and archons are separate, distinct entities, he is clear in his claim that the world of destruction and destitution belongs to the judge (Daugherty 163). Daugherty's interpretation is easily garnered from the text due to this all-encompassing blanket of evil in which the world is nestled. But to only perceive this in terms of morality is to overlook a vital aspect of evil—inadequate signifier that it is.

In his expansion of Daugherty’s Gnostic study, “Striking the Fire Out of the Rock’: Gnostic Theology in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*," Mundik holds that despite the end, the novel is not entirely grim. Mundik contends that “every one of McCarthy’s novels to date, no matter how bleak...contains a tiny glimmer of hope reminiscent of the divine spark trapped in the manifest cosmos” (90). This spark is the spirit, or *pneuma*, a part of the true god which is

³ Defined as “evil angels” by Petra Mundik, 73

imprisoned within the human body in the middle, or created, realm the demiurge oversees. The *pneuma* will ultimately return to the true god, according to Gnosticism, and herein lays the dwindling hope at the end of the destructive, gore-ridden road down which the reader is led. But McCarthy himself has stated that people will do better to open their eyes—eyes that will uselessly dilate—to the impenetrable darkness of the world.⁴ This ambivalence with regards to evil's darkness and whether any fleeting glimpses of hope can assuage it continues with Mundik's division of McCarthy's readers into two camps: nihilists and moralists.

Perhaps as a response to Daugherty's affirmation that Gnosticism is often taken for nihilism, Mundik distinguishes the nihilists as naysayers of any moral value in *Blood Meridian* from the moralists who see more than just extravagant bloodshed and mindless evil. It never seems, despite the overt violence and alleged vacancy of morality, that *Blood Meridian's* rumored propensity for pure "evil" is fully embraced. Daugherty distinguishes nihilism and Gnosticism by pointing out "the mere fact that the Gnostic god has a rescuing function," therefore, according to this doctrine, humans are not left completely alone to bear the cruelties of the world (161). Even Bell, with whom Mundik aligns the nihilist outlook, admits the novel bears spiritual merit despite its nihilist tendencies (72).

A more recent article by Dennis Sansom, "Learning from Art: Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* as a Critique of Divine Determinism," not based on Gnosticism but which tries to make sense of the feral, rampant violence, shifts the perspective on evil. Sansom contends that *Blood Meridian* acts as an artistic critique of the concept of divine determinism, the judge a personification of that very system. Sansom's central question is not so much asking whether this novel governed by "evil." Rather, he asks how the novel conveys a world in which God

⁴ From Richard B. Woodward's interview with McCarthy, published as "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," *New York Times Magazine*, 1992 April. Accessed 9 May 2012.

sanctions evil. According to Sansom, the novel demonstrates the absurdity of a world ruled by divine determinism: God is absolutely omnipotent, so anything that occurs is the will of God. Thus, excessive violence perpetuated by those lacking any moral compass (he focuses on violence caused by people) would then be holy because it is the will of God. This is the same argument Thomas Aquinas counters in his defense of God's good despite the existence of evil in the world, natural or moral.⁵ Aquinas claims that because God created humans as "free moral agents," the evil they commit as a result of their own moral capacity necessarily results from the ultimate good of God granting humanity that power. But this moral evil is not *Blood Meridian's* focus.

While what has come to be known as evil, the opposite of all that is good and godly, is most certainly evoked by the ruthless slayings in *Blood Meridian*, this concept must be reformulated to encompass the span of the novel's darkness. Steven Frye says of *Blood Meridian* "the governing motive...is the question of meaning, purpose, and value in a universe that yields answers only in bright but fleeting glimpses. Can human beings speak of possibility, hope, even God, with any validity or intellectual credibility?"⁶ Frye appropriately asks this question as the novel's weighty, though ambiguous, implications regarding our abstract concepts of good and evil and human morality have garnered examination. The interpretations reviewed imply or explicitly state that our universal idea of "evil" might not accurately apply to this novel. In addition to this ambiguity, most of this criticism acknowledges the judge cannot be a mere "sum" of his "antecedents" but rather a transmutation of them (McCarthy 309).

While we understand from the text itself, and from the slight misfit of all of the above characterizations of the judge, that no single definition could fully appease dedicated scholars in

⁵ in Part One of his *Summae Theologicae*

⁶ in his *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 66-7

their search for Judge Holden's evasive truth, a new angle on his meaning could fill in the gaps. For the narrator warns readers that while the judge may be a figure of any one of these interpretations, he can never *be* the archon or demiurge, for instance, or the force of determinism; he is purposely structured so that while he reflects these systems, he does not fit within the confines of any one of them. The unfathomable nature of the judge corresponds to the text's ambiguity on the grounds of evil. The text eludes all of the interpretations, intentionally deeming the judge a floating signifier with no single, agreed upon referent.⁷ Some critics fail to acknowledge this fact in their arguments which attempt, in vain, to trace him back to a non-existent origin. One might interpret this elusion of the interpretations to mean that the definitive truth of the judge, and by extension the novel's truth, is unreachable. However, positioning the judge as a harbinger of natural evil explains why he would not return to "his origins,"⁸ for the force of natural evil—the ultimate dissolution of all material entities—is a metaphysical one, indiscriminately governing the corporeal world and therefore has no observable source.

Natural evil closes the holes that the logic of many other perspectives has left behind. As previously mentioned, the novel has been associated with either the absence of an inherent morality (nihilism) or the overbearing presence of a malevolent god. Little has been done with the possibility that the text revolves around the idea of a non-sentient force rather than an anthropomorphized, sentient—in short, a Judeo-Christian—god. Though Saint Thomas Aquinas devised his two categories of evil (natural and moral) in the context of a Judeo Christian ethic, his concept of natural evil is relevant even if *Blood Meridian*'s overarching moral ethic is understood through a pantheist, or even atheist context. Transplanting the concept of natural evil from a religious context opens this seminal work to new dimensions of criticism which, until

⁷Vincent B. Leitch. Preface to *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001. 21.

⁸McCarthy, 309

now, have primarily assumed the malevolence of a Judeo-Christian God or the absence of good in the Judeo-Christian sense. A new niche must be carved out in the criticism to better understand these concepts and what the novel means to do with them. In addition and opposition to this dominant perspective within *Blood Meridian* criticism, this paper will argue that Cormac McCarthy's Judge Holden embodies natural evil⁹ and governs the text in accordance with the laws of that force. While a very specific part of Aquinas's work will be explored for the purposes of this examination, some context of this concept should be established as well.

In an effort to justify God's all-powerful, all-good existence despite the unavoidable evil in the world, Saint Thomas Aquinas introduced natural evil in his *Summae Theologica* by logically demonstrating how evil could exist beside God's omnipotence through his style of precipitating objections, counter-statement, and argument. With the creation of free moral agents, evil occasioned by misguided morals is a necessary potentiality, and even these misguided morals are merely the response of someone who thinks he or she is committing some kind of good. Therefore, this evil cannot be deemed a mar upon God's perfection. As Dr. Joseph Magee paraphrases Aquinas's argument,

“natural evils...such as natural disasters or...physical corruption [are] ubiquitously present in all of nature...For Aquinas, bodies by their nature are susceptible to corruption and dissolution. Since they are composed of contrary elements, material things, including humans as bodily, have the potency for corruption.”¹⁰

⁹ Coined by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica*, Q. 19, a. 9

¹⁰ Magee, Joseph M.. “The Problem of Evil”. *Thomistic Philosophy*. 1999. Web. 22 August 2011.

According to Aquinas, man was immune to death and corruption before the Fall, this state being termed "original justice." After man revoked the "subjection" of his reason to God,¹¹ the potential for corruptibility became certainty in all material things, for "death and such like defects are the punishment of original sin,"¹² If man was "originally preserved from potency to corruption, i.e. death,"¹³ then it can be concluded natural evil, likewise, does not undermine God's omnipotence. Along with the innateness of natural evil in all things material, it may also occur in forces external to a being like natural disasters, for example, or some other entity obeying natural laws.¹⁴

Though natural evil is presented by Aquinas as independent, or mutually exclusive from any idea of moral evil, and even God, it is not immediately distinct from these entities in *Blood Meridian*, resulting in the misinterpreting of natural evil as a malevolent force.¹⁵ Vital to this clarification of terms is the judge who we first meet in a "nomadic," or moveable "house of God."¹⁶ This establishes the judge as a congregant to a protean religion as he purposelessly accuses the Reverend Green— whom he had never met—of horrendous crimes, leading to the masses assailing on the Reverend. Many of the judge's actions on the surface seem as though they come from a place of pure evil, but he only lives up to the doctrine he spreads: "War is God" (McCarthy 249). A quote from *1984* proves especially enlightening here: "The essential act of war is destruction." The judge puts it in plain terms his followers can process, but he speaks of ultimate dissolution of all material beings and entities with little regard for intent or agenda. And while the judge's penchant and aptitude for mindless violence creates a certain

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book IV, ch. 52, paraphrased from McGee

¹² *ST*, Article 6, 2

¹³ Magee

¹⁴ Magee

¹⁵ In an effort to avoid the problematic semantics of accessing the concept of natural evil through that which Aquinas sought to define natural evil against, moral evil, Aquinas's idea of natural evil will be frequently reassigned to the title of dissolution for the purposes of this paper.

¹⁶ McCarthy, 6

incandescence around the Glanton Gang's doings, it is vital to note that the mindlessness of the violence is not a primitive instinct.

The presence of this force, natural evil, works on two different levels in *Blood Meridian*. First, the novel fundamentally illustrates natural evil: everything material erodes. The reader sees this in McCarthy's choice of setting. This aspect will be discussed in more depth in the final part of this thesis. There is also the all-encompassing presence of an entity, or cyclical, non-sentient force that oversees this perpetual dissolution, whether through natural disaster, primeval warfare, or the inevitable decay of all things material. In both respects, there is no intent of harm, no malevolent agenda. The quote introducing this chapter is particularly enlightening with regards to natural evil as it shows how this random cycle of nature brings death just as often as life. The speaker understands the dangers inherent in nature, and he expresses it in simple, emotionless language to show that there is no sentience behind the cycles of creation and destruction while man navigates the landscape—only the mother or the wolf, the coming of either subject to the 'sometimes' of chance.

