Prometheus Found: Figuralism in Blood Meridian and The Road

by

Allie Conti
Class of 2011
Table of Contents:

Introduction

1. The Expansion Event-Type

2. Dispensations and Covenants

3. The Dantecan Precursor

Carrying the Fire: Conclusions
Introduction

When *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West* was published in 1985, no one was quite sure what to make of it. The novel follows a Tennessean in his mid-teens, known only as “the kid,” and his experiences in the Glanton Gang, a historical group of scalphunters that terrorized the United States-Mexico borderlands in the mid-19th century. The ending presented a particular challenge for Caryn James from the New York Times Review of Books who called it “facile” and rife with “easy ambiguity.”¹ Harold Bloom had a notoriously difficult time making it through the book until his third attempt², and the same can be said of other prominent literary scholars, such as Amy Hungerford³, who found the violence gratuitous and off-putting. However, despite *Blood Meridian*’s initial dismissal by scholars and critics, there is no doubt that the 21st century has witnessed an enthusiastic effort aimed toward decoding the literary, historical and sociological implications of McCarthy’s oeuvre. Bloom, who was initially appalled by the book, has revised his opinion to the point that he included it on his list of “The American Sublime,” and TIME Magazine included it among the 100 Best English-Language Novels in 2005. *With No Country For Old Men* winning the 2007 Academy Award for Best Picture, a filmic adaptation of *The Road* released in 2010, and an adaptation of *Blood Meridian* in the works for 2012, it is clear that interest in McCarthy has reached an all-time high on the

---

level of popular culture as well. Uncovering the shifts in our cultural framework that have allowed for a new appreciation of McCarthy’s aesthetic will be one goal of this paper.

Another goal will be to refute the predominant scholarship on the religious elements of McCarthy’s texts. The most widely accepted reading of Blood Meridian text comes from Leo Daughtery who claims that, in the terms of Manichaeism, the judge is an archon and the kid is “failed pneuma.” Daughtery’s understanding of Gnosticism can be summarized as such: In the beginning there was a state of perfection that was sundered by an opposing dark force. After this crisis, the world was divided into light and dark, and it came to be ruled by lesser divinities, called archons that are characterized by jealousy, judgment and a desire to prevent humans from achieving liberational knowledge. According to Gnostic theology, archons prevent humans from realizing that they contain traces of the original, benevolent creator – the “spark of the alien divine.”

While Leo Daugherty is undoubtedly correct in noting that Blood Meridian is highly mystical, his attribution of these elements to Iranian Gnosticism is unnecessarily complex and, more importantly, dismissive of McCarthy’s obsession with history. On the other hand, scholars who attempt to analyze McCarthy’s allusions on a one-to-one level are exceedingly reductive. One example of this type of criticism comes from Peter James: “One must recall that “kid” is also a baby goat, a symbol which harkens to Satanism, though this particular kid will be the object of sacrifice, depending on one’s reading of the novel’s conclusions”

James’ mistake is not that he has recognized an allusion that does not exist, per se

---

5 James, Peter M., Blood Meridian, the Brutalist Aesthetic and History (Wesleyan University, 2008) 55.
(although this type of reasoning is specious at best because it underestimates McCarthy’s prowess and makes him seem “obvious.”) His most glaring mistake instead comes from his failure to realize that the allusions in *Blood Meridian* are typological, not allegorical; that is, they consist of a dialectical symbolism rather than a simply representational one.

Typology, the predominant form of biblical exegesis during the High Middle Ages, explains the events of the New Testament as fulfillments of events in the Old Testament. People, places and events in the Hebrew Scriptures were understood as precursors, or a “subfulfillments” of Christ. To think typologically is to look at a concrete historical event or person and see it as foreshadowing a later event or person. This basic introduction will serve our purposes for now, and a further explanation on this type of reading will be explained in due time.

Just as Christians used this form of hermeneutics to makes sense of the previous, contradictory history presented in the Old Testament, we shall use a typological interpretation to make sense of *Blood Meridian* in light of *The Road*. While *Blood Meridian* does not seem to be a prescriptive text on its own, when it is read in conjunction with *The Road* as one theological epic, it takes on an entirely new meaning with a deictic function. What exactly this epic “points to” will be the subject of my argument.

Charity writes that “typology does not exist for the sake of interpreting the past – though the past is, incidentally, reinterpreted, as historians always tend to reinterpret it, in the light of the

---

6 My understanding of typology was greatly informed by: Charity, A.C., *Events and Their Afterlife: The Dialectics of Christian Typology in the Bible and Dante* Cambridge (Cambridge University Press, 1966) and the essay “Figura” as it appears in: Auerbach, Erich, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984).
present.” Hence, this typological reading will reinterpret *Blood Meridian* in light of *The Road*, based on the supposition that the kid repeats and fulfills the historical existence of America, much in the same way that Jesus “recapitulates…the historical existence of Israel.” The ritualistic violence that Daughtery attributes to Gnosticism finds more appropriate parallels to Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “storm of progress.” As Benjamin writes in the ninth fragment of “On the Concept of History”:

> A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

After the Gang gets their fortunes read by a blindfolded, Tarot card-wielding showman,

---
7 Charity, 98
8 Ibid. 104
they sit fireside, watching “how the ragged flames fled down the wind as if sucked by some maelstrom out there in the void, some vortex in that waste apposite to which man’s transit and his reckonings alike lay abrogate.”

McCarthy’s philosophy of history has much in common with Benjamin’s: Neither writer falls into the trap of conflating history with progress and neither fails to see the danger of falling complacent to the conception of a “historical norm.” While Benjamin literally tried to theorize his way out of annihilation in the wake of the Holocaust by combating the philosophy of Fascism, McCarthy presents us with a premonition that worldwide destruction is imminent if we do not stop the “storm of progress.” As Steven Shaviro puts it: “Blood Meridian performs the violent, sacrificial, self-consuming ritual upon which our civilization is founded.”

To consider Manifest Destiny a historical norm would be to perpetuate instances of brutality and oppression until the “pile of debris” grows so high as to eclipse any chance of redemption.

The theory of typology can also be a doctrine of history that views the world as shaped by a God who writes the events of human affairs as an author would pen a novel. This is where McCarthy’s use of typology differs significantly from that of the biblical writers. In The Road, history is not shaped by divine will, and agency is handed back over to man. In this schematic, the authorial duties of history are returned to the human, and the significant historical event that anchors the narrative is Manifest Destiny.

What obstructs the human from liberational knowledge in Blood Meridian is not a supernatural entity. McCarthy’s theological epic points to this “third and other destiny” that is

10 McCarthy, 96
beyond both will and fate and is entirely located within the human. The eschatology *Blood Meridian* points to is increasingly relevant as America engages a boundless battle against opposing ideologies in the Middle East, that could, due to an exponential increase in the “progress” of developing nuclear armament, lead to worldwide cataclysm. Through the lens of the current zeitgeist, as well as through certain illuminating factors in *The Road, Blood Meridian* becomes much clearer and more pertinent than any critic could have envisioned in 1985.

1. The Expansion Event-Type

In order for us to see how McCarthy can be read typologically, I must show that his novels meet the criteria to be judged as such. Namely, it is essential to consider how his theological epic originates at a specific time and place within history.

Scholars of comparative religion are quick to point out that the Israelites differed significantly from their ancient Mid Eastern counterparts through their jump from a mythopoeic to a historical ontology.12 Peri-biblical societies existed in a world uncharacterized by abstraction in which all occurrences were the result of willed decisions instead of universal laws. Rather than attempt to theorize on why a river would flood one year and not the next, they would attribute these two separate events to the whims of an immanent deity. The pre-modern thought of the ancient Near Eastern precursors can also be characterized by their refusal of history and continual reenactment of the Creation in their rituals. Because the ancients, according to H. ...

---

12 Charity, on page 15, discusses the Babylonian New Year Festival, and says it is to be understood as “attempting, on the one hand a rehearsal, an imitation of the cosmogony, with the aim of ensuring the regeneration of nature, and on the other, as a necessary preliminary to that, the effecting of an abolition of past time by the re-evocation of primordial chaos.”
Frankfort\textsuperscript{13}, saw misdeeds as aberrations instead of sins, they could purify themselves in magic ritual that sent their misdeeds into back into the primordial chaos from which they arose.

With the introduction of a sublime, omnipotent and monotheistic deity, the Israelites confronted the concept of history. Sins were not considered mere abnormalities; they had real consequences that aggregated over time. Not only did the Israelites confront history in all its terror, writes Charity, they surmounted it by demanding an undying faith in the god of the Patriarchs and the lord of history. After the Exodus, which according to the Biblical writers took place in history and had no archetype\textsuperscript{14}, the Hebrews had developed a fundamentally different world-view from other religions of the same time and geographical area. They would forever be bound to an event that took place in the past and could never be repeated again.

The events of \textit{Blood Meridian} take place in a specific geographic and temporal location, namely, in the midst of Manifest Destiny and at the birthplace of an American exceptionalist ideology. Much like the historical event that foregrounded the Judeo-Christian belief system, the Hebrews’ exodus from Egypt, Manifest Destiny was viewed as something that was both eminent and providential. Beginning in the mid-19th century, the expansion event-figure has given way to a Romantic national pride and an insatiable American appetite for signs of fulfillment. In this way, the histories of both the Israelites and the American people revolve around maintaining a certain national character that is distinct from other nations.

Shaviro writes that “\textit{Blood Meridian} is a book, then, not of heights and depths, nor of origins and endings, but of restless, incessant horizontal movements: nomadic wanderings,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Charity quotes from pg. 73 of H. Frankfort’s \textit{Ancient Egyptian Religion}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Deut. 4:32: “Because ask of the earliest days that were before you, from the day that God created a human on the earth, and from one end of the skies to the other end of the skies: has there been anything like this great thing? Or has anything like it been heard of?”
\end{itemize}
topographical displacements, variations of weather, skirmishes in the desert,”\textsuperscript{15} and he is partially correct. Yes, \textit{Blood Meridian} and \textit{The Road} are both obsessed with horizontal movement and the \textit{telos} of history, but these movements have a purpose. \textit{Blood Meridian} is wholly consumed with questions of origin; in many ways it is an etiology of the concept of evil in the American character. The novel never posits that “exile is…our primordial and positive condition,” as Shaviro writes; it blames Manifest Destiny as the \textit{origin} of our alienation and marks it as an act of self-destruction that we are continually called upon to re-enact under the guise of “progress.” This expansion event-type and its various fulfillments throughout history are allegorized in \textit{Blood Meridian’s} supposedly “facile and easy” epilogue as the pursuit of “the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality.”\textsuperscript{16} As the judge says to Toadvine in response to his claim that “no man can acquaint himself with everthing [sic] on this earth”:

\begin{quote}
The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But the 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. \textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{15} Shavir\textsuperscript{o}, 147.
\textsuperscript{17} McCarthy, \textit{Blood Meridian} 199
\end{flushright}
That “thread of order from the tapestry” to the typological author is always history, and it is an understanding of history and causality that McCarthy goads us toward in his writings.

2. Dispensations and Covenants

My next goal must be to establish how the biblical concepts of covenant and dispensation inform McCarthy’s representation of history, and how these dispensations signify a shift from mythic to historical time. Specifically, I will call attention to two uses of type-scene and attempt to illustrate how their variations shift agency from God to man.