One might initially disagree that the judge is a representation of dissolution because he seems to premeditate most of his evil actions. However, with the observable facts about the judge (does not seem to age, inhuman strength and imperviousness, foresight, time and space travel, he has been encountered at one time or another by everyone) and his association with the constantly eroding landscape, he comes off as more of an ever-present force and less like a free agent. In his occult *Notes on Blood Meridian*, John Sepich translates a subheading of the final chapter, "*Sie müssen schlafen aber Ich muss tanzen*," as "You must sleep [i.e., die], but I have to dance" (316). This quote demarcates the judge as a separate entity from the men. It shows the nature of man is temporary and meets its end, while the judge will continue *ad infinitum*, his

course never meeting an end. The relation of his head to a stone precedes his later claim that God speaks “in stones and trees, the bones of things,” linking him with the omnipresence of God and, in turn, nature (116). He talks the language of the land and that language and his presence are static like the rocks, which are impervious to the cycles of destruction. With a number of allusions like this,¹⁷ the judge becomes a metaphorical representation of natural evil, and the metaphor can never die. While his seeming omnipotence and timelessness are both features attributed to the traditional Judeo-Christian God, he also evokes Milton's Satan—feared while simultaneously enthralling. He is the higher power within this landscape, constantly affirming the necessary presence of dissolution in nature.

Though the men glow in his epic presence, the judge stands apart. The men kill for money and to fulfill a yearning for god-like power, but the judge is senseless with his destruction. The gang's fascination with destruction and the illusion of power it gives them feeds into the judge's sermons on war and God. The gang reveres violence and destruction; the judge preaches the endless cycle of death and destruction. The gang follows the judge but cannot fully participate in the pure destruction of the evils committed because they are sentient, with all of their accompanying limits of conscience and individual experiences that make the kid rebel against the judge, that make Tobin pose as an alternative to the judge, that make Webster, Bathcat, and Toadvine all counter him at various points. These moments when the men seem awakened to the frighteningly harsh nature of the judge solidify Holden as a force that humans fear for his impenetrable, incalculable nature. Their actions are not to be excused by grouping them into the same position as the judge though, for while the judge may appear opposed to the men who question his word, they willfully partake in the killing.

¹⁷ walking through fire, demonstrating inhuman strength, his unaltered features after three decades

Yet, despite their violent ways, there are too many instances of ostensible concern the men harbor for the life of other beings or creatures, disproving inherent evil—rather they make choices, contrasting the static nature of the judge. The men are free agents, as Tobin dubs the kid. In other words, the men exemplify the ever-changing heart and mind of sentience while the judge is a force that does not favor or discriminate. It is valuable to note that the kid survives the attack of the Comanches on White's group only to stumble into another band of money-hungry, blood-driven individuals. One wonders what the purpose might be in having the kid in one band before the Glanton Gang, the time in which he spends in this gang making up the majority of the novel. Primarily, it allows readers to experience the actions of White's troop as the violence caused by humans, an evil that stems from a moral ineptitude. Upon joining Glanton's gang, the backdrop of politics, money, and war give way to a profound, mythic ambiance. Though the Glanton gang is essentially carrying out the same task as the army troop to which the kid had been drafted, they are now led by a force that vastly differs from their own privation and intentions. The kid's transition between these two groups demonstrates, by way of contrast, the transitory nature of man's violence and evil and the infinite influence of natural evil upon the world. The fact that the judge is the only one left (the only one the reader can be certain remains) reinforces this point.

Though a stark contrast reveals itself between the motivations of the men and lack thereof with regards to the judge, the designations between natural evil and moral evil are not always so clear. In response to the objections of whether evil is a nature, Aquinas posits "one opposite is known through the other, as darkness is known through light. Hence also what evil is must be known from the nature of good" (Q. 48, a.1). There is no absolute good in the novel through which to define the judge against as pure "evil." This deliberate ambiguity within the novel—as

demonstrated by the lack of interiority and the laconic speech of our only hope for a hero—has been the source of decades of turbulent criticism, fueled by the longing to prove innate goodness or innate evil; to prove there is a God or that there is no God; to prove God is this particular way or humans that way. We must isolate the argument to the text itself, to what is present on the pages. God does not figure into this argument, as we are dealing with strictly material things. Good and evil do not have a one to one correlation in the text as we have no moral scale by which to objectively judge these things. To understand the truly incomprehensible darkness at work in the novel is to disregard assumptions of the saving grace of religion, the assumption of a “good” God, and that God’s ambiguous voice to which Tobin alludes.

The text offers a barren landscape and desolate setting, governed by a violent zealot. We are presented with characters whose minds we cannot penetrate and an unresolved ending, with our only potential hero dying off just like the rest of them, except perhaps a little more personally. The most resistant of them all, the kid, is still annihilated by the judge despite having earned something akin to the judge’s favor at various intervals. These are the facts we have to deduce the forces at work in the text. Superimposed over the whole of *Blood Meridian*, the concept of evil does not satisfy, for there are too many unanswered questions. While the scholarship has shown “evil” to be a grey area in the novel, the reader can easily identify the judge as a destructive force, and thus closer to Aquinas’s concept of natural evil, or dissolution.

Unhinging the Myth of the West

“I was a highwayman. Along the coach roads I did ride
With sword and pistol by my side
Many a young maid lost her baubles to my trade
Many a soldier shed his lifeblood on my blade
The bastards hung me in the spring of twenty-five
But I am still alive.

...
Perhaps I may become a highwayman again
Or I may simply be a single drop of rain
But I will remain
And I'll be back again, and again and again and again and again.”

—Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Waylon Jennings, and Johnny Cash in “The Highwayman”

The Judge and Myth

The excerpted verses of “The Highwayman” exhibit two themes integral to Cormac McCarthy’s revisionist western, *Blood Meridian: Or the Evening Redness in the West*. The highwayman is a type of western hero, taking what he can get where he can get it. Though he is physically disposed of through hanging, the highwayman is “still alive,” alluding to a lasting resonance of not only the mythic hero but also the impulses that drove him. His actions as a highwayman—and likewise as a Western hero—are dressed in a kind of ordained glow. That he may return as “a single drop of rain” implies some sort of metaphysical staying power of this

hero and his inclinations: his returns and departures are cyclical and part of a natural process. The themes of the mythic hero and nature's cyclical processes heavily interplay among the pages of McCarthy's text, revealing a mutual dependence. Through the deathly setting of *Blood Meridian* and the deceiving roles of the characters which undercut the myths of the Western genre, McCarthy demonstrates the permanence of impermanence—the decay and often violent natural cycles of life.

To discuss *Blood Meridian* as a Western manifesting natural evil, one must first examine the concept of myth. Before this novel's myth-shattering and Western characteristics can be examined together, the *idea* of the West and how it came into being must be explored. The concept of the mythical western hero is largely informed by Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner's analysis of how Americans encountered the frontier and its effect on them inadvertently contributed to the archetype of the Western hero with ideas such as individualism—with regards to determination and in a social sense—and an indifference to religion.¹⁸ The Anglo man, newly freed from the shackles his mother country placed upon him, cut out his niche in this new territory, and, Turner argues, this hacking away of the landscape to force Anglo man's presence upon it created an "American" capable of ingenuity, survival, and raw ambition. However, as this myth breaks free from centuries of crystallization, one can see that the idea of the American, or the American myth, bears an unpleasant reality. In his *Regeneration Through Violence*, Richard Slotkin asserts that "regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (5). For the Anglo man hacking away at the dense territory, literally cutting out a niche for himself, is a physically violent means of staking one's claim and asserting his identity. Though the underdeveloped

¹⁸ Turner 53 and 58

regions of the landscape may have required this, the early American employed their own means of cutting out a cultural niche as well. To Native Americans, the West was not an unpopulated region awaiting civilization, thus the young Americans might be perceived as savages themselves. Slotkin uses a number of stories from their respective time periods to demonstrate the frame of mind regarding American mythology. These ideas have heavily contributed to the Western film's portrayal of the hero and the foes he (this pronoun deliberately used) faces. However, Western movies and novels seem to revolve around reliving a nostalgic time that does not necessarily take into account all of the perspectives of the period of the frontier or perhaps does not relate the gritty reality of events.¹⁹ As Slotkin contends in *Gunfighter Nation*, “genre worlds are . . . never-never lands whose special rules and meanings have more to do with conventions, myths, and ideologies than with historical representation” (233).

Though Turner’s address on the frontier is clearly a product of his time, his thesis accounts for the political, economic, and social conditions that bred the frontiersman—and, consequently, the American. In her *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, Patricia Limerick exposes Turner’s thesis for its regionalism, nationalism, and all around ethnocentrism, and broadens the scope of the “frontier” concept by updating it to reflect the current conflicts and tensions inspired by the conditions of the past. Limerick argues against Turner’s “excessive deference to the individual’s ideas” and pushes for a recasting of the perspective of the West by expanding it to include the Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Native-Americans, Latin-Americans and European immigrants (27 Limerick). In *Blood Meridian*, this reorientation of perspective occurs in numerous aspects and scenes but not in the way Limerick probably intends, for such designations are null and void in this landscape and era. When the Comanches “rid[e] down upon” the defenders as though from another world, they

¹⁹ With the exception of revisionist Westerns or postmodern novels like, for example, Percival Everett’s *God’s Country*

enact a battle scene that moves beyond itself in the primal imagery and archaic language (52). The lyrical, rhythmic quality of this scene takes the obliging reader under a spell, creating a strange beauty and mythic power in the horrific, painting the Comanches like messengers of God, so to speak, undertaking their role as one cog in the mechanism of a natural process. As Steven Frye contends, *Blood Meridian*, in this scene particularly, melds “a sweeping metaphorical rendering of the violence that has defined not only human history but the history of the physical universe itself” (75). In utilizing this specific historical moment, McCarthy shows “every kind of man” working under the same governing laws (McCarthy 325). No creature is outside the natural order because the West was a frontier where a multitude of cultures converged, as Limerick posits, but were all susceptible to the same laws that govern nature, including destruction.

Though McCarthy utilizes historical facts, Frye claims “*Blood Meridian* takes Chamberlain’s essential prototypes and from the scant data provided creates fully rendered literary characters, elevating them to mythic and densely philosophical proportions” (68-9). While the kid proves himself a mere man, not heroic, and the gang all make arbitrary (arbitrary because they go on killing) objections to the extremes of the judge’s evil, the reader sees the mythic proportioning lies not with the potentially redeemable characters, but the virulent, and unforgiving judge. Elevating the judge to mythic proportions serves to convey a message, even if that message does not directly correspond with the words that come out of the judge’s mouth.²⁰ Slotkin’s *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800-1890* exposes how myth is perpetuated by the universal beliefs of the people that pass that myth down each generation. He asserts, “if a metaphor like Cowboys and Indians is to work as a

²⁰ In “History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” Dana Phillips asserts “it is a mistake...the regard his speeches as representative of his character. Because they are first and foremost literary performances, the sum of his speeches does not equal a whole person” (441).

device for motivating great masses of people to engage in bloody and protracted war, its terms . . . must connect what happens to principles that the culture has accepted as valid representations of the nature of reality, of moral and natural law, and of the vector of society's historical destiny" (19). The judge's logic, evidence of a learned man, and his arguments of the Enlightenment work in this way; these characteristics draw on truths the men have come to accept, and this is what makes his rhetoric so powerful and appealing. The Gang looks to him as a sort of prophet and leader, and even Glanton seeks his counsel. Let us not fool ourselves into believing the gang would not be committing these atrocities without him—though perhaps not with so much flourish. But the judge is a figure that exemplifies indiscriminate violence regardless of his culture and education, specifically with his disposal of creatures as innocent as children and puppies. Through the novel's form and the elevation of these literary sketches, McCarthy is doing more than representing the bloody battles enacted in the name of Manifest Destiny as Joshua Masters would have the reader believe with his "Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World': Judge Holden's Textual Enterprise in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*". He goes deeper than history to show how natural evil governs that history and how it will continue to affect cultures and landscapes. He uses myth to convey its infinite reach and its infinite significance in human affairs.

The Unthinking, Unfeeling Landscape

One may define this natural destruction, perceived through the "mindless,"²¹ even mechanical, violence in the novel and landscape as natural evil by the mere fact that it is a mindless, intangible force that knows no limitations. Rather, the wilderness inevitably encroaches upon all frontiers, and any fence constructed by civilization is but a corporeal,

²¹ McCarthy 3

impermanent barrier that really protects nothing from this force. Just as Limerick proves and recasts Turner's thesis, so too does *Blood Meridian* undercut both historians' perspectives to demonstrate the supremacy of nature and therefore the limitations and fragility of humans. Man's utter impotence is demonstrated by the landscape, by nature, and by natural evil, and according to Phillips, each of these is conflated.

Blood Meridian treats darkness, violence, sudden death, and all other calamities as natural occurrences—like the weather...Accordingly, the novel soon makes it clear that creation cannot be shaped to man's will, at least not for very long. Man's will does not seem a very relevant or potent force in this novel, nor does there seem to be some other will shaping his fate. (Phillips 439)

Vital to understanding the extent of natural evil is the result of its dissolution: it clears the way for creation, like the role of the Hindu god Shiva.²² But just as natural decay is frowned upon with the same sense of unfairness as evil, so too is creation misperceived as a force that has a will to good, and this is precisely why readers should not place such an emphasis on value judgments with regards to good and evil on the events of this novel. "[I]n the east...where the earth drained up into the sky at the edge of creation the top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and malevolent behind them" (44-5). The sun rising in the east and the phallus emblemize creation while everything else about this passage is violent and negative. The earth "drain[s]" into the sky, "at the *edge* of creation," which implies the threshold of destruction is just at bay (emphasis added). The sun comes from nowhere and nothing—there is no promise of a creative God behind this cyclical occurrence, just the "great red phallus," sitting "squat and pulsing and malevolent."

²² As Rick Willach posits in his "Judge Holden, *Blood Meridian*'s Evil Archon" (130)

The landscape wears at humans and their temples, the crumbling, decaying churches²³ along the destructive path of the gang proof of this indiscriminate obliteration.

Part of the landscape's cruelty—an often-applied personification to the forces of nature and the misperception of those forces for God—is the proof that human existence is merely a single, minute segment of one thread in the tapestry of existence. Yet the men are "half crazed with the enormity of their own presence in that immense and blood slaked waste..." (177). Despite the immense waste, they foolishly—given their imminent deaths—indulge in their ego-driven impulses. They are led by the judge who implies that he may outlive death and the remnants of older cultures littering the landscape like waste by "tak[ing] charge of the world"²⁴ and submitting to the very force that already rules all existence: destruction. And indeed, the enduring riders, those "spectre horsemen" achieve that very same, though temporary, chimeric claim to immortality, when they are "fallen upon as saints," rewarded for killing as "ordained agents."²⁵ Like the burning, "heraldic" tree that "set[s] back the stars in their sockets,"²⁶ the band, infused with spiritual luster and the dark churches of death, exemplify distant, mystical forces rendered impotent by the natural forces that saturate this barren landscape. Though the band would seem an entity apart from natural evil while they ride on like ethereal deities, "above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order" (172). They are temporary and prey to their own mortal caprice, like carving out a name for themselves in an earth that will corrode the delineations of that name, washing it away into obscurity. They act within a void of chaos, attempting to affirm their existence through the reverent blood-letting that allows them a moment of god-like vainglory. As man and his temples fall prey to

²³ McCarthy 26, 60, 168, and 224

²⁴ McCarthy 198

²⁵ *ibid* 172

²⁶ *ibid* 215

dissolution, the landscape and its cycles of weather, death and birth, creation and destruction, though ever-changing, are permanent. The gang moves on this flatland of "optical democracy" "like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all" (247, 172). The "absolute rock" is the landscape, and by extension, natural evil while their namelessness represents their subjection to that greater power. Despite their hunger for power, money or blood, they are "doomed" and their influence reduced to that of their primeval ancestors, because they will always be subject to natural evil.

Man is No Match

The novel elicits the myth of the harsh deserts and uncharted, savage wilderness of the West to show not men taming it and conquering it with civilization, but rather being absorbed by it. Phillips makes a number of points that bring attention to the text as something other than a Western and novel, begging for a realignment of the text by decentering the human experience and leveling all the evils of mankind and the landscape, placing man secondary to nature in the arena of creation (439). One of the two epigraphs opening Phillips's paper provides a much deeper understanding of Phillips's premise and this idea that the violence revolves more tightly around the landscape than the men, for the men are taken into the landscape's cyclone of natural evil.

But what sort of literature remains possible if we relinquish the myth of human apartness? It must be a literature that abandons, or at least questions, what would

seem to be literature's most basic foci: character, persona, narrative
consciousness...²⁷

Far from being a typical novel, and perhaps not even a novel according to Phillips, *Blood Meridian* castigates the myth of human apartness, a component of the Western myth: man fighting against the landscape and eventually slaying it. Man is actually evolved *by* nature and the landscape and must adapt to survive. He can never erase the factor of the land, of nature and dissolution, but this dissolution is the "evil" that the characters in the novel and readers find so hard to grasp; unhinging the myth of the West echoes the shock of a novel that does not outline the progression of a character throughout this adaptation. This destabilized myth merely outlines the judge, who maintains the irrefutable power to overrule such fantasies of a Western hero that triumphs.

The Romantic and the Grotesque

Blood Meridian evokes the myth of the Western hero that Slotkin outlines, composed of the same qualities Turner attributes to American history, in a romantic and simultaneously grotesque depiction. Each of these representational modes serves a different purpose but together work to unveil the reality of events. As the romantic element sways the reader into submission, taking one under the spell so many have acknowledged when analyzing this novel, the grotesque element rips away the "shroud" Slotkin claims myth has allowed humans to place on reality.²⁸ "The nature of mythopoeic perception, in both maker and audience, is mystical and religious, drawing heavily on the unconscious and the deepest levels of the psyche, defining relationships

²⁷ from Lawrence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* quoted in Phillips's "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*"

²⁸ Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1680*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973.

between human and divine things, between temporalities and ultimates” (7-8). Yet, while McCarthy ultimately demythologizes, he taps into the mythopoeic perception with Judge Holden, the principal character with which most readers will continue to associate this novel. The romantic aspect easily applies to the judge, his verbose, sometimes-culturally refined philosophical waxing, and the historically inspired setting. The leveling narration of beauty and hideousness alike, life and death alike, and the shattering of the reader's assumption of the kid as a "hero" slice through the romanticism. Just as the grotesque descriptions of the judge and the waste left in the Gang's wake jar the reader out of the spell the novel casts and sometimes bolsters the enchantment, so too do the interweaving, ironically coupled conventions of romance and the grotesque destabilize conceptions of good and evil, revealing the dissolution at work. This inversion can only be achieved by laying the foundation for a Western before undercutting it; the judge, being one element of that foundation, is raised to the mythic with his charisma, indispensability, and glowing importance. Raised from the typical villain role, the judge prevails over anyone in the novel that might have been a hero. By switching the roles, McCarthy gives the judge, and consequently, the destructive creed he purports, more influence.

In addition to defeating the reader's expectations, McCarthy inserts doubles, pairings of characters who in some way complete one another but whose collective presence in the novel is as arbitrary as their oppositions are mere accidents of nature. Toadvine, the branded horse thief, lacks ears, while David Brown makes up for that loss with his stolen (from Bathcat) scapular of ears; these two characters are hung together at the end. The white Jackson directs a racist remark at the black Jackson who beheads the former, the latter being the first to die in the Yuma attack despite being taken on as the judge's apprentice. The kid acts as Holden's double, standing antithetical to the judge and mirroring him in some ways. The judge seems more of a deity, a

force of nature, but the kid is a mere human. The “child’s face” of the kid, his “eyes oddly innocent”, foreshadows Holden’s “serene and strangely childlike” visage; also, the kid’s “big hands” and small frame oppose the judge’s towering height and “small” hands (4,6). Beyond their physical oppositions, their respective speech diametrically opposes them. The judge presents grandiose claims on the inability to extricate violence from life and nature while the kid speaks laconically, if at all—another trait aligning him with a western hero that is parodied. “As the kid rode past the judge turned and watched him...when the kid looked back the judge smiled” (14). He sees an opponent in the kid. But the kid only opposes the judge as much as any of the other characters, and even less so in some instances²⁹ until the separation of Toadvine, Tobin, and the kid from the judge and the idiot, where the archetypal standoff ensues and proceeds to last unfulfilled for twenty-nine years.