In *Blood Meridian*, the universally recognizable journey archetype is inverted: Instead of returning from his journey with some sort of boon or knowledge that can be used to improve the world, the kid returns steeped in darkness and fatefully meets a grisly demise. The novel is a *Bildungsroman* without moral or spiritual development, and what McCarthy seems to be saying is that ethics are relative, we are born into chaos and that history is not progress. While his book is steeped in biblical prose and allusion, it seems to reject the very mode of thought that made the Israelites unique in history.

In the epilogue of *Blood Meridian*, a man wanders in the desert pulling fire from the Earth as others follow behind, like cogs in a machine. McCarthy writes:

In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there. On the plain behind him
and the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search and they move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapment and pallet so that they appear restrained by a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs into the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one that came before it there one the prairie upon which the bones and those who do not gather. He strikes the fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again.¹⁸

Critics’ initial dismay at the end of the novel was understandable if not unwarranted since it seems to suggest that we are lost to history and ultimately left to wander through wasteland after wasteland, chasing what can only be empty symbols. After reading an epic that features trees strewn with dead infants, beheadings and countless other acts of brutal violence, we are, as Shaviro puts it, “called to no responsibility, and we may lay claim to no transcendence.”¹⁹

For Leo Daughtery, however, this ending provided the first inkling that the novel was rooted in Gnostic ideology and gave Blood Meridian an optimistic outcome. He writes, “The…man provides a ‘structural element’… he is the revealer or ‘revelator’ of the divine, working to free spirit from matter – the pneumatic (albeit corporeal) messenger, in possession of gnosis, who is in service to the good ‘alien God,’” that this reading is supported by “the imagery

¹⁸ McCarthy, Blood Meridian 337
¹⁹ Shaviro 148
of his striking and freeing bits of fire, imprisoned in the Earth, which come from God,” and that “the digging man is in ‘pursuit’… of making his way back to the good, alien god – and of freeing and revealing imprisoned bits of holy fire in the evil world of the archons and all their sleeping inmates as he goes.”

He writes that he first took the scene to represent “some manner of culture-making force,” but that close reading caused him to abandon his original assumption. His line of reasoning does not seem to depart from these initial instincts: The live man leading essentially dead followers in a tick-tock fashion like “cogs in a wheel” seems like much more on a historical materialist’s argument than a Gnostic’s. Daughtery insists that the man is a “revelator,” paying no attention to those who follow behind, blindly verifying the principle and contributing to the “storm of progress.” There is nothing optimistic about the end of Blood Meridian, and Daughtery’s argument is wholly unconvincing in this regard as well.

The Road, though, stands in startling contrast to McCarthy’s initial insistence that we lack agency or responsibility. A telling scene occurs toward the beginning of the novel when the boy recalls a nightmare to his father: “I had this penguin that you wound up and it would waddle and flap its flippers. And we were in the house that we used to live in and it came around the corner but nobody had wound it up and it was really scary.” Through his dream, the boy articulates just how frightening it is to conceive of a dispensation that lacks an anchoring creation event in which those created lack agency and are left to pointless wanderings – a world that is remarkably similar to the one described in Blood Meridian.

---

20 Daughtery, 167
21 Daughtery, 168
One way that McCarthy assigns causal relationships is through his use of the type-scene\textsuperscript{23}. Also, like the authors of the Bible, McCarthy utilizes this device for purposes of characterization and foreshadowing, giving depth to characters whose consciousnesses we cannot access and purpose to stories that lack, in a modern sense, “plot.” As Robert Alter described in his landmark book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, the authors of the Bible utilized formal variations as much as they utilized formal repetition. His famous example was of the betrothal type-scene, which occurs twice in Genesis and once in Exodus. This convention, which was well known at the time of the Bible’s authorship and early transmission, would have communicated a wealth of information to its audience that is, unfortunately, lost to us as modern readers. Without being completely familiar with the “betrothal at a well” convention, we can, as modern readers, excavate the differences in each scene’s presentation and guess at the author’s intent in confirming, subverting or omitting conventions in each.

McCarthy provides characterization and foreshadowing in world where the characters are divested of interiority and personal history through the use of this device. McCarthy takes one convention from the American literary classic *Moby-Dick* in the same way that the Biblical writers took their convention from ancient Near Eastern literary tradition. The scene emulated and varied concerns Elijah, the man who hints that Ishmael and Queequeg have sold their souls as they prepare to join Ahab’s suicide mission in Chapter 19, “The Prophet.” Melville writes:

\begin{quote}
Queequeg and I had just left the Pequod and were sauntering away from the water, for the moment each occupied with his own thoughts, when the above
\end{quote}

words [shipmates have ye shipped in that ship] were put to us by a stranger who,
pausing before us, leveled his massive forefinger at the vessel in question. He was
but shabbily appareled in faded jacket and patched trousers, a rag of black
handkerchief investing his neck.  

A strikingly similar premonition occurs in both Blood Meridian and The Road. In the former, the
gang encounters “an old disordered Mennonite” at a saloon in the Laredito who says to them:
“At the river. Be told. They’ll jail you to a man… The wrath of God lies sleeping. It was hid a
million years before men were and only men have power to wake it. Hell ain’t half full. Hear me.
Ye carry war of a madman’s making onto a foreign land. Ye’ll wake more than the dogs.”
The brief physical description of the Mennonite (wet eyes, thin rim of whiskers, black hat) evokes the
appearance of Elijah, and the fact that these characters offer similarly portentous sayings
suggests they occupy the same structural position.

In The Road, the father and son met Ely, a man who refuses to divulge his real name and
who warns that “there is no god, and we are his prophets.” The scenes are immediately
reminiscent of each other because in each book, the number of non-central characters is limited.
In Blood Meridian, we are given very little access to anyone’s consciousness, to be sure, but we
are granted an even smaller window of access into the consciousness of those being acted upon
by the Gang. In The Road, the only two characters are the man and the boy; everyone else
encountered is discounted as “bad,” and not to be interacted with. These two instances, by merit
of their rareness and their mutual allusion to Moby-Dick are therefore related, and we can use

25 McCarthy, Blood Meridian 40
Alter’s theory of the type-scene to draw thematic conclusions based on how McCarthy treats these disparate interactions.

The pronouncements of the Mennonite in *Blood Meridian* immediately recall the logic that governed the mythopoeic world of the pre-Israelites. The concern revolves around a god who “lies sleeping” and thus has the potential to be awakened. In contrast, Ely accepts the consequences of history and declares that the cataclysm was the result of “people always getting ready for tomorrow.”26 For the Mennonite, the introduction of chaos is continually re-enacted at the whims of an immanent deity; for Ely, evil is the result of historical progress, and there’s no choice but to “just keep going.” The logic of the Mennonite does not allow for *telos* as evidenced by his belief that evil is an anthropomorphized entity lying dormant, ready to purge the Earth of those who disrupt the natural order. While the disaster that has befallen man might recall the Deluge in Genesis 7, it is clear that agency now rests on the shoulders of the human since in the post-apocalyptic world, “God does not exist.” Further destruction can only be caused by the actions of man, and this destruction will be self-wrought rather than a result of divine sanction. These two prophetic figures represent two competing ontologies, and McCarthy deploys them to illustrate a shift in characterization from those who are governed with notions of fate and those who are governed by the consequences of history.

Another thematic repetition with formal variation has to do with McCarthy’s treatment of names and representations. While the prophetic type-scene deals with a shifting of agency from god to man, this scene illustrates the consequences that befall those who reject history. In *Blood Meridian* a Tennessean named Webster questions the judge’s pre-occupation with recording

---

26 McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 168
likenesses in his ledgerbook and requests not to be drawn out of fear of being “chained to his own likeness.” During the man’s conversation with Ely, an old and disordered man he meets on the road, he asks, “Is your name really Ely?” to which Ely replies, “I don’t want to say it. I couldn’t trust you with it. To do something with it. I don’t want anybody talking about me. To say where I was or what I said when I was there.”

After the judge’s conversation with Brown, he goes on to tell a story that is, in itself, typological. He relates the tale of a harnessmaker who welcomes a traveler into his family’s home. The family adores the traveler, but the harnessmaker, while leading him to the road, murders him and buries him in a shallow grave. The wife, so moved by her short experience with the traveler, considers him a second son and visits his grave throughout her life. Only on his deathbed does the harnessmaker reveal that bandits did not attack the traveler. The son, always jealous of the traveler, goes on to become “a killer of men,” and his mother goes on to refer to the buried traveler as her son until she dies. This story communicates how a historical occurrence goes on to effect progeny and the tautology that evil begets more evil.

The judge’s story goes on to spawn an argument among the members of the Gang. They ejaculate claims that the judge’s story is inaccurate, each purporting to know the true details of the story. Protests range from “He was no harnessmaker, he was a shoemaker,” to “that was my brother in that casket and he was a minstrel dancer out of Cincinnati Ohio was shot to death over a woman.” These responses confirm the judge’s earlier declarations that, “Whether in my book or not, every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless

---

27 McCarthy, Blood Meridian 141
28 McCarthy, The Road 171
29 McCarthy, Blood Meridian 145
30 McCarthy, Blood Meridian 145
complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world”\textsuperscript{31} and “all will be known to you at last. To you as to every man.”\textsuperscript{32} The judge’s philosophy is that there is a timeless truth that subsumes the aggregate of human experience. It is also clear that the judge is the ultimate rejecter of history. Daughtery would attribute his position as a trickster to the fact that Holden represents an archon, but the \textit{gnosis} at stake has nothing to do with mysticism at all. His purpose is to prevent an understanding of history by taking a concrete, historical event and encasing it in ritual, all the while declaring that “War is God.”\textsuperscript{33} Holden continually stirs the primordial chaos, never allowing anything to solidify. He dances and “says he will never die”\textsuperscript{34} because he is beyond history, and his function in the novel is to create pure chaos by turning “a chain of events” into “a single catastrophe.”

It is clear that McCarthy believes, much like the authors of the Bible, that history is not merely a teleological process we lack the capacity to understand and that while events are indeed anchored by their historical precursors, there is an overarching truth that subsumes them. The monomaniacal evil of the judge stems from the fact that he prevents \textit{gnosis} of historical precursors and therefore prevents humans from having agency. The use of type-scene mirrors the jump from mythopoeic to historical time and creates a bridge between the two universes of the respective novels. As in the Bible, these dispensations are marked by covenants. This focus on covenant provides the most emphatic disruption to a purely Gnostic reading of McCarthy.

The Biblical patriarchs established a series of covenants with God based on the following of ritual and adherence to a moral code based upon the concept of separateness or

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} McCarthy, \textit{Blood Meridian} 93
\textsuperscript{33} McCarthy, \textit{Blood Meridian} 248
\textsuperscript{34} McCarthy, \textit{Blood Meridian} 335
“holiness.” The agreements between God and man relied on an exchange of symbols that denoted concepts of “otherness.” This is not to be mistaken with innate moral superiority. Circumcision, the construction of the tabernacle, and other covenant-markers only served to further reduce the number of ancient Near Eastern peoples that were protected by Yahweh’s providence.

The Israelites were far from a perfect people as the Bible widely attests: They built false idols, endlessly complained, and had to be bound by a certain set of danger beliefs to prevent contamination of their camp. After the Flood, Yahweh acknowledged man’s predisposition for evil and law becomes to way to keep them from self-destruction. Yahweh divested other peoples from the lands the Israelites came to conquer because they did not adhere to a certain set of guidelines, and it was imperative that the Israelites conduct themselves accordingly.