Razing Expectations

The entire novel severely challenges the concepts of hero and villain, but before meeting the judge, McCarthy’s arguable demythologization efforts begin with what seems to be a bildungsroman, aligning the reader with what one expects to be some form of a hero, a fourteen year old boy. From his introduction, the kid presents a sliver of hope for some sort of hero, despite his besmirched childhood. Here begins the myth that will endure unraveling. Slotkin argues, “the heroic quest...is perhaps the most important archetype underlying American cultural mythology” (Slotkin 10). This heroic quest and the bildungsroman are popular themes in westerns where young men “light out”, either to get away from “sivilization”³⁰ or to chase

²⁹ Webster on not being drawn, 141; Toadvine about molested and murdered halfbreed child, 164; David Brown calling the judge crazy, 245; black Jackson disputing the judge on war, 248.

³⁰ From Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

adventure that will incite a transformation or growth in the protagonist, but rather than a heroic quest, the kid runs away to satiate his taste for “mindless violence” (3).

Even the narrative structure reveals just how mindless the violence is, perpetuating the interpretation of evil as a natural cycle of destruction. McCarthy primarily composes the text of action and dialogue, deliberately avoiding the placement of the reader in any character’s head. After being shot, the boy is “finally divested of all that has been,” his severed “origins” echoing with his father’s drunken “quotes from poets whose names are now lost” (4, 3). Those nameless poets show that even the mighty may fall victim to erosion. With this, McCarthy dupes the reader into believing the bloodletting of the boy has somehow purified him, allowing him to rise to something greater than the senseless violence, but the introduction of Judge Holden proves otherwise. After hearing the judge undercut religion by falsely and pointlessly accusing the Reverend Green of horrific acts, everyone looks away, refusing to charge the judge for his blasphemous libel, and the kid is no different, going on to get into a fight outside the saloon. By tricking the reader with the kid's deceptively sweet face, "eyes oddly innocent"³¹ and laconic demeanor, the shroud that softens reality and provides comfort from the truth of natural evil's permanent, cyclical destruction is ripped away. The narrator proceeds prophetically, as though this violence was expected: “Now come the days of begging, days of theft” (15). As these days unfold, McCarthy repudiates any illusions about the kid who blindly follows the gang: he is no hero.

In addition to stripping the closest thing to a protagonist the reader has of any heroic qualities, the text also performs a rhetorically persuasive spell³² to invert the universally held conceptions good and evil, effectively subverting the western genre and drawing attention to the

³¹ McCarthy 4

³² This will be discussed in more detail with close reading in "The Suzerain of the Earth"

force of natural evil at work. This inversion, for obvious reasons, would be difficult to pull off convincingly. Though the reader may not be completely persuaded by Judge Holden, the reader still follows his character with wide eyes and bated breath. Fundamentally, a multitude of structural and contextual elements enforces this fascination: the optical democracy of the narration, or descriptive voice as Phillips terms it; the poetic composition during the violent scenes; the deliberate void of character interiority—and perhaps the deliberate absence of characters altogether;³³ the inversion of good and evil through archaic diction, leading to a sense of biblical significance despite the subject matter; and the antithetical imagery of the decaying ruins against the permanence of the ever-brutal landscape all ensure a sort of dumbfounded awe on the part of the reader who cannot set the book aside nor immediately ascertain what kernel of meaning lies at the center of this text. The Western genre is used as part of this awe-inducing enchantment and includes the potential for the heroic quest tradition and the powerful, numinous villain. All of these elements lull the reader, making the nonsentience of natural evil feasible and forcing an acceptance upon the reader for the violence that is this era, this landscape, this world. Though the judge is based on a historical figure, his essence is lifted out of the confines of that man in Samuel Chamberlain's memoirs and transformed into a mystical, villainous being, erratic in his "evil" and sometimes even nurturing.³⁴ Judge Holden of the novel sheds the mortal, money-driven garb of his historical referent so that his diabolical essence exceeds any particular colonist or explorer and transcends the western historical setting to embody of natural evil. Phillips maintains that "the novel strongly resists such pigeonholing" as aligning it with a mere historical text.³⁵ Indeed, aligning it with any novelistic genre would be difficult because the text's

³³ "Lukács argues dramatic representation of character is necessary if an author wishes to explore the ideological complexities of a given era..." (44). Rather, Phillips sees character in *Blood Meridian* "not as self but as language, as a suggestive artifact or trace of the human" (44).

³⁴ Soothing a sick Glanton, 191, playing with the Apache child, 164, loving the kid like a son, 306

³⁵ 437

conflicts, according to Phillips and the Lukácsian standpoint, are not solved (443). Though the events of the text move, nothing *happens*. The cycle of destruction merely continues.

The text embodies the cycle of natural evil and man's oppositions to overcome it. Always, until the very last, the gang "rode on," this echoing phrase, bearing a timeless quality, creates and symbolizes a cycle without end. As the gang rides into the mountains,³⁶ Glanton admires a relic of perfection in nature, an event that coincides with the poetic, high language structuring this scene. In this language, the landscape and the judge continue to seduce the reader before Holden's parable, told in a soothing and simultaneously unsettling technique, reinforce the unyielding legacy of violence and death.³⁷ In other words, he attempts to tame the wild (149). The juxtaposition of higher preoccupations—those of the soul and nature—with lower preoccupations, like collecting as many scalps as opportunity will allot, illustrates the crests and troughs of natural evil. Though these men have been born into a civilized culture of names, titles, prestige, they remain chained to their fate: whatever lies in wait for them at every bend will accost them, unceasingly and remorselessly. They understood this warring existence as well as the hearts in their breasts. "They were men of another time for all that they bore Christian names and they had lived all their lives in a wilderness as had their fathers before them. They'd learnt war by warring...none of it more than were their own hearts alien in them, whatever wilderness contained there and whatever beasts" (138). Man is the subject of the true governing force of natural evil and will be absorbed by and thrown from it all in the same breath as chance would have it.

Conclusion

³⁶ Chapter XI

³⁷ 142-146

While a number of revisionist westerns toe the lines of subverting the Western genre, *Blood Meridian* unabashedly jumps that line by inverting good and evil, both concepts of which are redefined by the landscape itself and the judge. Though the judge appears to desire order, he merely seeks to exert his control. He salivates for chaos and leaves it in his wake but appears averse to it because of his form as a human in the novel. There is enough evidence in his beliefs and actions to show that he does not control but rather ushers the indiscriminate chaos and violence of natural evil. This misperception is easily overcome given Phillips's contention that there are no real characters according to Lukács. The reader must refrain from seeing the judge as a megalomaniac human and rather for the symbol he is. The judge and his potential omnipotence works together with the landscape to invert these critical conceptions of good and evil inherent in the text's narration, the reverent violence, and the decimated institutions of religion. If the judge is perceived as a literary creation given more to his human impulses, then one might come to the same conclusion as Masters who links the judge more closely to his historical sources than do the other critics; he explores the judge's representation of colonial expansion through its power source—discursive practices—while looking at him as ethnographer and Adam. He argues that the judge is McCarthy's indictment of myth makers who used such power to justify their deeds. But as Phillips points out, "that [the judge's] character has no real-world analogue and is not intended to suggest one is made apparent several times" (442). Rather he is from another realm one cannot fathom. He is "a great shambling mutant, silent and serene...[with] no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to commence his reckoning" (509-10). A mutant among humans, because human he is not, the judge maintains a self-assured peace with all that is, most specifically the law of the land, its brutality and unforgiving terrain. His reckoning cannot be analyzed, for what man can trace the origin of destruction? The judge

and the landscape are one; they are the harshness and cruelty that have taken precedence over what once might have been deemed “good.” Religion is eroded and the men are swept up in the brilliant glow of blood in the western sun, leaving only the erudite Holden and his domain, the destructive environment, to believe in and to worship.

As previously mentioned, the hero and villain labels elude readers in this novel, yet we are seduced by the prime suspect for the role of villain. The use, or perhaps more aptly put, the abuse of the western components of good guy and bad guy are undercut to elevate the judge’s faith in and service to natural evil. When the judge sits “like an icon,” “his eyes empty slots,” inhuman, leaving the gang to feel “as if they would not waken something that had better been left sleeping,”³⁸ the reader is accosted by the indiscriminate volatility of natural evil and that it is omnipresent and can, at any given moment, pounce like the judge “that had better been left sleeping.” One may recall *Heart of Darkness* and Marlowe’s voyage to that place found in the recesses of a man ruined by what the man himself deemed “the horror, the horror!”,³⁹ so terrible that it may only exist linguistically as an abstract adjective. The horror, like the judge, is a floating signifier with no agreed upon referent, thus McCarthy uses the language, the lyrical prose, the detached narrator, and the charismatic Judge Holden to bring readers closer to that referent, though it may never be fully attained.

Though Conrad seems to be addressing the horror of what breeds in the hearts of men, specifically left to their own devices in that place of darkness, this horror is also seen in the wilderness that enfolds the fragile human heart in its darkness. Marlowe sees through to its horror “as though a veil had been rent” (Conrad 69). Perhaps, if the kid were a Western hero, his end would have come much the same way Kurtz’s did, and he would have bore a “wide and

³⁸ McCarthy 147

³⁹ Conrad 69

immense stare embracing, condemning, loathing all the universe.” But we never know the kid’s mind, so we never know if he understood natural evil as his destroyer—we never know whether he “loath[ed] all the universe” (Conrad 73).