The Israelites dealt with this responsibility through their conception of “holiness” – a symbolic structure revolving around concepts of pollution and purgation. The task of the Levites was to account for man’s predisposition for sin and to make amends for it, always attempting to maintain equilibrium between the sacred and profane. Mosaic law, as laid out in the second half of Exodus through Numbers, was concerned with maintaining the distinction

---

37 Num. 15-16. provides an example of superstition through an explanation of the “Sotah ritual” in which a woman, believed to be adulterous, is forced to drink a “bitter cursing water” that will make her ill and barren if she is guilty.
38 Gen. 7.
39 Lev. 20:23: “And you shall not go by the laws of the nation that I am ejecting you from in front of you, because they have done all these, and I am disgusted with them.”
40 Douglas, Mary, Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo (London: Routledge, 2005)
between pollutants that would alienate YHWH and acceptable practices for maintaining ritual cleanliness. Because YHWH led the Israelites out of bondage, they were expected to maintain deference toward him and separateness from other peoples, and because Biblical Hebrew lacked a vocabulary conducive to abstraction, it was necessary that the code of conduct revolve around absolute adherence to a seemingly arbitrary set of standards related to concrete, everyday practices.

In *Blood Meridian*, the Glanton Gang establishes a bilateral relationship with the supernatural judge at a crucial moment in which defeat seems eminent. Holden shares his almost encyclopedic knowledge of science and teaches the remaining 12 members of the Gang to forge much-needed bullets out of brimstone and urine in exchange for their total allegiance. This story is clearly a thematic centerpiece; taking up 11 pages, it is the longest continuous narrative in the novel. The men forge what Tobin calls a “terrible covenant”\(^\text{41}\) that is remarkably similar to the covenant established between the Israelites and Yahweh at the Sinaitic Event. The judge tells the men to circle the mountain for 48 hours before returning, delivers a sermon and leads the men off like “disciples of a new faith.”\(^\text{42}\) This covenant is similar to the Pentateuchal covenants in that the judge, like Yahweh, infers a special status among a group of people in return for total obedience. The obedience does not concern ethical conduct – it simply has to do with a mending of wills, for neither God nor Holden will accept any deviation from their pronouncements. In fact, the judge tells Glanton’s men: “Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every

\(^{41}\) McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 126
\(^{42}\) Ibid. 130
The evidence that Daughtery presents for Holden’s status as an archon is tenuous at best. His argument stems from a claim that Holden makes to Toadvine: “This is my claim…and yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine, nothing must be able to permit upon it save for my dispensation.”

As he explains later, his goal is to become a Suzerain, “one whose authority countermands local judgments.” Nothing about this argument suggests that Holden is specifically an archon, and in fact, this argument seems to suggest that Holden is less of an archon than an amalgamation of the Levitical priest and Yahweh, one who is swept up in cultic ritual but unconcerned with matters of morality. This is supported by the fact that the two types of covenants that appear in ancient Near Eastern law are suzerainty and parity. In the covenant between Yahweh and the Israelites, Yahweh was most certainly a Suzerain over the fledgling nation and the two were not in a peer relationship as they would be in a parity arrangement.

More importantly, the archon’s primary task is to prevent humans from obtaining gnosis, but judge isn’t only concerned with this; he is concerned with forcing progress at the expense of understanding. While the judge is undoubtedly a malevolent, trickster character, his evil comes from the fact that he can simultaneously initiate history while obscuring historical memory. This is why Blood Meridian is so disturbing – by making the authorial figure who initiates the new dispensation wholly alien to our conceptions of Judeo-Christian ethics,
McCarthy seems to suggest that the “American character” is monstrous and beyond redemption. The new historical dispensation that unfolds is post-biblical but still relies on biblical types to present a theory of history in which the past prefigures the present while the present simultaneously envelops the past, all the while pointing to an eschatology that is bleak and meaningless. It is only in The Road, when history has literally been reset, that the judge stops dancing and redemption can come for man.

These biblical covenants as detailed in the Priestly source of the Pentateuch divided history into four distinct dispensations, each related to a patriarchal figure, initiated by a judgment and marked by a covenantal sign. The Noahic covenant was between man and all flesh and marked by a rainbow; the Abrahamic covenant was between El Shaddai and Abraham/his seed and marked by circumcision; and the Mosaic covenant was between Yahweh and Israel and marked by the Sabbath. The binding factor (and therefore, the degree of importance) of the covenants was indicated by the increasing exclusivity of the covenantal signs. In Blood Meridian, the covenant between the judge and the Gang and is marked by an external sign: the frequently envoked “evening redness in the west;” in The Road, the covenant between the man and the boy and is signified by an internal fire, only accessible to the few remaining “good guys” on Earth.

3. The Dantean Precursor

In Events and their Afterlife, A.C. Charity articulates how the Commedia is typological because it turns “prophecy into challenge”\textsuperscript{47}. While acts of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible force

\textsuperscript{47} Charity 168
the Israelites to reconsider the most basic ontological suppositions of their culture and leave “myth” for “history,” Dante uses his own experiences as a Christian to “challenge” readers into cementing their faith.

Through an inversion of Dante’s religious epic, the *Commedia*, McCarthy suggests we are in a new dispensation of religious and political history in which free will reigns and fallen man is taken to his logical conclusion. This new dispensation, which for Dante came with Christ, comes from the concept of American exceptionalism in McCarthy. Both narratives deal with how political and historical circumstance structure the ways in which man is reconfigured through his consideration of the divine. Just as Dante asks his readers to “individually appropriate Christianity,” McCarthy asks his readers to individually appropriate the “American character” that was created in Manifest Destiny. Instead of blindly seeking the “verification of a principle,” readers are asked to take the primary principle of American exceptionalism – individual agency – and use it to look both backwards and forward to lead themselves to a new existence.

The *Commedia* is, from a literary standpoint, about the creation of a new poetic tradition. Dante attempted to create an unrivaled work, write in a new language and style, describe things that by their very definition elude description and divert the carnal desires of man toward achieving beatific vision. From the very beginning of *Blood Meridian*, we know our protagonist faces the same historical *carte blanche*; He is born of a father who “quotes from poets whose names are now lost,” ⁴⁸ and he remains throughout the novel, unnamed and unhethered. The kid wanders throughout the West looking for guidance until he finds Captain White who will give

---

⁴⁸ McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 3
him a parcel of land if he follows his direction.

The final chapter of Blood Meridian is undeniably bleak and maddeningly circular. The kid, born during the Leonids meteor shower, suffers an unnamable death, as “stars [are] falling across the sky myriad and random, speeding along brief vectors from their origins in night to their destines in dust and nothingness49” and the judge, the etiology of evil, continues dancing indefinitely. Both McCarthy and Dante utilize concrete symbolism in order to make the consequences that befall their characters “appropriate not only in degree but in mode to the sin.”50 Dante does this through contrapasso, a punishment that involves the sinner in an infliction of the same kind that he has inflicted on others. The only use of this word explicitly elucidates its meaning: “I made a father and son rebels towards each other. Achitopel did no more towards Absalom and David by malicious incitements. Because I parted persons so united now I carry my brain, alas, parted from its root, which is in this trunk. So retribution is observed in me.”51 The contrapasso is reminiscent of various traditions that existed in ancient Near Eastern law codes such as Hittite Law, in which the talionic principle called for one who steals beehives to be stung by bees and Middle Assyrian Law, which calls for prostitutes who veil themselves like married women to have hot pitch poured over their heads.52

Besides alluding to ancient Near Eastern conceptions of jurisprudence, Dante’s neologism for “observed in me” is reminiscent of the covenant marker in The Road. As the father lies dying from an arrow-inflicted wound, he goads his son to continue down the road:

---

49 McCarthy, Blood Meridian 333
50 Charity, 189
52 Roth, Martha, Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1995)
You have to carry the fire.

I don’t know how to.

Yes, you do.

Is the fire real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I don’t know where it is.

Yes you do. It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it.53

As in the Commedia, characterization and plot occur from the outward manifestation of an internal and unchanging fact. Just as the contrapasso allows for a perpetuation of sin and characterizes otherwise flat characters into self-disclosure, the covenantal sign of internal fire provides characterization to the man and the boy who would otherwise be fixed within a single context. They exist in a world defined by the good-bad binary and most of the dialogue in The Road involves the almost choral repetition of the need to carry the fire and be “good guys.” However, like Dante, McCarthy uses this trope of self-disclosure to provide characterization through concrete symbolism.

McCarthy’s motif of “carrying the fire” is introduced in the final pages of No Country For Old Men in Sheriff Bell’s dream vision. After he laments the moral decline since the days of his father, Bell dreams of him riding past him on the horse, carrying “fire of moonlight color in a

53 McCarthy, The Road 279
horn.”54 Not only does this intertextual link in McCarthy suggest a series of quest narratives that ultimately comprise one text, it buttresses the supposition that “fire” can be read as “legacy,” as well as hope. Dante is similarly obsessed with the concept of legacy throughout the Commedia. While Dante exalts poetic legacy over procreative legacy, McCarthy uses father-son relationships as thematic centerpieces in his novels. It is only when the father dies at the end of The Road that any sort of redemption can come for humanity, and hope shows its face for the first time in any of McCarthy’s novels. This purgation also informs Dante; it is only after he encounters his literary, theological, moral and historical idols in the afterlife that Dante can ascend to the highest point of Heaven and achieve his beatific vision, which, ultimately, he lacks the ability to describe.

There is no deficiency in Dante’s imagination; that much is certain. Rather, there exists no tradition that gives Dante the vocabulary to convey a face-to-face encounter with God. McCarthy either faces the same problem or deliberately chooses to follow in the tradition of Dante’s speechlessness; the fate the kid suffers at the hands of the terrible judge remains ambiguous at the end of Blood Meridian, and The Road ends with a rumination on the mysterious quality of nature rather an explication of the consequences of the boy’s modified beatific vision. Each author theorizes morality, spirituality, politics and history, but leaves the conclusion to the reader’s interpretation of the proposed theory. Both narratives serve as an invitation to self-reflection, and ultimately, as a concession to the ineffable and incomprehensible qualities of the divine.

For both the Commedia and McCarthy’s string of novels to count as quest narratives, McCarthy, Cormac, No Country For Old Men (New York: Vintage International/Vintage, 2007).
both must have the concept of redemption as their locus. In Dante’s work, this redemption is explicit. The pilgrim reaches a state of spiritual ecstasy in which he is consumed by free will, the basis of faith, and encounters God directly. In McCarthy, excavating the idea of redemption requires a closer reading. In *The Road*, redemption can only come from destruction and regeneration can only come after total devastation. In this way, McCarthy is much more nihilistic than Dante. He believes the human can be delivered from his state of sinfulness and violence but only after the world literally implodes or faces a flood-like purgation equivalent to that of Genesis 7, and man is left to start from scratch. Redemption doesn’t come from an encounter with God, as it does in Dante, but from an encounter with another man, one of the “good guys,” someone like the boy who is also intent on “carrying the fire.” Both narratives end with their respective protagonists being redeemed by symbolic reflections of themselves, but it seems that McCarthy’s spiritual quest narrative revolves around a new historical and religious dispensation in which God is irrelevant to the question of how to redeem man. *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* might even be considered a post-Christian quest narrative, or a re-telling of the fall of man from a historical, not religious, standpoint.

In the pilgrim’s discussion with John in *Paradiso* XXVI, Dante claims that Christ has brought him from a “sea of twisted love” to a “shore where love is just.”\(^55\) It is precisely this shore that the father and son strive to reach in *The Road*. The father and son have completed the journey of Manifest Destiny by reaching the coast. However, instead of completing this gesture as an act of domination, they complete it as an act of love. As in Dante, the re-direction of love takes a physical and geographical route in the works of McCarthy. Like Christ who “bore death”

so that Dante “might live,” the Father dies so that the son can complete the Narcissistic gesture of recognition and join the company of other “good guys.”