Despite how critics of the nihilist camp, as Mundik demarcates them, have come to understand *Blood Meridian*’s ending, it is not necessarily negative and, most importantly, resists the idea that man is "evil." And while those who perform a Gnostic reading see this hopeful ending riddled with Gnostic symbolism, the ending must be stripped down to its base facts. The man constructing a fence, carrying the fire⁴⁰ of civilization, proves there will always be some equal but opposite force to rise against the certainty of corruption intrinsic to all material entities, whether as a creative force or a merely human force with the capacity to *choose* a path of non-destruction. The laws of physics, then, are the law of the land rather than some affixed religious ethic. Mundik deconstructs the accusation leveled against this text that humans are inherently evil:

Bloodlust lies at the very core of human nature; it is something that comes from within, not without. Evolving in a harsh, brutal environment where the rule was ‘kill, or be killed,’ human beings had to compete with each other as well as with wild predators in order to survive as a species. Our remarkable penchant for brutality and mayhem has sustained us since the beginning of human history, as McCarthy’s epigrammatic reference to the 300,000-year-old skull which “shows evidence of having been scalped” demonstrates. The judge, looking at our species from an outsider’s perspective, talks about the immense influence that war has had on the history of human development and even suggests that humanity did not invent war, but was created to take part in it." (Mundik 76)

⁴⁰ From McCarthy’s *The Road*

What might be interpreted as inherent “evil” is our instinct to survive, thus that which destroys, Mundik implies, also nourishes. *Blood Meridian* exists within this context when lifted out of the ill-fitting pigeonhole of a Western. In the overarching scheme of things, "natural history" presides, decentering the human experience, even where it seems man is infested with evil. Rather, he is driven by the rule of survival of the fittest that was bred within him *by nature*, by the landscape, and by the imminent dissolution of natural evil.

The Suzerain of the Earth⁴¹

“He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and in shadow...He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die.”⁴²

“The Second Law of Thermodynamics¹. If a system with many molecules is permitted to change, then— with overwhelming probability—the system will evolve to the macrostate of largest multiplicity...”⁴³

Defining Power and Darkness

The men in *Blood Meridian* are limited to their perspectives. Humans interpret reality through their cultural conceptions, like, for instance, religion; some cultures create religions centered on a personified, malevolent god that explains the violent, unfair mechanisms of the universe. These constructs are evidence of humanity’s attempt to create sense in the face of the inevitable dissolution of all matter. Like the prisoners in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave who predict what shadow would next cross the wall before them, humans have created systems through which they hope to predict the things to come. Similar to the prisoner, newly released

⁴¹ McCarthy 198

⁴² *ibid* 335

⁴³ Ralph Baierlein. *Thermal Physics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 29.

from Plato's cave, who cannot understand the reality of the figures causing the shadows, the seemingly cruel nature of the universe on which humans try to superimpose order is unfathomable in its infinite unpredictability.

The judge is not limited by such constructs in his understanding of the universe though, as evidenced by the references to ledgers and coinage throughout. Money is the one thing to which humans have applied an indisputable value (though quantitative value varies). The false coiner of the kid's dream and the judge's talk of destroying ledgers illustrate the judge's refusal to acknowledge the systems and projected order of value humans have assigned anything; "of this is the judge judge" (310). He informs the men that this planet is his "claim" and anything that occurs upon it beyond his scope, independent of his will, defies him, but Toadvine challenges the judge with his understanding of the world: "No man can acquaint himself with everything on this earth" (199). Toadvine admits the whole of humanity's limited perspective in this simple statement. The judge ambitiously counters:

The man who believes the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear...the rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (199)

Despite humanity's rage for order, the universe cannot be confined by such conceptions, and the judge maintains this macrocosmic perspective. He understands destruction and that everything decays. He seems to say that there is not much to know other than the "war" of dissolution which, at all turns, man and every entity on this earth encounters. Humans cannot know the entirety of the earth as Toadvine speaks of it—through man's cultural conceptions—yet the

judge speaks of “that man” that seeks it out, regardless of temporal and spatial limitations. Interested only in the natural power of dissolution and its destruction of religions, cultures, politics, and all material existence, the judge can access that limitlessness.

The judge already has ultimate power. He is the tome of the knowledge of the world and cosmos and outlives everyone in the book. Regarding his indomitability, one might align Holden with the "Fool" from the Tarot deck as John Sepich did in his *Notes on Blood Meridian*. With “no fixed number he is free to travel at will”, he is the “wanderer...[the] immortal” (Nichols *qtd.* in Sepich 110). Isolating a single part of Sepich’s characterization, Joshua Masters, in his “‘Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World’: Judge Holden’s Textual Enterprise in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” focuses on the judge as the trickster, “a figure who turns the world upside-down...who essentially transgresses any and all boundaries that establish order” (2). Though the judge certainly turns the world upside-down in the expectations of the readers and his compatriots, he only transgresses ineffective boundaries which create the illusion of order. But the fact is that there is no order, merely a “game” of chance.⁴⁴ Holden turns the world upside-down by maintaining a supreme position as a metaphor of dissolution. He knows that mindless, chaotic violence is the only thing close to any established order in that it will never cease to be. This can always be expected as it is part of nature's forces, not the evolving nature of man, or his conceptions. The ever-youthful, undying, always dancing judge wields that ultimate power as the embodiment of natural evil, but the power he wields must be distinguished from political power.

In 1948, George Orwell published what is arguably the greatest fictional explication of the methods and means of political power. Orwell's O'Brien illuminates the purview of power—which will later be compared to Holden’s—saying “...power is power over human beings. Over

⁴⁴ McCarthy 249

the body—but, above all, over the mind. Power over matter—external reality, as you would call it—is not important" (218). While he denigrates external existence and consequently, the significance of control over matter, to make the power of the Party absolute, O'Brien recognizes power above him. O'Brien considers himself a mere "priest" of power where "God *is* power."⁴⁵ O'Brien is concerned with control over man through his perception of reality. He pushes Winston to accept that he will ultimately die but assures him that if he completely assimilates with the Party, he can become immortal. To maintain his own immortality through the party, O'Brien and other members must take control over people.

The judge inverts the Orwellian dictate because he is not interested in political power. Rather, he concerns himself with that which is absolute. O'Brien claims "God is power" and this is the level the judge strives for. For the judge, God is nature, including the destructive forces: "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...a suzerain rules even where there are other rulers" (198). The judge's immutability and all that implies he is more than just a man allows him to—with hope of actually attaining it—strive for power over things versus just the mental representations of things to which O'Brien aspires. Absolute power over matter is his primary agenda, control over the minds of the Gang following, or so he plans. The judge already inhabits a place of eminent power as he claims nature is the all-encompassing ruler. He holds that one must exert ultimate supremacy over not only every living creature, but every *thing*, to attain supreme power. This is not possible for any "entity" but nature, as the judge illustrates with his opposing statements: if "only nature can enslave man," then it is impossible for man to preside as suzerain over all, because nature will always be the final entity to which

⁴⁵ Orwell 217, emphasis added

one must answer. However, natural dissolution presents no threat to the being that “never sleeps...[and] will never die.”

Many have sought to explain the judge's megalomania as a condition. Masters reads the judge in light of the frontier and colonial expansion, specifically examining political power through myths and how the judge represents colonial expansion through that discursive practice as its power source. He likens the judge to the figures of Adam and ethnographer in his manipulation over words and language, the power to create and destroy. Driven by the assumption that the judge seeks political power through inscription, the act of naming and designation, Masters's argument attempts to assign moral ineptitude to the judge, but what is the judge's ultimate desire above destruction and chaos? It is not to rename or recreate. The judge's "immortality stems from his violent transgressions. In them we discover that origin and end constitute an eternal cycle, and the judge is the ultimate embodiment of their endless dance" (Masters 12). The judge celebrates pure violence alone, and this dance is an eternal, natural cycle.

Further exploring the root of Holden's supremacy and questionable nature, Leo Daugherty compares him to the false god of Gnostic theology.⁴⁶ This belief system holds that there are three realms overseen by two gods. The true god sits above the other two realms, indifferent to the created world. The demiurge, situated between the true god and the lowest realm, rules over “all that is created,” sometimes calling forth archons⁴⁷ for assistance in maintaining humanity's ignorance of the true god (Mundik 73). The power of the demiurge is political power. Daugherty, analyzing from a position of *a priori* evil, claims the judge to be the Gnostic demiurge, the overseer of the created world and the ultimate manipulator in keeping the

⁴⁶ “Graver's False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy”

⁴⁷ Defined as “evil angels” by Petra Mundik

pneuma, trapped in the mortal vessels, ignorant to the true God. The demiurge of Gnosticism is qualified by this evil intention, by its absence of good, and so one may wonder at Holden's desire to teach, to engage, to encourage the men that the universe is not a mystery and that all must join the "dance." Like Masters, Daugherty applies evil to the judge, but the assumption of a Judeo Christian ethic must be left behind with *Blood Meridian*.

The novel cannot be fairly examined through such extremes, and as much of the criticism implies or explicitly states, our universal idea of "evil" may not be accurately applied to this novel. For in a world where good cannot be certain, neither can evil be so. In discussing whether evil is a nature, Thomas Aquinas contends "one opposite is known through the other, as darkness is known through light. Hence also what evil is must be known from the nature of good."⁴⁸ Not only is the ability to fully know evil already unattainable because it is an idea or nature which must be defined through another idea or nature,⁴⁹ but it is also irrelevant here. Evil must be known through good, but we have no definitive value of good; what we have are vague assertions of the kid's morality, and with the kid being the only character who *might* diametrically oppose the judge, only vague references can be made of the judge's intent and morality. If the nature of evil is problematic, then the nature of God is problematic. To question the former is to determine the latter as such, specifically the interpretation of *Him*. Rather, He is not a 'he' at all, but a force without intention.

Perhaps a better way of understanding any indication of good and evil in the novel is by replacing the Judeo Christian idea of God with a more pantheistic concept. In discussing what the *demiurge* might mean to Gnostics, "a force that through violence and destruction initiates and

⁴⁸ *ST*, Ia, q. 48, a. 1, "Whether evil is a nature?"

⁴⁹ *Summa Theologica*, Ia, q. 14, a. 10, "Whether God knows evil things?": "To know a thing by something else only, belongs to imperfect knowledge, if that thing is of itself knowable; but evil is not of itself knowable, forasmuch as the very nature of evil means the privation of good; therefore evil can neither be defined nor known except by good."

maintains the unity of existence,” Frye contends that readers might figuratively relate the judge to the “God” of modern physicists, which is closer to the Rationalist philosopher Baruch Spinoza’s conception of God.⁵⁰ In this novel, according to Frye, God may be thought of as more of “a metaphor for the unity of natural law and cosmological order, impersonal and inhuman the antithesis of the anthropomorphic God of the Judeo-Christian tradition” (86). This is precisely Spinoza’s argument on God, for in his mutually supporting propositions of his *Ethics*, he claims “existence belongs to the nature of substance”, his proof being that “substance cannot be produced by anything else . . . and is therefore self-caused” (160). Just as the corruption of material bodies is necessitated by the existence of corporeality, everything exists because that is its nature. While this is a very material interpretation of the universe, Spinoza contends “God,” the highest being or force that *is*, resides in everyone and all things as an unconscious will to be. This is because “there can be, or be conceived, no other substance but God,” and we perceive God through two of his modes; the world is not distinct from God but is God expressed through thought and extension (163). This conceptualization of God is more appropriate for the interpretation of the judge as the harbinger of natural dissolution.

Where the judge's random, arbitrary acts of kindness⁵¹ are left unaccounted for in Gnosticism, since the Gnostic demiurge does not possess what is objectively perceived as good, these inconsistencies of character weaken the Gnostic argument and provide evidence for the argument of natural evil. Holden simply does not meet the criteria for such a title. More than an archon of Gnosticism or the demiurge, Richard Wallach sees the judge as an “archon of textuality” with the power to eradicate any culture that has been carried by spoken or written

⁵⁰ Frye 86-7

⁵¹ Soothing Glanton, 191, the judge saving the idiot, Robert James, from drowning, 259, and "Dont you know that I'd have loved you liked a son?", 306. In applying the concept of natural evil to the novel, the judge's erratic behavior in these moments of "goodness" and in playing with and caring for children only to brutally rape and kill them is accounted for.

words (132). Though Wallach's essay, "Judge Holden, *Blood Meridian's* Evil Archon," opens by relating the judge to Gnosticism, it becomes obvious that he merely uses this as his entry point into his all-pervasive destruction. Wallach fuses Shiva⁵² symbolism with Holden's recursivity. Masters argues that "the immensity of the Judge's hairless, scarless, tatoeless body indicates [his] unidirectionality," and Wallach seems to pick up from this point in Masters's analysis, allowing the judge a wider berth for his inherent meaning (Masters 4). Masters does not sufficiently account for the figurative meaning of Holden's "textual enterprise" in choosing to overlook the judge's capacity for pure destruction without the taint of a political motive.

Natural Evil's Inconceivable Inexplicability

Throughout the criticism, Holden is linked with destruction. Though these critics may interpret him as an "evil" *character*, which implies a moral ineptitude usually paired with a political motive, the assertion of the judge as a materially destructive *force* is more befitting.

The novel foregrounds, with a gravity and force many find difficult to absorb, the suffering that ensues as life confronts life, and the material confronts the material . . . if any single dominance is to be found, it is in Judge Holden himself, who maintains his force and control because he alone recognizes the laws that bind, the laws of will and violence that at least metaphorically make a deity of malevolent destruction. (Frye 78)

Some readers and critics conceptualize the novel's violence and Holden himself as evil because understanding the "suffering" of life and war on a microcosmic level is difficult. In a scene demonstrating unfathomable destruction, the gang enters a church filled with gore and death. There, they encounter a "screeching and yammering" violence. This destruction has no

⁵² Shiva is the Hindu God of dissolution often given negative connotations with the title 'the Destroyer'.

perceptible reason or order and so is incomprehensible (53). The violence of imminent dissolution is “a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of Christian reckoning” (53). At least in Christian dogma one knows the sins which will, if committed, condemn the soul to hell, but there are no contracts of good and evil here, merely the chance of natural evil and the mindless violence committed in an attempt to duplicate the ultimate power of that force. This scene echoes Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, when the light of truth—nature’s chaotic violence and decay is the true, constant evil—is too much for the victims “kneeling...clasp[ing] their shadows on the ground” in an effort to revert back to the cave, where they only saw the shadows of the real forms, when they were ignorant of such truth (53). But the truth here is not spiritual or moral. Dana Phillips argues *Blood Meridian* is a natural history in all of its description and lack of character interiority as opposed to a historical novel. In "History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," Phillips contends, "salvation history, which understands the natural world and man's travails in it as symbols of the spirit, has long since been played out, as the ruined, eroded, and buzzard-draped mission churches in *Blood Meridian* suggest" (Phillips 448). Like the conception of evolution, people want to reflect on their achievements and the trail they have blazed on the surface of existence, and thus construct this “salvation history,” placing themselves at the center of the natural world, and indeed, at the center of all existence. But again, this is the microcosmic perspective.

From the judge’s macrocosmic view, these salvation histories are merely man’s celebration of himself and his justification for the destructive claim he has staked in the earth. The judge knows the earth will renew, and death and dissolution are not imminent fates for him as he exists as a metaphor/summoner of natural evil. As mentioned in the preceding parts of this argument, multiple elements of the novel point to the judge’s eminent power. The breakdown of

religion and reverent bloodshed desensitize readers to the universally accepted concepts, however abstract, of 'good' and 'evil' to show how the judge remains outside this system on an entirely different plane. While he may not be perceived as good or evil, he and the landscape appear to move as one. His immutability is illuminated by the landscape which erodes all but he.

In discussing the supremacy of war above all other forms of "divination,"⁵³ and indeed all things in the natural order, the judge holds that "decisions of life and death, of what shall be and what shall not, beggar all question of right. In elections of these magnitudes are all lesser ones subsumed, moral, spiritual, natural" (250). Creation and destruction happen, and according to Holden, there is no moral code or spiritual deity to dictate those happenings. More significantly, he mentions "natural [elections]" as lesser to "decisions of life and death," indicating that men can have hand in these decisions alongside what will naturally occur, and the man that plays his hand will momentarily be just as powerful as the forces that rule the landscape, delivering death and life in kind. In asking the expriest, Tobin, to weigh in on these statements, the judge cuts in: "but the priest has said. For the priest has put by the robe of his craft and taken up the tools of that *higher* calling which all men honor. The priest also would be no godserver but a god himself."⁵⁴ The judge contends that war is the highest link on, or indeed the source of, the chain of order, and that even a man formerly of the priesthood has set that duty aside in favor of a superior calling. This calling being the one that does not require temporary symbols erected in its honor, nor a moral code to purport its values. Rather, it knows no code or temporality. Its temples still stand: the earth, the wind, water, trees, rocks, nature, and its laws. While these elements of natural evil transform, move, or erode, their influence on the landscape—on all entities—is permanent.

⁵³ McCarthy 249

⁵⁴ 250, emphasis added

The judge emulates the permanence of nature and its movement. The always moving, nearly always half-naked judge cannot be the typical villain if he is not even human, but rather that static embodiment of nature in his "sweating for all the night was cool" (146). The judge is close to the earth, one with its cycles, and contains the heat of all existence. Associated with the destruction of fire, he is borne of this element. "Djinn", according to the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, is "an intelligent spirit able to appear in human and animal form."⁵⁵ Despite harboring the heat of existence, he is also described as "that great corpus [which] enshadowed [the kid] from all beyond" (327).⁵⁶ In the *OED Online*, a corpus is "the body of a man or animal...[this definition] formerly frequent, now only humorous or grotesque," which is appropriate given that McCarthy utilizes so many elements of the grotesque in his copious descriptions of the violence and the landscape on which it plays. Also, a corpus is "a body or complete collection of writings" or, in accordance with the phrase "*corpus delicti* ... also, in lay use, the concrete evidence of a crime [like] the body of a murdered person." A final telling definition is in the phrase "*corpus juris*: a body of law." The judge's body is indeed a vessel for something more than man, as the first definition posits. With regard to a corpus as a collection of writings, Holden represents a number of philosophies and alludes to many prominent literary figures such as Melville's Ahab and the whale itself, Milton's Satan, and Nietzsche's *Übermensch*.⁵⁷ Lastly, he is the representation of a violent force, the actions of which many react to as a crime. In the description of Judge Holden as a corpus, he is immortalized. The others do not overtly challenge the judge's claims to immortality through bloodshed, only reveal their human uncertainty and the ability to change—as opposed to the constant, untiring forces of

⁵⁵ "The judge like a great ponderous djinn stepped through the fire and flames delivered him up as if he were in some way native to their element" (McCarthy 96).

⁵⁶ Also on 167 referred to as a corpus

⁵⁷ Frye 69

destruction. The men, then, remain subject to *impermanence* by the permanent force of destruction. One may give in and become one with that force, but he or she is still subject to it.

The men are part of the landscape in these moments of mindless violence, essentially messengers of the "suzerain of the earth," like the Comanches that descend as though from a heavenly realm on the White gang. And though "the individual human achieves the closest thing to divine status" through mindless violence, humans are not outside of this cyclical destruction (Frye 85). The Glanton Gang demonstrates this all-inclusiveness of dissolution; while under the nearly divine⁵⁸ lead of the judge they are still likened to animals,⁵⁹ showing their susceptibility to decay and erosion, not to mention the Gang's shared end of the ultimate destruction: death. And though the judge too is linked to animal imagery, he is twice likened to sea creatures. The marine references outlined in Sepich's concordances can be seen as hints that the land used to be ocean floor. These references recall the source of biological life, dumb and violent as it was, while the similes involving the men recall their non-sentient, pre-evolutionary counterparts. The overbearing presence of this eroding force also reveals itself in the "all but ruined" mounts of the riders and the decay and death constantly surrounding them on their trek (150). This corruptibility acts as a mechanism unto itself within nature, an untiring, all-powerful force when compared to corporeal objects and beings.

As part of the world and the natural processes therein, humans are subject to the ebb and flow of existence: life and death. Though the men can temporarily enfold themselves in the non-sentient will of this natural machinery, the narrator, nor any redeeming character in the typical sense, makes any comment on an inherent or absent capacity for what is right or good. Even

⁵⁸"He is a draftsman as he is other things, well sufficient to the task"; "Then he sat with his hands cupped in his lap and he seemed much satisfied with the world, as if his counsel had been sought at its creation"; "...the judge smiled and said that it was his intention to expunge them from the memory of man" (140); "so like an icon was he in his sitting that they grew cautious and spoke with circumspection among themselves as if they would not waken something that had better been left sleeping" (147).

⁵⁹ According to Sepich, there are twelve instances of "the point counterpoint of apes and men" (156).