If Dante’s narrative is about reaching the emanating light of God’s love and re-directing his desires toward the pursuit of glorifying God and the creation of legacy, McCarthy’s narrative is about much of the same. The only difference lies in that McCarthy thinks that man is the impetus of all world affairs, not God. Instead of glorifying God, he glorifies man for his innate goodness. What he tells us is that even when all conventional morality, and even God, seems to have abandoned us, there is still hope, there is still some merit to “carrying the fire” of history. He tells us that our history exists even when it is obscured and that history is worth passing on. If Dante’s goal is to look into the ever-reflective mirror of God and see himself redeemed, the goal of the father and son is to make it to the coast and find someone like them, someone imbued with a sense of “goodness,” someone intent on procreating and communing with them. In a world where all is lost, including all history (even legacies as deeply imbued in human history as the Bible56), man must create his own meaning, and his only possible goal is to complete the gesture of Narcissus by looking into another fallen creature and seeing himself. By eliminating God from the equation, McCarthy is able to solve Dante’s problem of fallenness without the arbiter of a divine being. The quest isn’t about finding God but about identifying with fellow man and seeing goodness reflected back. It is about defeating the judge, transcending the etiology of evil and recognizing what is good and transcendent in the human spirit. It is, ultimately, about transcending the pratfalls of conflating history with progress and recognizing what is worthy of propagating when it comes to man’s legacy.

56 The kid, now “the man,” carries a Bible he cannot read (pg --), “blindly verifying a principle,” but in *The Road*, it is repeatedly stated that God is nowhere to be found.
After the man dies in *The Road*, we get one paragraph of insight into the boy’s new life before the novel’s conclusion. McCarthy writes: “She would try to talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn’t forget. The woman said that was alright. The breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man all through eternity.” It is this scene that summarizes the entirety of McCarthy’s epic and cements the boy as the fulfillment of the kid. The boy is a figure who must return to the ocean – the origins of life – and begin a new dispensation, unfettered by the clutter of history and free of accumulated sin. Conversely, the kid is bogged down by a history he cannot understand and by people blindly clinging to a principle that will ultimately lead to his destruction. He is the angel who cannot close his wings for he cannot see the havoc he wrecks because of the judge, the one who defies all notions of time and space and negates history, throwing man back into a mythopoeic world consumed with ritual and chaos. Instead of a “single thread of order,” the kid is left with what the judge continually refers to as a “the game,” a never-ending series of sleight-of-hand tricks that will prevent him from understanding his past and present, as well as his eschatological character.

Carrying the Fire: Conclusions

McCarthy’s theology is very much centered on restructuring the human, but redemption doesn’t derive from looking into the face of God and achieving beatific vision, as it does in the Dantean precursor. At the end of *The Road* it is clear that agency is given to man, the one entrusted to “carry the fire” of history and search for the ultimate fulfillment of mankind within

---

57 McCarthy, *The Road* 286
it. This fulfillment can only come from looking into the face of another and seeing goodness reflected back. It is in this way that man can unveil the order of things and see the overarching truth implicit in the figures that comprise his past, present and ultimately, his eternal state. In this schematic, Manifest Destiny is an event-figure that finds fulfillment in cataclysmic disaster, and the kid – characterized only by his ambivalence – finds fulfillment in highly moral figure of the boy.

In “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the specific character of the American came from his ability to forge new territories unfettered by European example. He traced the development of American cities as the pioneers expanded west and how, as previously isolated territories became more geographically central, they adopted specific characteristics that would come to constitute regional identity.  

I think McCarthy also believes that Western expansion was the most significant event in the development of an American people as well as the greatest experiment in all of Western history.

As Charity notes, there is frequent parallelism in the Old Testament between the “way” and the “law.” Because God, he writes, led Israel through the wilderness, Israel was summoned to a specific “way of life.” McCarthy creates the same parallel through his two quest narratives, both of which end at a shore, a liminal place that represents both the origin and conclusion of life. Because the covenancers of the Glanton Gang were lead to a symbolic shore that signified domination over some negative inversion of Western culture, Americans were called to a certain way of life, bound forever to blindly verify it, and ultimately repeat the same

58 Turner, Frederick Jackson, The Significance of the Frontier in American History (Project Gutenberg, 14 Oct. 2007)
59 Charity, 105
journey to a symbolic shore. McCarthy breaks this endless repetition and recapitulation with the boy, a new Adamic figure who exists in a world in which “There is no later. This is later.”

Turner argued that the uniqueness of the American character was defined by the American’s ability to tame the wild during westward expansion. Once the western frontier was exhausted, the concept of frontier shifted to include places overseas. Through imperialism and attempts at democracy building in the Middle East, Americans continue to define themselves by claiming dominance over an “other.” Jackson’s “Frontier Thesis” seems to resonate with McCarthy. Both authors realized that westward expansion marked a new point in human history in which European standards of civilization were discarded and Americans were left to create their own morals and institutions without any historical template. Blood Meridian offers no moral judgment on the horrors of Manifest Destiny, but The Road humanizes those decisions and shows the implications of American exceptionalism as they affect the father and son.

So what does the fire represent in The Road? Is it legacy? Is it the sign of covenant in a truly post-lapsarian, apocalyptic world, a contract that can only exist between men because god has abandoned his creation? The Glanton Gang during Manifest Destiny enacts the same gesture as Adam in the beginning of Genesis when he names the animals and establishes dominion over them. As the American expands westward he claims dominion over the savage and lesser “other” because he feels a sense of “chosenness” by God. Morality is obscured and the knowledge of good and evil seems all but alien. This lack of knowledge is not a sign of complete communion with God but instead leads to total chaos and mindless violence. Therefore, the mediation that Dante laments is championed in The Road. The fire is the concept of good and evil, the original

---

60 McCarthy, The Road 54
sign that separated man from death in the garden. The sign that protected man from death in Genesis is precisely what redeems him in McCarthy, and the knowledge of good and evil is what must be passed on if man hopes to survive in his post-lapsarian state.