Tobin, who only speaks of hearing a voice but has ignored it, leaves the construct of religion stripped of efficacy and meaningless (124). His understanding of “God” is just as unclear and indiscriminate as nature and its eroding forces: “The gifts of the Almighty are weighed and parceled out in a scale peculiar to himself” (123). Just as man is part of that world, capable of participating in the dissolution of material, he is also a sentient being subject to change and dissolution himself while the judge, the embodiment of that natural cycle of destruction, remains a permanent fixture dancing upon the landscape. In seeing the residue of a lost culture, "...[the judge] rose and with a piece of broken chert he scrapped away one of the designs, leaving no trace of it only a raw place on the stone where it had been" (173). As he so easily smites a people from memory, the landscape commits the same apathetic erasure: "In the circuit of a few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing..." (174). Days are all it takes to wipe away the massacre of many people, and not only wipe it away, but the wind would obliterate this history, this memory, leaving “*nothing*”.

The Rhetorical Devices Revealing Natural Evil

The men do not dare challenge Holden’s megalomaniac statement that "it was his intention to expunge [the artifacts he recorded into his ledger book] from the memory of man," nor does the narrator make judgments on Holden’s power to do so. While McCarthy's rhetoric, whether intentional or not, presents itself through genre, structure, and diction, the judge has his own rhetoric, doubly persuading the reader of the novel’s true source of violence and its random distribution. The judge is the higher power within this landscape, constantly affirming the necessary presence of destitution and destruction. "The judge walked the ruins at dusk," a dark,

destructive force haughtily surveying and even recording the erosion left in his wake, in the wake of nature's dissolution (139-40). He represents the permanence of nature and the reality that natural evil, in its unceasing cycles, is the catalyst for the decay and erosion of all material things, including man and his temples. He is not merely a blood thirsty villain with a vendetta to fill as his rhetoric demonstrates.

Through his presence and speech, Judge Holden is likened to a religious figure or even immortal,⁶⁰ his actions and speech giving off an air of consequence and even sometimes omnipotence. His presence, "at dusk", "until the light failed", and "all day" never ends (139). He is as permanent as the "dry white rocks of the dead river floor round and smooth as arcane eggs," the origin of life, seemingly impervious to the destruction that has made its inescapable presence known in the ruins, broken down animals, structures, and towns around the men, constantly showing the judge's oneness with the earth.

Even his speech is a constant rhetoric showing his oneness with dissolution. The judge's oscillation between high and low language also works on a random level of delivery that natural evil also does. He must awe *and* empathize with the men in order to convince them of his immeasurable force. In turn, the reader is persuaded of that very force as the true suzerain governing the text. The judge speaks in abstractions of high language and even tells a parable. However, he also posits that the way to raise a child is to "put [them] in a pit with wild dogs. They should be set to puzzle out from their proper clues the one of three doors that does not harbor wild lions. They should be made to run naked in the desert..." (146). The judge contends here that the best way to "raise" a child is to let nature do it so that man may always be on his guard—and rightfully so—against the accidental force of natural evil that he should be made to bow before. After all, "wild lions" may be lurking behind any door. The judge also resorts to a

⁶⁰ See footnoted 17, 55, and 58

marked moment of low language when, relaying these cold truths, he tells the expriest, Tobin, "wolves cull themselves, man": nature inherently and cyclically governs itself through necessary destruction. According to Sepich, "the gang's two Jacksons demonstrate this [culling] trait in the human sphere" in just another instance in which the men are likened to the animals which contribute to natural dissolution but are also subject to it⁶¹ (106-107). When the kid is walking the desert plains by himself, he is turned into a mere creature subject to the landscape's forces, "tottering in the cold and casting about dumbly for some star in the overcast" (211-13).

In Judge Holden's title and name lies another noteworthy rhetorical gesture which persuades the reader of his all-governing power. Though his name is Judge Holden (which could mean he is a vessel for, or holder of, that permanent force of destruction), the title, 'the judge', far outnumbers the title followed by his name. The more common usage of 'the judge' as his title resigns Holden to a less specific name, which would confine him to one origin, one place, but rather, he seems to everywhere pervade. This helps to maintain the universal appeal of what the judge seeks to impart, implicating the whole of existence that it is all governed by imminent dissolution.

The judge's parable, too, symbolizes the presence of natural evil among men. The harnessmaker, killed by a beggar in the wilderness, leaves his son, victim of circumstance that he is, "euchered...out of his patrimony," to continue the cycle that "will be again...with other people, with other sons" (145, 147). The force pervades all things in nature, including men with the power to choose preservation as opposed to erosion. Despite this inherent choice, they remain susceptible to the cycle. As mutable, dissoluble bodies, humans are fated to have some amount of

⁶¹ *ST*, Ia, q. 19, a. 9 "Whether God wills evils?" In discussing how some things are "naturally corrupted", Aquinas states: "Evil may be sought accidentally, so far as it accompanies a good, as appears in each of the appetites . . . when a lion kills a stag, his object is food, to obtain which the killing of the animal is the only means." Just as the lion may kill the stag, taking part in this force of dissolution, so too is the stag subject to it, as it is destroyed by a natural cause.

megalomania, a craving to feel omnipotent that is sometimes sated by shepherding destruction to every nook and cranny of the earth.

In the sphere of the narrator, readers are linguistically persuaded of the judge as a metaphor of natural evil. A running style⁶² becomes apparent in all the strings of phrases joined by sometimes four and five *ands* in one sentence, one phrase rarely taking precedence over the following or former. Not only phrases show this equality of language but events, as numerous critics have pointed out, and also, lengthy descriptions of groups of people like the Comanches (52), the jugglers (89), the funeral procession (191-1), the beggars and importunate (200), the Chiricahuas (228) and "every kind of man" (325). McCarthy equalizes everyone and everything in an "optical democracy," which is what Limerick begs for in her *Legacy of Conquest* regarding the decentering of the American experience. In refusing to bestow a sympathetic voice to any particular group, victims or antagonists, McCarthy demonstrates how this reality of existence—inevitable total dissolution—overshadows designations between people. As Phillips argues, the novel is a "natural history" as opposed to a historical novel which typically focuses on the human experience. To approach the tale with anything "less clinical would seem anthropomorphic or all too human. But *Blood Meridian* is not so much inhuman as non-human. It is thoroughly dispassionate," just like the natural, destructive force it illustrates (Phillips 450).

In spite of the dispassionate tone in scenes that would normally elicit strong emotional reactions, the narrator, through diction and style, develops an eerily beautiful gloss over such moments. The proximity to the novel's message creates the sense that the voice of existence, of life, speaks directly to the reader, confirming this cycle of dissolution does exist, as opposed to the mere words on the page insisting it exists. This is achieved by the scarcity of disposable punctuation like quotation marks and most commas, allowing for a closer relationship to the text,

⁶² A "strung-together style" of "incremental" phrases in one running, "shapeless" sentence, according to Richard Landham (48).

unhindered by grammatical technicalities. The archaic, prophetic diction creating the effect of profundity in all things uttered, even that which is base, heavily underscores the feeling that the narrator speaks heavy truths. The judge is associated with that overarching, omnipresent voice when the gang looks to him as a prophet, asking him about Indians who left the ruins behind, or later when Glanton takes the judge at his word that one of the Mexicans they slaughter is not the man they wanted.⁶³ In addition to the structural features, the repetition and alliteration support an ongoing rhythm, all of which contribute to a prophetic tone or lullaby that resonates, guaranteeing the endlessness of the cycle herein: "They rode through a narrow draw where the leaves were re shingled up in ice and they crossed a high saddle at sunset where wild doves were rocketing down the wind..." (136). The alliteration gets heavier and closer together in the moments of violence, such as when the bear, Old Ephraim, attacks and carries off one of the Delawares: "...the horse he rode...trying to turn it, beating it about the head with his balled fist...stunned articulation, amazed...dyed red with blood. Glanton fired...into the thick ruff of fur forward..." (137).ⁱⁱ The prose is almost like a lullaby, lulling the reader until the jarring action begins with repeatedly shifting consonant sounds and heavy alliteration. The push and pull one endures throughout this text⁶⁴ persuades the reader to the novel's message: the ebb and flow of destruction, of life, in which the only constant is that it continually ebbs and flows. The novel's structure even tells of this ebb and flow, rhetorically upholding the judge as the waver of war's pennant. Of the twenty-three chapter summaries, not including the epilogue, sixteen of them mention fatal occurrences.⁶⁵ Out of these sixteen, the judge is listed in all but three⁶⁶ of the

⁶³ McCarthy 142 and 159-60

⁶⁴ Specific examples pulled from Chapter XI, "Into the mountains"

⁶⁵ the variations of which being: attack, shot, massacre/s, attack, scalp/scalphunters, ruins, killing, knifing, death/dead, slaughter/slaying/slain, sacrifice, murder, war, crucifixion, hanged, burned alive

⁶⁶ IV: "Comanches attack", VIII: black Jackson kills his white doppelganger, and despite the judge's absence from the chapter summary in XIII where a village is decimated and soldiers are slaughtered, he is heavily influential throughout the chapter with

chapter summaries. Also critical to note, though the chapter summary which speaks of "bath[ing] in the river" and "baptism" does not mention the judge, he is the "great midwife" that heaved Robert James from the water. The baptism of the women did not work. Only the judge can properly restore the idiot (259).

Reevaluating the Religious Imagery

Though the judge is not associated with the religious symbol of the baptism in the chapter summary, he is undoubtedly a spiritual figure as the description of his heaving the idiot from the water indicates. The Glanton Gang, and most specifically the judge, leaves a spectral imprint on the surface of the west that is certainly spiritual but not exactly in the same vein as Judeo-Christianity. Sepich rightfully notes that "the landscape of McCarthy's Southwest is composed not only of deserts and mirage effects, but also of heavenly phenomena" (164). Though no less impressionable, the spectral imprint challenges religious symbolism. These religious allusions, specifically of the decaying churches and the people that "knelt clutching the altar," show the inescapability of natural evil and humanity's attempt to overcome its inconceivable destruction through the conception of religion. They seek the ordered system they have developed to explain the violence in the world, but nevertheless, "from this refuge they [are] dragged howling one by one" (181). While institutionalized religion, or the construct of religion, is undercut, the spirituality of the judge corresponds with the "dance" of which he speaks.

[The judge] presides over a carnivalesque scene that seems a microcosm of the malevolent world in which human beings live and struggle. This ritual is defined by the 'dance,' which the judge describes not just as an act but as a state of being

the allusion to him as a sea creature, a latent force behind the preternatural glow of the men and their madness inspired by the huge waste on which they were only a small presence.

that transcends the physical and achieves meaning by acknowledging the primacy of destruction. (Frye 85)

This ritualistic dance could be interpreted as the dance of existence. The judge is associated with most of the novel's religious allusions, numbering the most of any one allusion or motif in Sepich's concordances, and yet he is the man of sciences. While he purports that spiritual glow, a glow that does not come from a saved soul but rather from laying the blows of destruction in a landscape that also delivers it upon the men, he conflates the terms of science with spiritual transcendence. To better understand the definitive laws of dissolution at work in the novel, the second law of thermodynamics proves particularly useful here. Put simply, in any enclosed system (i.e. the universe), matter and the state of things will usually move from a condensed, ordered state to a state of higher multiplicity, or a more chaotic state. Given that McCarthy is a man more interested in hanging out with scientists than other authors,⁶⁷ thermodynamics—this law of degradation specifically—is an apt channel through which to interpret the judge's philosophies. This scientific perspective on the dissolution in *Blood Meridian* illuminates the judge's pontifications on violence and war.

In asserting the precedence of war and violence, the judge tells the men “war was always here...the ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner”⁶⁸ and tells the kid “our animosities were formed and waiting before ever we two met.”⁶⁹ On a molecular level, this law of dispersion, or degradation, has been present as long as matter has, indefinitely existing just as war and the opposition of the judge and kid have. In accordance with Gilbert Newton Lewis and Merle Randall, the second law of thermodynamics is also referred to as the law of equilibrium

⁶⁷ Woodward

⁶⁸ McCarthy 248

⁶⁹ *ibid* 307

(76). This equilibrium in physics can be used to demonstrate the movement of the novel to its ultimate end.

The Standoff

In *Blood Meridian*, the judge dominates by controlling matter while control over people follows naturally, in that they seek to attain that ultimate power the judge dangles like a prize before them. The kid resists this. There is no proof to support the claim that this kid who runs with the gang and does his own fair share of killing resists the judge for moral reasons, but rather, he seems to refuse himself the illusion of the God-power the gang seeks through exercising their own capacity for destruction. The kid repeatedly resigns himself to the way things are, seen in his conversations with the hermit (he cannot "make it be" and "[doesn't] know" if "God made man [when] the devil was at his elbow"),⁷⁰ Shelby (accepting the arrow with the tassel and arguing with Shelby about no good "place to die in"),⁷¹ Tate (when they were lost),⁷² and Tobin (when he comes to accept that he will not be able to defeat the force that is the judge).⁷³ Also, he allows the landscape to take control of him,⁷⁴ ultimately accepting that he does not permanently attain that God-power the men taste when they partake in senseless destruction. Specific instances of resistance can be witnessed when he calls the judge's elucidations on war and violence "crazy" and accuses the judge of being "nothin."⁷⁵ The judge cannot permit such dissent; he must destroy the kid to maintain his indisputable dominance in this landscape. "This is my claim, he said. 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"

⁷⁰ McCarthy 19

⁷¹ *ibid* 205-8

⁷² *ibid* 209-11

⁷³ *ibid* 297

⁷⁴ *ibid* 212-13

⁷⁵ *ibid* 330-1

(199). This recalls the conversation between Tobin and the judge when the expriest tells the judge that the kid is a “free agent”, but then when the judge outlives the dissolution to which the rest of the gang fall victim and disposes of the kid in a final standoff which lacks any profundity with regard to the kid’s lost life.

“Unhinging the Myth of the West” deconstructs the good guy/bad guy dichotomy to reveal it as arbitrary in this novel; herein lays the futility of the kid’s end. Critics who argue the kid is a Christ figure and the judge as a Miltonic figure of Satan might perceive this end as a statement that the world is desolate and governed by evil forces. But when examined closer, one sees this pairing as arbitrary, like much of the other doubles throughout the novel⁷⁶ and that it is not, after all, a commentary on the malevolent forces in the world but rather the amoral nature of dissolution. After becoming the man, the kid witnesses destruction everywhere he goes, an affirmation of all the judge has ever said, and his never seeing the expriest again a mere sign that the construct of religion is impotent against this force.⁷⁷

When the judge tells the kid in the saloon, “you’re here for the dance,” he’s referring to the kid’s murder of the boy in the prairie before arriving. The judge hopes that the kid has finally given into the temptation of the ultimate power man temporarily attains through mindless destruction. But the kid responds in the negative, telling the judge that people do not always “have to have a reason to be someplace.”

That’s so, said the judge. They do not have to have a reason. But order is not set aside because of their indifference...Let me put it this way, said the judge.

If it is so that they themselves have no reason and yet are indeed here must they

⁷⁶ “Unhinging the Myth of the West”, 7-8

⁷⁷ “He saw...bales of tea and silks and spices broken open with swords...bears and lions turned loose to fight...the fall of burning timbers and the cries of the lost. He never saw the expriest again, of the judge he heard rumor every where...” (313).

not be here by reason of some other? And if this is so can you guess who that other might be?

No. Can you?

I know him well. (328)

Holden himself is the reason people are here for the dance and the reason order is set aside. The judge is the force that causes matter to spiral into dissolution. The judge is the second law of thermodynamics, the great equalizer. He is nature and destruction and death. He is the embodiment of natural evil, more than a mere man but a vessel for an incorporeal force that has always existed and will continue to, causing things to die, to chaotically destruct. And after killing the kid in the outhouse, the judge “emerges here as more than an extraordinary man, but as part of the defining reality of the material world, the ubiquitous and evil force that orders the violent play of material existence” (Frye 86).

The judge’s final, ageless appearance precedes his figurative last word on the matter of good and evil. His reign over bodies and things is an amoral one. Though he seems a dark representation of earth’s destructive forces, perceiving him negatively—other than in the literal sense of negation—defeats the application of natural evil to the text. Natural evil, while hard for people to grasp and therefore inciting fear, should not be thought of as an evil or negative force. Destruction and decay are necessary for rebirth and renewal, as Hindus would argue of their god Shiva. This is not necessarily a hopeless end. The man in the epilogue demonstrates human changeability. Though the world is rife with characters like every member of Glanton’s Gang, consumed by the ease with which they kill, this mystical man shows humanity persists despite the inherent destruction of the universe. “He is...working to free spirit from matter” as Daugherty contends him. Though the man strikes fire out of the rock which God put there,

releasing the destruction inherent in the world through an eroding motion, striking, he is a creative force, building a fence. He chooses to make his own order despite the "mechanisms" and lack of "inner reality" which characterize the indiscriminate face of the landscape and its natural dissolution (337).

By looking at the judge as an embodiment of natural evil, readers and critics benefit from a fresh perspective on the elusive judge that better suits his character, for he cannot be confined to an enclosed *system*. Though *Blood Meridian* enthusiasts may come to consider this larger definition part of his repertoire, this force cannot be predicted, and this is what makes Judge Holden such a frightening entity. Likewise, predictions cannot be made on the victims of natural evil, only that it will inevitably corrupt all material bodies. Perceiving inevitable dissolution as a condition of existence accommodates the indissoluble, all-pervading being that is the judge. But there is no directly correlating referent for this darkness; "the shadow of the act [of the dancing bear at the end] which the candlelight constructed upon the wall might have gone begging for referents in any day light world" (326). The act of the dance, its celebration and immersion in the reality of imminent destruction cannot be answered for. So when filtered through the lens of cultural constructs like Gnosticism, divine determinism, or scientific materialism, analyses of this novel leave something to be desired, whether for their narrow focus or assumption of a Judeo-Christian ethic at work within the text. The only god humans can *know* is the higher, incorporeal force that is nature and its cycles of renewal and destruction, and the judge could not be more fit for the position, for he understands that God "speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things."⁷⁸ These trees and stones will be the remains of existence, here long after man's structures and cultures have eroded. The present tense and repetition of the last lines before the epilogue promise that the true suzerain's reign does not end:

⁷⁸ McCarthy 116

...his small feet lively and quick...he never sleeps, he says. He says he'll never die...he is a great favorite, the judge...His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die. (335)

This is the cyclical nature of destruction, its existence continuing *ad infinitum*, like a pendulum propelled by its own weight and momentum.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Gilbert Newton Lewis and Merle Randall, *Thermodynamics* 2nd ed., McGraw-Hill, Inc. New York: 1961. 75: "The first law of thermodynamics, or the law of the conservation of energy, was universally accepted almost as soon as it was stated, not because the experimental evidence in its favor was at that time overwhelming, but rather because it appeared reasonable and in accord with human intuition. The concept of the permanence of things is one which is possessed by all...the second law of thermodynamics, which is known also as the law of the dissipation or degradation of energy, or the law of the increase of entropy, was developed almost simultaneously with the first law...but it met with a different fate, for it seemed in no recognizable way to accord with existing thought and prejudice...because the second law seemed alien to the intuition, and even abhorrent...many attempts were made to find exceptions to this law and thus to disprove its universal validity."

The imminent dissolution of all matter even evades those of a scientifically driven disposition. The fact that ultimate dissolution is "alien to the intuition," to the instinct to survive, live on, preserve, is what makes *Blood Meridian* so difficult to accept, and the horrors of its violence and death so inexplicable.

ⁱⁱ Another example of this rhythmic alliteration that first sounds like lullaby and then grows sharper and more insistent is when Governor Angel Trias throws a banquet in honor of the men. "The scalphunters stood grinning at the dames, churlish looking in the shrunken clothes, sucking their teeth, armed with knives and pistols and mad about the eyes" (170). Here, the *z*, *sh*, *n*, and *th* sounds are all voiceless and soft, or steady and resonating. The repetitive *ing* sound and the rhyme of 'knives' and 'eyes' also create a softly rocking rhythm. In the sentence just preceding the fight, "a blind street harpist stood terrified upon the banquet table among the bones and platters and a horde of lurid looking whores had infiltrated the dance." The alliteration has become closer together and sharper, threatening the oncoming violence, which only increases in harsh stops (*t, d, b, k, p, j*).