To return to the original, glaring question: Why does McCarthy choose to rely on the traditions of Biblical literature and spiritual quest narrative if his narrative is decidedly humanistic, if not downright atheistic? What is the purpose of a Bildungsroman about a character that experiences no moral or spiritual development, like the kid in Blood Meridian? These almost universally recognizable narrative archetypes are inverted and strategically varied to provide a startling commentary that teeters on the brink of outright condemnation. The series of novels is undeniably about the transmission of the concept of “humanity” between generations: In Blood Meridian the moral calculus allows for such atrocities as cannibalism and the murder of infants; in The Road, what sets apart the father and son from the “bad guys” is their refusal to eat other people to survive, and it is this innate “goodness” they want to pass on to other people. When the two novels are taken into consideration as a typological whole, these questions disappear. The only question that remains is: Why are Blood Meridian and The Road suddenly so resonant?

One does not have to look very far into our recent political history to look for answers. With an increased interest in democracy promotion after the September 11th terrorist attacks, issues of legacy and morality are at the forefront of our consciousness. The mythos of George W. Bush, often deemed the “cowboy president,” is not unfamiliar to any attentive reader of McCarthy’s judge, the one who claims “war is at last the forcing of the unity of existence.”61 Fresh off an eight-year stint with a president who wanted to continue Manifest Destiny into other

61 McCarthy, Blood Meridian 249
nations with the concept of “democracy building,” Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis is obviously pertinent to American readers, and McCarthy’s oeuvre can be taken seriously as an indictment of the past decade of our foreign policy.

McCarthy’s, like Dante’s, political beliefs are inextricable from his religious allusions. Just as Dante believed that political strife between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines would contribute to a corrupted papacy and ultimately, religious and moral decline, McCarthy believes that Manifest Destiny has spawned a dangerous sense of exceptionalism that will lead to the kind of nuclear devastation we see in *The Road*.

McCarthy problematizes the Judeo-Christian ideology that led to an invasion of Iraq by accusing it of relying on notions of fulfillment that can ultimately lead to destruction. The fire that is struck out of the rocks at the end of *Blood Meridian* is not for the “blind verification of a principle,” but to be put back in the hands of man who must carry it to achieve his own salvation. His work is less Gnostic than it is millenarian, and he seems to believe that the only solution to a world tainted by chaos is a dramatic change only to be survived by the “good guys.” To McCarthy, eschatological judgment occurs within history and because of history. *The Road* helps us to understand the current zeitgeist by humanizing the decisions made by the founders of our country and granting us an artistic statement with which to criticize them. As McCarthy said in 1992 to the *New York Times*, in one of only two interviews the hermitic author has granted during his career:

There's no such thing as life without bloodshed. I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really
dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give
up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and
make your life vacuous.\(^\text{62}\)

So the violence isn’t what we are supposed to take away from *Blood Meridian*; McCarthy is
merely cataloguing a necessary and vital human function in his virtuosic and blood-drenched
prose. The jaw-dropping brutality he depicts is meant to flatten out any psychological or moral
judgments and present a stark naked view of historical process. The judge exists as a device that
further eliminates characterization by divesting characters of their individuality. This is why the
kid carries a bible he cannot read\(^\text{63}\) and a lost life falls “turning in that lonely void until it fell
from sight into a sink of cold blue space that absolved it forever of memory in the mind of any
living thing that was.”\(^\text{64}\) Each character is bound to a legacy greater than himself and no
individual life carries weight.

*The Road*, though, is difficult to consider in light of McCarthy’s self-proclaimed nihilistic
disposition. Are we to assume that the writer who once wrote what could arguably be considered
the most violent and pessimistic novel of the past 20 years had a change of heart? In his second
interview, with Oprah Winfrey in 2007, McCarthy admits that *The Road* is a love story to his
son, John Francis.\(^\text{65}\) So, in a word: Yes. *The Road* is a work of redaction that allows the kid to
become fulfilled and presents a world to a young son that is redeemable and worth passing on.

1992)

\(^{63}\) McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 312

\(^{64}\) McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 147

Through an ingenious deployment of typological allegory and the grandest of Narcissistic gestures, McCarthy has managed to maintain his initial insistence that mankind is wholly degenerate by looking into the eyes of his progeny and finding hope for a future that has arrested the “storm blowing from Paradise.” He has stopped the judge, the figure who serves to retard understanding under the guise of progress, by asking his son to look inside himself toward the sign of an internal covenant between men and be one of the “good guys” in a world that is vastly devoid of morality. He presents us with the boy, the Adamic/Messianic figure who has the ability to “carry the fire” of human progress without being ensnared in the chaos that left his forefathers “tabernacled in each other” and bound to an interminable series of violent re-enactments. The grandest statement the trickster judge ever makes is nothing about the game of war or the degeneracy of mankind, but the simple statement that “there is no mystery.” An attentive reader of McCarthy will immediately find this statement to be a falsehood. There is mystery, a bit of knowledge, that can moderate our acceleration into oblivion. Leo Daughtery’s mistake is thinking that we need to look to a divine power to find this “alien” goodness. McCarthy is telling his son that he can find it within himself.

Bibliography:


---

66 McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 252


James, Peter M. Blood Meridian, the Brutalist Aesthetic and History. Thesis. Wesleyan University, 2008.


McCarthy, Cormac. Blood Meridian Or the Evening Redness in the West. New York:


