

## ANALYSIS

*Blood Meridian* (1985)

Cormac McCarthy

(1933- )

“What do we make of this phenomenon, a mind that dwells unremittingly on evil and a prose that conveys these thoughts with the tongue of an angel?”

Walter Sullivan

“About Any Kind of Meanness You Can Name”

*Sewanee Review* 93 (Fall 1985) 652

“*Suttree* is generally considered McCarthy’s best work [no longer], but it must compete for this honor with his fifth novel, *Blood Meridian*. Set in the old Southwest and Mexican territory, *Blood Meridian* renews McCarthy’s dark vision with a vengeance: From one massacre to another, the novel traces the lives of scruffy adventurers and bounty hunters who represent the cutting edge of Manifest Destiny and who might embody a violence at the heart of civilization itself.

While writing *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy got closer to the scene by moving to El Paso, Texas. Since then, he has continued to move about, living and writing in hotels and occasionally visiting his family and friends in Tennessee....McCarthy has received grants from the Rockefeller, Guggenheim, Lyndhurst, and MacArthur foundations. He has also received much critical praise, especially from other authors, who admire the care and skill with which he writes. Moreover, McCarthy has developed steadily over the years, polishing his style and increasing his range. Nevertheless, his readership remains small. Some readers might be repulsed by his frequently gruesome subjects or his seemingly nihilistic vision, but they should instead respect him for facing the worse and not settling for easy triumphs...His moral vision is his sense of humanity, which might seem to concentrate on the quirky fringes but by the same token is remarkably inclusive. For McCarthy, it is not hard to accept even his necrophiliac Lester Ballard as ‘a child of God much like yourself perhaps.’”

Harold Branam

*Cyclopedia of World Authors* II, Vol. 3

ed. Frank N. Magill

(Salem 1989) 964-65

“John Glanton is found as a character in Jeremiah Clemens’s 1856 romance *Bernard Lile*. As recently as 1956 he appears in the pages of Samuel Chamberlain’s long-lost personal narrative of the late 1840s, *My Confession*. His name punctuates any number of histories of the mid-nineteenth-century Southwest, and even when nameless his legend is unmistakable....The decade of the 1840s had seen the northern Mexico State of Chihuahua, in its attempt to break the cycle of Indian incursions, hire Anglo aliens to kill the raiders. James (don Santiago) Kirker, in particular, brought hundreds of ‘proofs’ of the deaths of Indians and thousands of head of livestock to Chihuahua City during the first half of the decade. ‘Proofs’: that is, the scalps of the Indians, ‘receipts’....

Chihuahua not only paid scalp bounties to licensed alien parties, but also to peon guerilla bands who found that the government payment on a single scalp exceeded the amount which a gang member could earn by hard labor in a year....Kirker’s group was known to have killed as many as two hundred Indians on a single trip, bringing in one hundred and eighty-two scalps. Taking the averages, this is sixty times the amount the men would have earned in other employment....Thus, Captain Glanton filled a void, did the thing the state hired him to do. The scalphunters’ business, though, is thought to have reached a ‘peak’ in late 1849 and early 1850. A ‘depletion’ of the number of Indians venturing into Mexico, due in part to Chihuahua’s willingness to pay for the scalps of women and children (though at a rate below that of warriors), seems to have occurred....

Glanton's 'second in command,' and *Blood Meridian*'s most imposing character, Judge Holden, is also historically verifiable, but only through Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession*, a personal narrative unknown until its publication in 1956. Chamberlain, later a decorated Union general in the Civil War, had entered the nineteenth-century Southwest as a private during the war with Mexico, and his adventures during the 1846-1848 conflict comprise the bulk of *My Confession*. War Department records list him as an army 'Deserter' as of 22 March 1849. He had met Holden as he joined Glanton's gang of scalphunters in the process of this desertion....Chamberlain's depiction of Holden as a child molester...is not his only notice of...depravity....The judge's statement in McCarthy that 'Books lie,' but that God's 'words' are spoken 'in stones and trees, the bones of things,' echoes Chamberlain's story....

McCarthy makes from Dobie's observation on men and horses an analogy expressing the ex-priest Tobin's continuing sense of God's presence, no matter that his vocation in America is scalp-hunting. The kid asserts that he has never heard God's voice, and Tobin contradicts him."

John Emil Sepich

"What kind of indians was them?":

Some Historical Sources in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*"

*Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*

Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, eds.

(U Mississippi 1993) 122-25, 129, 134

"While he worked on *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*, his first three novels (none of which, along with *Suttree*, had sold more than several thousand copies apiece) were reissued in paperback by Echo Press in their 'Neglected Books of the Twentieth Century' series....Based on extensive research and first-hand knowledge of the locales (McCarthy retraced the journeys described in the book), *Blood Meridian* details the exploits of a band of scalp hunters as they murder, pillage, rape and desecrate throughout the border lands of the Southwest. For all of its repellent violence and gore, the book has haunted those who stayed with it.

Although seemingly devoid of moral or finally even meaning, it nevertheless compels its readers to attempt an understanding. *Blood Meridian* received few major reviews at the time of publication, although it has since become the touchstone by which McCarthy readers define themselves. Some admirers of his 'southern' novels disapproved of his new subject, his 'metaphysical western.' 'This novel, despite its chronicling of appalling horrors and its straining for apocalyptic effects, is boring,' Terence Moran declared in *The New Republic*. 'McCarthy should go home, and take another, closer look. He'll find the real devil soon enough there.' Others saw more. 'Any page of his work reveals his originality, a passionate voice given equally to ugliness and lyricism,' wrote Caryn James in the *New York Times Book Review*. 'This latest book is his most important, for it puts in perspective the Faulknerian language and unprovoked violence running through the previous works, which were often viewed as exercises in style or studies of evil. *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 inescapable reality; his elaborate language invents a world hinged between the real and surreal, jolting us out of complacency.'

In the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (where it appeared on the same page as a review of Larry McMurtry's romantic and nostalgic western *Lonesome Dove*), the assessment by Tom Nolan decreed *Blood Meridian* 'a theological purgative, an allegory on the nature of evil as timeless as Goya's hallucinations on war, monomaniacal in its conceptions and execution.' Slowly, this book above others (with *Suttree* as a close second) had developed a dedicated readership. Studied and discussed as an historical novel, as a philosophical or theological treatise, or as a major achievement of postmodern fiction, *Blood Meridian* remains McCarthy's most problematic and extraordinary work to date."

Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, eds.

*Perspectives* (1993) 9-10

"*Blood Meridian* comes out of historical record, and there was an actual Judge Holden...but McCarthy, in a sense, had already created him in *Outer Dark*, for the judge and the sinister, supernatural leader of the murderous band are the same manifestation, extended over time and space. Both are creatures of fire, and

both exemplify a kind of terrible justice and retribution. And what of the kid? Like Culla Holme, he wanders through a dark land, and, again like Culla, his destiny carries him over and over to the company of the frightening judge.

Judge Holden is clearly satanic...a 'sooty-souled rascal' known to all men, a magician, a liar, a trickster. Also a child molester and murderer, drawn to the very innocence he needs to destroy. And yet, again, evil is not that simple in McCarthy. As William James put it, 'the world is all the richer for having a devil in it, *so long as we keep our foot upon his neck,*' and the judge is an endlessly fascinating and seductive and even comic character for all his abhorrent vileness. He 'smiles upon the kid the first time he sees him, follows him with his eye and later claims he has loved him 'like a son.' Most opposed to the judge is Tobin, known as the expriest but actually a lapsed novitiate. He urges the kid to resist the judge at all turns and offers a kind of faith in opposition to the judge's words. 'For let it go how it will,' he tells the kid, 'God speaks in the least of creatures....No man is give leave of that voice.' 'I aint heard no voice,' the kid replies. 'When it stops,' Tobin says, 'You'll know you've heard it all your life.'

The heart of the judge's arguments (which stand in direct opposition to those of the sheriff in *Suttree*) is that life is infinitely fascinating but ultimately has no meaning other than that man imposes on it....'Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak....The mystery is that there is no mystery.' 'As if he were no mystery himself, the bloody old hoodwinker,' responds Tobin, and his point is well taken. Some readers assume the judge speaks for McCarthy himself, but Tobin, I think, comes much closer (or, at least, presents the other side of the dialectic). And it is Tobin who tells the kid to kill the judge when they meet him in the desert after the massacre at Yuma ferry. 'Do it for the love of God. Do it or I swear your life is forfeit,' Tobin says....

The judge says, 'You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen.' (The kid also shows misplaced mercy to other members of the gang, leaving Shelby, for example, alive even though he knows Elias's men will torture him when he is captured.) After the kid is rescued from the desert (by Indians, ironically) and is subsequently jailed in San Diego, the judge accuses him to the authorities of being the cause of the massacre, the 'person responsible.' In a broad sense he is, for he has failed to confront the heart within, to 'face down' the judge....Like Lester Ballard, he pours his words into the ear of a corpse. He has, however, lost his taste for 'mindless violence.' The one time we see him kill after leaving the band, it is out of self-defense. The boy he kills, Elrod, is fifteen, approximately the same age as the kid when he began his exploits....

By failing to examine his heart, to name and face the judge to acknowledge responsibility, the kid is another Culla Holme. Yet unlike Culla, he finally runs out of time, embraced (possibly, like the judge's other child victims, raped) by the judge in the outhouse. The judge lives on: 'He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite...He says that he will never die.' Nor will he, as the epilogue illustrates. Fences will neither hold the judge nor constrain the force he calls to in each of us. But moral choice remains; the judge can still be faced."

Edwin T. Arnold, ed.

"Naming, Knowing and Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables"  
*Perspectives* (1993) 60-63

"Everywhere in this book, death leaves behind its memorials, its trophies and its fetishes: the scalps collected by Glanton and his men, the tree of dead babies, the crucified mummy, the circle of severed heads, the eviscerated bodies of bearded men with 'strange menstrual wounds between their legs and no man's parts for these had been cut away and hung dark and strange from out their grinning mouths.' Reading *Blood Meridian* produces a vertiginous, nauseous exhilaration. A strong compulsion draws us through this text, something beyond either fascination or horror....McCarthy's sublime prose style resonates with those of Faulkner, of Melville and of the King James Bible. And by any criterion, McCarthy's writing is as great as any of these....

Cormac McCarthy, the solitary poet of this exultation, is our greatest living author: nomadic wanderer, lucid cartographer of an inescapable delirium. In the entire range of American literature, only *Moby-Dick* bears comparison to *Blood Meridian*. Both novels are epic in scope, cosmically resonant, obsessed with

open space and with language, exploring vast uncharted distances...Both manifest a sublime visionary power that is matched only by a still more ferocious irony....McCarthy writes with a yet more terrible clarity than does Melville....There is something of Ahab in Glanton...We encounter...the monstrously charismatic figure of Judge Holden, ironic Ahab to the kid's unselfconscious Ishmael. Orphanhood is taken for granted in *Blood Meridian*; the kid, unlike Ishmael, never feels any pathos in this condition....Exile is not deprivation or loss, but our primordial and positive condition....This Ishmael will not be thrown free, and will not survive the wreck.

Glanton and the kid may represent opposite poles of a dialectic, but it is a stalled dialectic, one that fails ever to advance. All these heroic or evasive stances only bring us back by circuitous routes to the immanence of the landscape and the imminence of death, that 'wry and grinning tradesman good to follow every campaign or hound men from their holes in just those whited regions where they've gone to hide from God'."

Steven Shaviro

"'The Very Life of the Darkness': A Reading of *Blood Meridian*"  
*Perspectives* (1993) 143-45, 148, 150-51

"Gnostic thought is central to Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*....The Earth is the judge's. Even so, on our own evil planet Judge Holden's power is not yet complete, since his will is not yet fulfilled in its passion for total domination. [Holden also corresponds to the Christian concept of Satan, who has a "hold" on humankind.] He is working, as he implies to Toadvine, to become a full 'suzerain'—one who 'rules even where there are other rulers,' whose authority 'countermands local judgements.' Yet this was also necessarily true of the Gnostic archons, just as it was true of the Old Testament Yahweh, whom they saw as evil. And, like those archons, Holden also possesses all the other characteristics of Yahweh as the Gnostics saw him: he is jealous, he is vengeful, he is wrathful, he is powerful and—most centrally—he possesses, and is possessed by, a will. And he is enraged by any existence or any act outside that will....

It is the warrior judge's work to achieve dominion...through becoming the totalizing victor in all conflicts, real and perpetual, involving his will. The corollary is to show no mercy to those others whose wills have led them to be outside one's own: as Holden tells the kid late in the novel, 'There's a flawed place in the fabric of your heart....You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen.' And because the kid *has* shown them mercy, the judge must *not* show *him* any—and does not. Ultimately, a person serves the god of war, as Holden tells Tobin, in order to be 'no godserver but a god himself'....A good 'alien' god exists somewhere, as is always the case in Gnosticism, and he is the god of the epilogue who put the fire in the earth and part of himself in the souls of humans, including the kid....

*Blood Meridian* centers upon what can be reasonably thought of as a fraternity of male shepherds who kill the sheep entrusted to them. One of the shepherds is the kid, who feels the 'spark of the alien divine' within him through the call of what seems to be conscience. He thus 'awakens' a bit, attaining in the process a will outside the will of his murdering shepherdic subculture and the archon who runs it. The kid reminds us here of Huckleberry Finn, who, in the crucial act of saving his friend Jim from slaveholder justice, similarly defies the will of a pernicious subculture, but who is judged only by his own cultural conscience, saying to himself at the novel's turning point, 'All right then, I'll go to hell.' Both these boys are a little bit awakened by the spark of the divine, and both extend acts of fraternal mercy when they are 'not supposed to.' In the Mark Twain world, Huck gets away with it; in the McCarthy world, the kid is killed by the judge for it in an outhouse. The kid has 'awakened,' but he is not progressed sufficiently in wisdom much beyond mere awakening and thus has no chance at survival...

The entire novel makes clear (primarily through the judge, who continuously emphasizes the point in his preachments) that the human world is, and has always been, a world of killing....*Blood Meridian* exemplifies the rare coupling of Gnostic 'ideology' with the 'affect' of Hellenistic tragedy by means of its depiction of how power works in the making and erasing of culture, and of what the human condition amounts to when a person opposes that power and thence gets introduced to fate....

What is the connection between the man of the epilogue and the main narrative body of *Blood Meridian*?...The man provides a 'structural' element which is absolutely necessary to the novel's Gnostic

world-view, but which is nowhere to be found in the characters who figure in its primary story: 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.' This reading is, I think, clearly supported (if not indeed mandated) by the imagery of his striking and freeing bits of fire, imprisoned in the earth, which come from God; by the fact of his solitary, ascetic and superior nature and work (set in clear opposition to other people's nature and work, themselves the 'sleepers' of Manichean thought); and by the Gnostic context provided by the novel proper, which not only implies his existence but mandates his eventual appearance. The 'continuance' of which the digging man is in 'pursuit' is the ongoing work of making his way back to the good, alien god—and of freeing and revealing imprisoned bits of holy fire in the evil world....

McCarthy may be showing us in the epilogue, in parable form, his reading of himself as writer—particularly in opposition to others. I think he goes so far as to make of himself a 'presence' at the end....In McCarthy, the idea of the world-creating artist retains much of the romantic one—particularly its notion of the *stance* of the artist on earth—but everything is changed by virtue of the fact that *this* artist reflects and serves neither the Old Testament Yahweh nor some other good god of this world. Rather, he is inextricably bound to, and reflective of, the good 'alien god' who did not make the world, is not in charge of it and is no part of it—except for the 'spark of original divinity' residing in people, waiting to be awakened (by the Call) and then nurtured to the most of those persons' capacities....The man in the epilogue, as he moves over the landscape digging holes and striking God's fire in them, is the exact antithesis of the false 'graver' of the kid's dream who seeks the judge's favor through a different sort of line-drawing. And just as the judge...does not want to 'pass' in the civilized world, but wants only war, victory and then more war in the unending night of fallen matter, so the man of the epilogue cares nothing for playing and winning in the judge's world....

I think *Blood Meridian* elicits the same human responses as Greek tragedy, the reason being that its archon, Holden, plays the same role as the original untamed Fates (in *The Oresteia*, most notably), who judge and avenge, or who sometimes just do whatever they want. In the Western tradition, they have been steadily domesticated—from Fates to Eumenides to Fortune to Chance to Lady Luck. But if Fates stay Fates, then the just-doing-one's-best, divine-spark protagonist has got to lose, through no fault of his or her own, and it has always been bizarrely energizing, bracing, 'cathartic' and joy-producing to feel the delirious pity and fear when the protagonist takes his or her heroic bloodbath at the end—to read it and weep....

Some tragic heroes do not really fill any formulaic bill, most notably Antigone; all that's needed is a dumb kid possessed of a spark of the divine who's outside the will of some Yahweh or other and meets his or her fate at said nemesis' hands at the end. The *peculiar* thing, really, is that it strikes us Americans in the 1990s as so outlandishly shocking to find one of our writing countrymen not only refusing to water down the tragic vision, but embracing it with open arms....He has become our finest living tragedian....In major consequence of his mastery of the high tragedian's art, Cormac McCarthy has become the best and most indispensable writer of English-language narrative in the second half of the century."

Leo Daugherty

"Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy"

*Perspectives* (1993) 161-63, 165-70

"*All the Pretty Horses*...is not McCarthy's most noteworthy book. That honor belongs to *Blood Meridian*, or, *The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), which, like *All the Pretty Horses*, might be called a 'Western.' Both novels trace the adventures of teenaged boys who run away to Mexico, but *Blood Meridian* is only very loosely centered on the character identified to the reader simply as 'the kid.'

Its opening pages offer a summary of the kid's early life in the Tennessee hills, his flight to Texas in 1848, and his recruitment by a troop of filibusters, most of whom are slaughtered by a force of Comanches as their expedition makes its way into Mexico. The kid then joins up with Captain John Joel Glanton's band of scalphunters, who have a contract to provide the Mexicans with the hair of Apache raiders preying on isolated borderland villages and towns. Glanton and his men begin their own bloody campaign of depredations, which lasts for a year or two and several hundred pages. The kid is one of the few survivors

of this campaign. The last chapters of the novel offer a compressed account of the final twenty-eight years of his life of wandering and of his eventual death in an outhouse at the hands of his old comrade-in-arms, the seven-foot-tall, three-hundred-pound, hairless albino Judge Holden, a man of incredible savagery and great intellectual facility. All these events are described in prose remarkable for its syntactic complexity, its recondite vocabulary, its recording of minute detail, and its violent intensity, as well as for an uncanny, almost scriptural stateliness.

*Blood Meridian* is a very complicated book—although complication is not a quality often associated with the label ‘Western.’ Early reviewers attempting to map this novel’s outlandish aesthetic and moral territories resorted to striking but desperate oppositions. To them, the novel seemed a blend of Hieronymus Bosch and Sam Peckinpah; of Salvador Dali, Shakespeare, and the Bible; of Faulkner and Fellini; of Gustave Dore, Louis L’Amour, Dante, and Goya; of cowboys and nothingness; of Texas and Vietnam....It conflates the Old Testament with the Western....McCarthy’s work seems designed to elude interpretation, especially interpretation that would translate it into some supposedly more essential language.

The few readers who have given *Blood Meridian* deliberate and prolonged consideration have generally fallen into two camps, which (simply to make their differences clear) can be distinguished geographically. ‘Southern’ readers have tended to see McCarthy as the heir of William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor. Given the Appalachian settings and country-folk characters of *The Orchard-Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973), and *Suttree* (1979), and given McCarthy’s Faulkner-like verbal range and the O’Connor-like grimness of his humor, seeing him as a southern writer in the great tradition is not unreasonable. It is nevertheless a mistake, particularly with regard to *Blood Meridian*, and not just because the sources and setting of this novel are more western than southern.

Those who read McCarthy as a ‘southern’ writer tend to want to find in each of his novels something redemptive or regenerative, something affirming mysteries similar to those that O’Connor’s fiction is supposed to affirm (mysteries of a Christian or Gnostic variety). McCarthy’s fiction resembles O’Connor’s in its violence, but he entirely lacks O’Connor’s penchant for theology...In McCarthy’s work, violence tends to be just that; it is not a sign or symbol of something else. There is, moreover, an astonishing amount of it: the body count for *Blood Meridian* alone runs into the hundreds. The ‘southern’ camp therefore wants to defend McCarthy from the heinous charge of nihilism, to make him seem more like O’Connor than he really is.

‘Western’ readers see in the trajectory of McCarthy’s career a move toward wider relevance and a broader worldview. For these readers, *Blood Meridian* marks McCarthy’s progress toward addressing not just the Wild West but also Western culture as a whole, especially its philosophical heritage. According to the ‘western’ camp, McCarthy’s antecedents are not only great American writers like Faulkner and O’Connor or Melville and Hemingway, but figures from world literature as well—specifically Dostoyevsky (the judge adopts a sidekick known as ‘the idiot’) and Conrad (especially *Heart of Darkness*), less specifically Nietzsche and Heidegger. McCarthy’s ‘nihilism’ is not, therefore, something he must counter by crafting a symbolic redemption of the fallen world or narrating the moral regeneration of his characters. On the contrary, it is just what one would expect from a writer who has fed on such corrosive, demystifying influences.

But the provenance of *Blood Meridian* is still difficult to specify; fittingly for a work set in a borderland, it seems curiously suspended, not just between regions and geographies, but also within literary history. It is a difficult text to place within a literary period. Obviously, given its publication date (1985), it was written after the heyday of high modernism—in fact, at a time when the failure of modernism [?] had been thoroughly assimilated as a working philosophical assumption of contemporary literature. Yet it avoids the apocalyptic tone [see *The Road*, 2006] and the jaded manner of much postmodern fiction (the novels of Thomas Pynchon or Don DeLillo, for example). McCarthy’s allegiance to either the modernist or postmodernist paradigm, or to the ‘southern’ or the ‘western’ camp, is doubtful....

McCarthy acknowledges that the novel is partially constructed out of his research in Mexican and American records detailing the bloody exploits of Captain Glanton and his band of scalphunters (including the historical figure Judge Holden) in the years following the Mexican-American War. Knowing that

Glanton and other members of his band are not pure fictions may excite some readers....The story of Captain Glanton and his men is not well enough known to qualify as an insider's joke for Western history buffs. McCarthy can neither 'allude' to it, as a Modernist might, nor can he incorporate it into the fabric of a fictional pastiche in order to riff on it in the postmodern manner....

*Moby-Dick* seems to have provided McCarthy with some of his novel's language; for example, his hint about 'the awful darkness inside the world' echoes Melville's 'the blackness of darkness'....Whereas Melville was anxious to record his horror of darkness by having his characters react to it, *Blood Meridian* treats darkness, violence, sudden death, and all other calamities as natural occurrences—like the weather.... The likeness of 'the kid' to Ishmael, of Captain Glanton and the judge to Ahab, and of Glanton's band to the Pequod's motley crew is fairly obvious [except that the crew of the Pequod are not murderers, the harpooners are portrayed as noble exemplars of their ethnic groups, Bulkington the helmsman is exalted into a demigod for thinking independently, and Pip is objectivity itself]....The kid spits as often as he speaks....McCarthy seems to have largely dispensed with the concept of character... 'History' is not a form of awareness in McCarthy's novel but merely the arena in which brutal, 'mindless' events unfold....

Judge Holden appears to be an exception to the rule defining character in *Blood Meridian*: he is loquacious, even multilingual, and an intellectual with a great store of both practical and arcane information....But it is a mistake (one that many readers find easy to make because the judge is such a remarkable creation) to 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. They are delivered as highly ironic and playful lectures...Although many of his speeches...are nihilistic compounds of Nietzschean (and Spenglerian) rhetoric, the judge is not a nihilist (nor a Spenglerian)...No calculus, moral or otherwise, will explain the judge....Having dispensed with 'character' as a hermeneutic concept, one cannot then latch onto the judge's speeches as authorial pronouncements. Holden is not a ventriloquist's dummy perched on the novelist's knee, and we should not strain our eyes to see whether McCarthy's lips move when the judge speaks. He is not sounding the novel's 'themes.'

By dispensing with character as a concept, McCarthy is able to deploy the language he uses heuristically as a tool for exploring the liminal concerns the novel takes up, such as whether human beings have any privileged position in relation to the rest of the world. Thus traditional concepts of the narrator as a 'person' or 'voice,' a sort of meta-character with an interest in certain 'themes' that help to structure a text, also do not apply to *Blood Meridian*. The novel's narration is omniscient, but there seems to be no knower providing us with the knowledge it imparts. And this knowledge also does not really develop, it merely accrues. The most often repeated sentence in *Blood Meridian* is 'They rode on.' So the plot moves, but it does not thicken....In his many novels, the West is a generic place...The American West in McCarthy's fiction is not the New World but a very old world, the reality of which is bedrock. We might place him in time...as a writer not of the 'modern' or 'postmodern' eras but of the Holocene, with a strong historical interest in the late Pleistocene....

*Blood Meridian*, a novel in which none of the protagonists has anything remotely like 'a sense of himself,' is a Western without a hero (and thus, some would say, not really a Western at all). In it the land speaks for itself...in a much more thoroughgoing and less mediated fashion than traditional Western formulas permit....What it sees is an 'optical democracy'...The horses seem more animate, perhaps even more conscious than Glanton's men. Of course, horses are more sensitive than men to some things, especially to things in the natural world, and they often get the last word in McCarthy's fiction....It is *Blood Meridian*'s adherence in its descriptions of events to the protocols and paradigms of natural history that gives it epic resonance....

There is no supernatural elevation of consciousness... 'The stars burned with a lidless fixity and they drew nearer in the night...' The limits of perspective are left behind in a passage like this one: it is cosmic without being metaphysical, as if the sentence had been written by a transparent eyeball that has learned how not to be Emersonian. It suggests, to paraphrase Melville, an 'ungodly, godlike' view of life. In this sense, it is true that McCarthy's 'descriptive method lacks humanity'....*Blood Meridian* is not so much inhuman as nonhuman. It is thoroughly dispassionate. The book's odd power derives from its relating everything and everybody with absolute equanimity; its voice seems profoundly alien, but not alienated....

In the raw orchestration of the book's events' the world of nature and the world of men are parts of the same world, and both are equally violent and indifferent to the other....Human failure to be other than brutal is not treated here as a departure from the ordinary course of events....

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 vulture-draped mission churches in *Blood Meridian* suggest. Only natural history, which regards neither nature nor man as symbolic, is left. It seems newly potent as a result....The similes seem designed to increase the intensity and accuracy of focus on the objects being described rather than to suggest that they have double natures or bear hidden meanings....At any rate, *Blood Meridian* certainly cannot be read as suggesting some moral insight on the order of 'scalphunting is wrong.' Nor does it try to adumbrate a more sophisticated, more political version of that insight, something on the order of 'scalphunting is imperialism by other means'."

Dana Phillips

"History and the Ugly Facts of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*"  
*American Literature* 68.2 (June 1996) 433-60

"For his fifth novel McCarthy moved himself (to El Paso) and his scene westward. Although most of the characters in *Blood Meridian* (1985) are from Tennessee, the impulse that moves them is not the one that cause others there to settle into an agrarian existence and develop an apologetics for a distinctively southern way of life but rather a continuation of that restless urge to exploit the frontier which in the first half of the nineteenth century was still a significant part of the average southerner's psyche.

The central figure in *Blood Meridian* is an unnamed 'kid,' who shortly after the Mexican War goes west and falls in with a band of murderous scalp hunters headed by a historically identifiable cutthroat name John Glanton. The band's second in command, also historically identifiable, is a massive hairless figure named Holden, commonly referred to as Judge Holden—sophisticate, graceful dancer, molester of youth, philosophical apologist for their aimless enterprise, instructor to the kid, and ultimately his murderer. The novel conducts the reader through a succession of brawls, massacres, mass scalplings, encounters with despoiled mummies, severed heads, dead infants, and mutilated bodies, and ends in a dance hall with a protracted Walpurgisnacht of drunken drovers, hunters, soldiers, whores, and a captive bear, all orchestrated by a smiling and naked Holden, who, having just killed the kid presumably for his reluctance to participate in the reveling, declares the dance eternal and himself immortal."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.

*Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*  
(U Kentucky 1997) 222

"For *Blood Meridian*, in 1985, the Faulkner comparison looms: the *New Republic* calls him 'a literary child of Faulkner,' and now Robert Penn Warren weighs in, that McCarthy 'has, line by line, the stab of actuality.' Warren assures us he 'is here to stay.' The *Times Literary Supplement* of London, hesitant to praise Americans, novelists or otherwise, says his 'sense of the tragic is almost unerring.' Alan Cheuse describes *Blood Meridian* as a Western 'that evokes the styles of both Sam Peckinpah and Hieronymus Bosch; also that McCarthy 'employs a neo-Biblical rhetoric,' a 'stirring diction unparalleled in American writing today.' It all paid off, these blurbs, these pats on the back, these Faulknerian comparisons....

McCarthy rarely asks us how we live, but, instead, how we would live if we found ourselves on the edge. He is our Jack London of the Southwest, but with an even more implacable ideology. The 'edge' may be anywhere, but it is usually in the natural world where one is totally exposed, while the individual himself (all men!) may be self-destructive, indifferent to his fate, even suicidal. Fate is there, a deadening sense of what lies in store, an inexorable, relentless fate. Individual will is exerted as if one were Sisyphus, but the outcome, while not determined, is fixed within the act. McCarthy's protagonists are, more often than not, entangled as soon as they start on a mission. The American West is not opportunity or escape, certainly not transformational, but the valley into death.

In *Blood Meridian*, for example, the Kid—no further name—joins a band of murderous outlaws whose goal is to kill Indians and collect the bounty on their scalps. The mission is made to order for McCarthy's brand of mayhem and implacability, as well as for the striking sharpness of his prose. What the book lacks,



however, are the very Faulknerian qualities so many reviewers found in him: Faulkner's depth of humanity, not as some sentimental or nostalgic bit, but as a witty recognition of how life divides, compromises, forces uncertainties, even while the individual struggles on according to a plan of his own. Endurance means very different things to the two authors.

Yet the angulation of McCarthy's prose, its seeming contradiction between obliqueness and visual accuracy, its unflinching clutch of natural events and human weakness, all create a crisis in any analysis of his work. One must admit that the verbal, linguistic dimensions of his fiction—a good part of his novelty—outrun the conceptual base he starts from. His is indeed a new, jagged voice, a serious revisionist, but mainly in a language divorced from any overall pattern. Running against the contemporary grain, McCarthy wants nothing less than Greek tragedy, the fall of men who pride themselves on their unassailability. Yet when they decline, fade, or, more often, die, they have outlived our accommodation of whoever they are or whatever they are seeking. They seem physical embodiments, not quite human beings: figures who exist so that McCarthy's 'fate' can drive them toward some personal doom.

Most critics have commented on the violence and mayhem committed in McCarthy's novels as part of his charm. In *Blood Meridian*, for example, the physical agony is indeed impressive. 'They followed the trampled ground left by the war party and in the afternoon they came upon a mule that had failed and been lanced and left dead and then they came upon another. The way narrowed through rocks and by and by they came to a bush that was hung with dead babies.' The language is tricky, with the 'by and by' indicating a leisurely stroll, then the dead babies hitting us suddenly after we have relaxed. The judge and Glanton in *Blood Meridian* are psychopathic killer who go about their work as other men might make shoes: killing is their business, or else maiming, gouging, slicing.

McCarthy likes to mix blood and gore with piss and shit, as if in some intensified Jacobean revenge drama or an updated *Titus Andronicus*. His books are deliquescent; bodies seem destined to return to their liquid origins. Or else, he gloats over remains, whether human, animal, bird, or unidentifiable. Carrion is a major participant. He distributes blame for the mayhem equally, to whites, Indians, Mexicans. Women and children are almost always victims because in the pecking order they are defenseless; the moral standard we perhaps foolishly associate with civilization is absent, quickly abandoned when his men head out into the wilderness. Men, however, are not only hunters, they are hunted; and anyone in their way, women, children, farm and domestic animals, is sliced up....

McCarthy starts from certain premises which make him unique among serious American novelists, most of whom are more heedful of human life, even when personal survival is at stake. McCarthy sees every situation as Donner Pass material, eat or be eaten. He had tasted the things of the world and come away convinced that they are relentless, inexorable, unstoppable: man is merely a temporary dam stopping the flow of pain and anguish. The moral is to look for none....

The individual life is really in service to something stronger; and one could see in this a kind of residual Christianity, of the type Graham Greene often posited in his fiction. According to this line of reasoning, there is an Unknowable—call it what one will—and this Unknowable beckons to us all, with war, struggle, bloodletting part of the ongoing process. Man's adversarial relationship to nature is also complementary, since survival paradoxically means, simply, prolonging one's return to nature. There is no surmounting it—only holding it, as it were, at bay. Out there, waiting, looming, whatever the circumstances, is that final move, where the Unknowable will spring. McCarthy calls it war, whereas others may call it some form of deity. Are we granting him too much of a metaphysical quest? Perhaps not. In *All the Pretty Horses*, when Cole 'passed and paled into the darkening land,' that 'world to come'—the final words—will bring some examination of man's relationship to himself."

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions: 1980-2000*  
(Xlibris 2001) 123-26, 129

"The primary source for the characters in the novel is the memoir of Samuel Chamberlain, entitled *My Confessions: The Recollections of a Rogue*. This narrative gives an account of the disturbing exploits of the

Glanton Gang and provides colorful portraits of characters such as John Joel Glanton and Judge Holden, complete with drawn images....

Although *Blood Meridian* has emerged as perhaps McCarthy's masterpiece, the novel's astounding reception was slow in coming, selling poorly even among the sophisticated readers who had been previously drawn to McCarthy's canon....Not surprisingly, critics were disturbed by the staggering portrayal of violence. In *The New York Times*, Caryn James acknowledged the extraordinary quality of McCarthy's prose but struggled with his choice of material, writing that McCarthy has 'a passionate voice given equally to ugliness and lyricism.' In the *Sewanee Review*, Walter Sullivan struck a similar note in the form of a question: "What do we make of this phenomenon, a mind that dwells unremittingly on evil and a prose that conveys those thoughts with the tongue of an angel?"

What is interesting about these responses is the immediate acknowledgment of McCarthy's artistry. While both reviewers were tepid in their overall judgment, both equally concede a vexing irony that they cannot rest with comfortably: Cormac McCarthy writes a novel of incomparable beauty derived from the raw matter of incomparable horror. A gloss on the poetics of *Blood Meridian* might be drawn from McCarthy himself in words from *All the Pretty Horses*: 'the world's heart beat[s] at some terrible cost' and 'the blood of multitudes' is 'exacted for the vision of a single flower'....

Modern readers are often skeptical of the classical and neoclassical dictum that authors must write with a moral imperative....Moral and ethical questions lie at the heart of a novel that seems on the surface deaf to them....McCarthy's now famous quote does little to help in this regard. He argues that, '[t]here is 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'....Naturalism is qualified by McCarthy's romantic leanings. On the most basic level, McCarthy's comment is an argument against the Enlightenment conception of human perfectibility, and it implies realism rather than defeatism, arguably preserving the possibility of right-minded human action in the world....

Although McCarthy takes as raw material the political world of the nineteenth century, his rendering of it is marked not only by the excess of the violence itself, but by...the troubling transformation of blood into beauty. In this manner, McCarthy, with his own distinct vision, reflects the sensibilities of his romantic and pre-romantic forbears. In the broadest possible sense, he is informed by the Burkean sublime, that concept of the beautiful (Edmund Burke redefines 'beauty' in terms of the picturesque), that blends the merely pleasing with the pain-pleasure response we expect from the highest tragedies, that transport of emotion Edgar Allan Poe called 'Supernal Beauty'....McCarthy's embodiment of the sublime appears in his reconceptualization of American mythology and his overt use of the carnivalesque, both aesthetic strategies predicated on excess, and all intended in one degree or another to be imbued with moral vision, however obscure and ambiguous....

It is in the transformation of violence into myth...that McCarthy's poetics of violence operates most clearly. Critics from the beginning have addressed the notion of *Blood Meridian* as a 'revisionist' Western....The figurations of characters like John Joel Glanton, Judge Holden, and the kid clearly undermine the celebratory mythic conceptions of westward expansion....[But] McCarthy is genuinely skeptical of utopian 'liberalism,' perhaps reflecting the same doubt as the outcome of social reform that appeared in Hawthorne and Melville a hundred or more years before....

In *Blood Meridian* the penultimate scene in the novel that concludes the action of the narrative is the Yuma massacre, and it displays a remarkable similarity to the sequence in Peckinpah's film [*The Wild Bunch*]....Whether the influence of cinematic technique is direct or indirect, the purpose of both Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is to heighten the reader/viewer's sense of the reality of violence, not through an objective realism but by a subjectively rendered aesthetic transformation that captures a deeper, more compelling, and more disturbing sense of the real. This method is akin to the expressionist aesthetic that informed many artistic forms in the twentieth century, including painting, literature, and film....The ethical implications of the atrocity are given greater clarity for lack of

narrative commentary, which, typical of cinema, heightens the excesses of violence through the omission of a qualifying human consciousness. Readers and reviewers occasionally comment on this lack of narrative voice in *Blood Meridian* as evidence of an impoverished moral vision. But the opposite is true. Through aesthetic rather than polemical means, this cinematic method, poetically rendered, makes ethical considerations unavoidable....

The transformation of blood into beauty involves little if any falsification, and a kind of aesthetic alchemy heightens our sense of the real...Echoing in the background is the 'brimstone land of christian reckoning,' which suggests not necessarily the literal existence of hell itself [why not?] but at least a moral sphere, a realm of reckoning that exists in a strange counterpoint to the present festival of suffering...It is precisely the aesthetic rendering of danger itself that allows for the combination of pleasure and horror that is central to the sublime. Not only does McCarthy use the carnivalesque to orchestrate this response, he heightens our awareness of the reality of moral transgression, which was precisely the purpose of the carnival from its inception....The novel itself ends not with the kid's death but with the carnival scene and the judge's dance....

Not unlike the festival tradition of the medieval period, the carnivalesque imagery in *Blood Meridian* is formally contained by the epilogue, a narrative frame that affirms an oblique order, however mysterious. In this context, McCarthy points to both the pressing relevance of the moral sphere and the imperative to truth. For all the pervasive violence of the novel, one of the most evocative pieces of dialogue takes place between the kid and ex-priest Tobin. This brief conversation perhaps functions as a cornerstone in the thematic architecture of *Blood Meridian*. The ex-priest enigmatically evokes a sense of mystery and the transcendent...a mysterious essence that imbues the world with meaning. This possibility is reinforced in the penultimate moment in the novel with the kid's failed but nevertheless heroic resistance to the judge's call...[This] articulates in mystery language the principle of order, community, and moral vision evoked in the epilogue following the judge's dance, echoing perhaps a sense of future possibility in which the judge does not wholly reign."

Steven Frye, ed.  
"Blood Meridian and the Poetics of Violence"  
*The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*  
(Cambridge U 2013) 107-19

"The novel functions on the level of mythmaking and national fantasy as an American origin story...the winning of the West and the building of the American character through frontier experiences....The scalphunters as a group can be read as playing the part of the sacred hunter, dark versions of the classic Western heroes from the Deerslayer and Daniel Boone to Buffalo Bill, leaving their communities to enter the wilderness for renewal and regeneration through the acts of hunting and killing. Although the scalphunters seek a human prey, it is a prey nonetheless rhetorically tied to the wilderness, and the goal of its killing is ostensibly the protection and renewal of the scalphunters' foster community—the Mexicans of Sonora. And yet the fact that their prey is human begins the degeneration of the myth....The novel implies that such a perversion is equally as old as the myth itself....The myth has always contained within itself the antimyth, the dark shadow double awaiting a Kurtz or a Holden to strip bare the original and turn it inside out....

The central myth...manipulated in *Blood Meridian*, mainly by the judge, is that of the sacred hunter. In *Regeneration Through Violence*, Richard Slotkin claims that this ancient form of the archetypal hero quest, twisted and hybridized through the meeting of numerous European and Native American versions, forms the basis of the modern American myth of the frontier...The gigantic figure of Judge Holden, who is both a fictional version of a historical personage and an amalgamation of numerous archetypes from the mythic West, acts throughout the book as the author of the new version of the hunter myth. McCarthy consistently presents the judge as a priest, a mediator between man and Nature, shepherding, or...manipulating, the scalphunters' souls even as Glanton guides their physical bodies. The image of the judge as priest is consistent with the dominant mood and tone of *Blood Meridian* as an origin myth. Bernard Schopen calls the entire novel 'profoundly religious' and claims that it takes place 'in a physical and thematic landscape charged with religious nuance, allusion, and language'....At its deepest structural and rhetorical levels, *Blood Meridian* uses mythic and religious imagery both Christian and non-Christian....

The judge deliberately cultivates a feel for myth, ritual, and religion and directs it toward his own ends. His goal is to harness the unconscious response to mythic heroes, invoke it with the rituals of the sacred hunter and the eucharist of the wilderness, and reorder, or perhaps disorder, it on a deep and essential level. His aim is no less than the birthing of a new myth....The judge, having symbolically dethroned the priest of the Christian rituals and myths at the revival tent, will make proselytes of the scalphunters and lead them in a cannibalistic perversion of the old myth...McCarthy is interested in myths, not morals....The face of the hero is infinitely changeable—therefore the kid does not need a proper name, Judge Holden can be endowed with faculties that border on the superhuman, and Tobin can be referred to simply as ‘expriest’ as often as he is called by name. What is meaningful are the actions the characters take and the power of their story to shape the world of those who hear it....The judge will turn the old myth on its head, pervert it, and cannibalize it....an almost Conradian expression of white American civilization...

The judge alone among the scalphunters claims the power to solve the mysteries of the natural world, and he does so through science and a skewed rationality cloaked in the rhetoric of religion. The myth of science, with the judge as its sacred high priest, is now opposed to the earlier myth of Nature served by the sacred hunter....Again and again, McCarthy invokes archetypal myths and references to the sacred when portraying humans in the natural world. Travelers of all sorts in the wilderness are commonly referred to as ‘pilgrims’ and ‘proselytes’....In McCarthy’s antimyth the revelation of the profound disorder at the heart of our myths seems to be the ultimate goal....For all its echoes of universality and timelessness, in *Blood Meridian* McCarthy is interested in the specific ways in which the ancient myths of the sacred hunter and the eucharist of the wilderness have been played out upon the particular landscape and within the particular historical context of the southwestern borderlands....

The first description in the novel of Glanton and his gang marks them equally as actors within the myth and as deviants from it, as both hunters and cannibals...The natural order of the original myth governing the relationship between humans and nature has been upset so profoundly that even the horses are seen as feral, feeding on flesh instead of grass, and the hunters themselves a visitation of the profane rather than the sacred....The first instance of the judge’s symbolic cannibalization of those whom he is engaged to serve occurs when the scalphunters spend the night with the doomed miners at the ruined mines. As the gang prepares to retire for the night, ‘Someone had reported the judge naked atop the walls, immense and pale in the revelations of lightning, striding the perimeter up there and declaiming in the old epic mode.’ The next morning the body of the boy is discovered, lying naked and face down, while the judge is seen ‘standing in the gently steaming quiet picking his teeth with a thorn as if he had just eaten.’

The sacred marriage and the sacred eucharist in this scene are at once conflated and perverted, the whole echoing and reimagining the sacred hunter myth as well as the Christian crucifixion and eucharist. The naked body of the innocent child...mimics the image of the body of the innocent and sinless Christ on the cross, drooping head ringed by a crown of thorns. As the judge watches these procedures, he employs a thorn with which to pick his teeth clean of the cannibalized flesh of the child....The judge both literally and symbolically consumes that which is forbidden, the child as a living representation of the community the sacred hunter is bound to serve and protect....The sequence of actions, enacting the ritual of the hunt and culminating in a perversion of the sacred marriage and sacred eucharist and the resulting regeneration of the hunters, ends chapter IX....The great patrimony of Nature has been reduced to the level of a zoo or circus by the final chapter of the novel.”

Sara Spurgeon  
“The Sacred Hunter and the Eucharist of the Wilderness”  
*Cormac McCarthy: New Directions*, ed. James D. Lilley  
(2002; U New Mexico 2014) 75-87, 91, 93

“Despite the outlandish violence of Cormac McCarthy’s epic anti-western, this sanguine narrative cannot be considered nihilistic, even though some critics argue that its pervasive mayhem represents not much more than amoral naturalism. As Vernon M. Bell puts it, ‘the whole experience of McCarthy’s work...is that nothing can be taken to stand as the truth. Anything that *stands* in this sense by definition cannot be true.’ For Steven Shaviro, the gist of *Blood Meridian* ‘is only war, there is only the dance. Exile is not deprivation or loss, but our primordial and positive condition.’ Novelist and surgeon Richard Selzer,

for whom the application of benign violence is a matter of craft, remarks that McCarthy's violence 'is there for its own sake.'

Yet, despite the claim by *Blood Meridian*'s narrator that the child in whom 'broods a taste for mindless violence' is father to the man, the novel evolves beyond the Old English epic, because it exposes the psychological and cultural mechanisms behind the martial code instead of merely chronicling the code's effects. In reality, *Blood Meridian* possesses a precise moral compass whose poles are the narrative voice and the voice of the monstrous Judge Holden, who, as Harold Bloom has observed, 'has no ideology except blood, violence, war for its own sake'....However, Holden's voice is not the narrator's, and much of the narrator's aleatory value results from an implicit dialogue with its Anglo-Saxon antecedent....*Blood Meridian* concludes in a locale that mirrors the fens of *Beowulf*....

*Blood Meridian* exposes this contagion of systemized violence by invoking *Beowulf* in its representation of another culture whose vitality derived from obedience to the martial code, the mid-nineteenth century American 'Wild West.' In some cases the invocation is explicit, as when Captain White's fallen filibusters are described as 'unhorsed Saxons, dispatched by Comanche spears and clubs rather than guns. The novel's philosopher of the code, Judge Holden, asserts the primacy of violence over form when he insists, 'If war is not holy, man is nothing but antic clay'....In both *Beowulf* and *Blood Meridian*, as in any jingoistic appeal to patriotic fervor, the solipsism of mimetic desire disappears behind a masquerade of ennobled emptying of the self into a commonhood. In operation, however, this charade is less than an abnegation of desire than the abridgement of individual will....

It is no accident that *Blood Meridian* is also set during a martial interregnum, in 1849, at the conclusion of the Mexican-American War and the United States' transcontinental territorial consolidation. Like Grendel invading Heorot, Judge Holden invades Reverend Green's tent to disrupt his sermon and incite a riot, the tent collapsing amid another invocation of monstrous sea creatures, 'like a huge and wounded medusa'....The kid seems to lose everything he struggles toward; he cannot approach a burning mesquite clearly meant to parody the biblical burning bush, and shortly thereafter discovers that Glanton's retreating scalphunters have burned their valuable scalp collection; his last act before he dies is a visit to the whore, which is aborted by his impotence. Glanton's fleeing of Mangas Coloradas with a dummy whiskey barrel constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of the theme of futile desire....

The bear's death symbolizes the exhaustion of an entire epoch of the code, but it also heralds a new one as surely as does the eradication of the buffalo [they were not eradicated], that symbol of the Native American hunt ethos. Fort Griffin's bison-based trade implies that the code has been reinscribed in a new, commercial, guise of jingoistic capitalism. The nature of this system has been hinted at already, in the commodification of human body parts, especially scalps...Meanwhile, whatever is left of the kid, as two cowboys behold inside the dogyard outhouse, is too horrible to describe; asked what he has seen there, the first refuses to speak and merely walks back to the bar. He has witnessed the aftermath of another sacrifice to the code and responded to it with the silence befitting a mystery.

Inside the saloon an 'enormous drunken whore'—sexuality once again rendered nongenerative and subject to masculine utility—wears 'nothing but a pair of men's drawers' as a counterpoint to the bear's crinoline, and rollicks androgynously through the hall, 'clapping her hands at the bandstand and calling drunkenly for music.' Sure enough, the judge is once again restless. Like the deaths of the bear and of *Beowulf* himself, the 'lunar dome' of Holden's skull connotes the passing of the initial age of American frontier exploration, with its special brand of genocidal violence. His dance underscores the ultimate frangibility of any lineage based on a patriarchal model of violence; indeed, his murder of the kid extinguishes the last surviving member of the gang. Yet how easily the judge recruits another nameless disciple to explode into violence and slaughter the bear....

He enacts once more the rout of the feminine by the ethos of the code. Holden understands that compassion dissolves the difference between self and other, which alone makes rivalry and violence possible. The kid's double-negative rebuke of the judge—'You ain't nothin'—betokens his suspicion of the illusion and an attempt to withdraw from the ethos of the code. Mere instinct, inadequately focused by rhetoric, cannot counterweigh the code's mystifying appeal. Its absolute violence is not susceptible to half-

formed insights....Thus, far from identifying itself with the judge's amorality, the narrative voice of *Blood Meridian* consistently subverts his philosophy....The progress of the narrative, from the kid's 'taste for mindless violence' to his resistance to the judge's discourse, cannot reasonably be interpreted as an amoral representation of violence for its own sake."

Rick Wallach

"From *Beowulf* to *Blood Meridian*: Cormac McCarthy's Demystification of the Martial Code"  
*New Directions* (2002; 2014) 199-02, 204-05, 208-12

"Many readers dislike *Blood Meridian*....The melancholy rhetoricity of Ecclesiastes clearly reverberates through the very first sentence of *Blood Meridian*, 'See the child'....The approach put forth here—the identification of a melancholy subtext—not only permits us to read *Blood Meridian* as something more than a revisionist Western awash in blood, it also elevates McCarthy to the ranks of other master craftsmen of melancholy discourse, such as Conrad, Dostoyevsky, or Faulkner....

The children whose murder the Hebrew expatriates are advocating [Psalm 137] are to them the offspring of heathen. Homocidal expatriates, too, are the desperadoes of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, taking unwarranted revenge on the 'heathen' (as they sometimes label Native Americans) in a manner not unlike what the psalmist may have had in mind....What further legitimizes the parallel are the constant references in McCarthy's fiction to biblical iconography and rhetoric, among them many involving the death of children....McCarthy's novel, it seems, draws on a traditional motif that subsumes melancholia, rage, and infanticide....The 'melancholy subtext' constitutes something of a quasi-baroque strain that weaves its way through the text....Nowhere in the novel does the narrative voice devote itself to the question of ethics, not even by pointing out the conspicuous absence of moral positions....

At one point, the judge—in a sense the novel's Mephisto figure...adopts an Apache boy orphaned during a raid, 'a strange dark child covered with ash,' only to kill and scalp him three days later. The belligerent boy whom the kid kills in self-defense in the last chapter also recalls the kid's own feistiness at the outset of the novel....The childlike, or rather fetal, features of the judge are repeatedly alluded to through references to his baldness, hairlessness, paleness, smallness of extremities, and nudity. Although children expire in his hands, the judge, who himself looks like a demonic child revenant, outlives the entire cast of the novel....The paradoxical persona of the judge becomes all the most monstrous as the narrative turns him into something of an Antichrist persona with Nietzschean rhetoric; a confidence man altering his appearance and appearing anywhere, any time, a conjurer adept at tricks and magical feats... 'He says that he will never die'....

The words set into Judge Holden's rifle stock: '*Et In Arcadia Ego.*' Within the narrative context, the baroque aphorism states that even the idyllic pastoral world is encroached upon by death. *Blood Meridian*'s third epigraph on the scalped skull three hundred thousand years old adapts this aphorism to the novel's context, stating in effect that the earth has been a place of mayhem and murder since time immemorial.... [The kid] declines to shoot the judge when twice the opportunity presents itself. Nor does he flee the saloon at Fort Griffin to save himself after the judge has virtually told him to his face that he will be sacrificed. While being indifferent to the lives of others...and leaving his companion Shelby to die in the desert, he is just as indifferent regarding his own soul, as becomes apparent when he fails to understand Tobin's parable of the voice of God. The same self-destructive impetus manifest itself in the chronicles of the Glanton gang as a whole, for they refuse to quit their marauding until massacred by the Yumas in much the same way as they in turn massacred the Apaches."

George Guillemin

"'See the Child': The Melancholy Subtext of *Blood Meridian*"  
*New Directions* (2002; 2014) 239-42, 244-45, 249-51, 262

"The kid's first action upon emerging from his mother's womb is to cast off his nearest relative; even as an infant, he seems more predatory than the 'few last wolves' harbored by the woods beyond....Running away at fourteen from his father's home in Tennessee, the kid wastes little time....At the beginning of the tale, the kid sheds both of his natural parents; at the end, he is shed in turn by the surrogate father he might have had, the so-called Judge Holden, who had once asked him: 'Don't you know that I'd have loved you like a son?'"

His early adventures take him down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, where he is shot by a Maltese boatswain, once in the back and a second time just below the heart; when he recovers, he heads west, and takes part in the scalphunting expeditions that occurred in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War of 1846-48....Exiling himself from family ties, the kid is now free to confront the trials of life in the 'wild and barbarous' arena of the American Southwest. As he submits to these trials, the kid recapitulates his earlier brushes with death and rebirth, as we see in his narrow escape during a fight with Toadvine...and in his reemergence from the carnage of Captain White's slaughtered militia....

McCarthy implies that the kid's identity should be considered not as biologically predetermined nor as revealing itself in various family traits, but as something constituted over time through the performance of a series of actions or as the product of various trials....[Existentialism] More powerfully than any other character in this novel, [Judge] Holden embodies the 'performance fluidity' of identity, a notion that *Blood Meridian* turns into the founding principle of existence....Holden may even be indulging in a grisly parody of our biological origins, or the ties between humankind and nature, as he trudges across the desert with the imbecile, James Robert Bell, carrying a collection of pubic scalps, which they wear as hats. To be sure, in the course of the novel the judge puts in a consummate variety performance, playing by turns the roles of raconteur, orator, philosopher, naturalist, inventor, conjurer, draftsman, lawyer, and dancer. He combines these roles, moreover, with those of various literary figures, most obviously Melville's Ahab, and even...Melville's whale....The judge also reminds us of Conrad's Kurtz by adopting the attitude of an 'icon' and by inspiring Captain Glanton's gang to raise severed heads on poles....

Mimicking first the language of medieval epic romance ('a fabled horde...bearing shields'...) then modern evangelical rhetoric...and ending in a comic deflation...This passage offers a mock-Dantesque vision of hell, in which the Comanches put on a pantomime on the theme of death and slaughter.... McCarthy intimates that perhaps no victory or conquest can be more than temporary, and thus implies that the role of conqueror is less the innate property of a particular sacred tribe than a mantle that repeatedly changes hands over time....

McCarthy subtly develops the notion of fluid racial borderland in...chapter VII by introducing two characters, one white, one black, who share the same name....Black Jackson bears something of white Jackson, and vice versa: white Jackson is as much the shadow of black Jackson as black Jackson is the shadow of white Jackson....It might be possible, of course, to gloss the story of the two Jacksons as a mini-allegory of race relations in America. One might read the image of the headless white Jackson, for instance, as signifying the irrationality of racism, and black Jackson's revenge as a foretaste of things to come in the Civil War. Alternatively one might construe their feud as symbolic of hostilities that have projected themselves forward into the twentieth century; in this case, black Jackson would be regarded both as a literary echo and as a historical precursor of Richard Wright's decapitator Bigger Thomas. And yet, as I have been suggesting, McCarthy tends to destabilize the oppositions on which such allegorical readings are predicated....In the world of this fiction, the Civil War is a nonevent....

The massacre of Glanton's gang [occurs] in April 1850 at a place—the Yuma crossing—where the Colorado River defines the present-day borders of Mexico, California, and the New Mexico Territory. In the context of *Blood Meridian* this convergence of history with fiction (in which black John Jackson is the first casualty) implies that in some fundamental sense the project of establishing these borders is inseparable from the attempt to define an American self, and that as long as one of these endeavors is incomplete, the other must remain unfinished as well.”

Adam Parkes

“History, Bloodshed, and the Spectacle of American Identity in *Blood Meridian*”  
*New Directions* (2002; 2014) 103-05, 108, 110, 116-19

“It is a picaresque Western...Both *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* pair a wild or melancholy psyche with a wild or melancholy landscape in order to envision a pastoral alternative. This trend culminates in *Blood Meridian* because here the absolute lawlessness of the characters matches the absolute wilderness of the setting. As in the other two novels, a melancholy narrator projects allegorical characters into a microcosmic landscape, and no approach other than an allegorical one will unite the novel's protagonists, plot action, and nature aesthetic in one homogeneous interpretation....

The overture introduces the nameless protagonist, 'the kid'—another one of McCarthy's homeless and uneducated teenage picaros—and narrates his flight out West and his adventures with a band of filibusters in the wake of the Mexican-American War of 1848. In the main part of the novel the kid signs up with a troop of brigands led by John Joel Glanton, contracting with Mexican state governors as headhunters against the Apaches. Without scruples he participates in the slaughter of any black-haired natives they find, a phrase lasting about two years and terminating in the gang's annihilation by the Yuma on the Colorado River. In this part, where the unholy crusade turns into a sheer struggle for survival, carnage alternates with the monologues of Judge Holden, an albino of superhuman strength, erudition, and cruelty who emerges as a second protagonist. The third part fast-forwards through almost three decades up to the novel's denouement in Texas in 1878, where the kid meets again with the judge and dies at his hands. The judge, 'a huge messianic figure, a kind of Ahab crossed with Conrad's Kurtz,' ends up being the sole survivor of the gang....

At age fifteen 'he is shot...just below the heart' and heals up within two weeks; toward the end he is pierced by an arrow and recovers. He survives attacks by the Comanches, the Apaches, the Yumas, the Mexican Army. He makes his way out of the desert twice. He remains unscathed by incarceration in both Mexico and California. He shoots Apaches 'as if he'd done it all before in a dream'....At San Antonio de Bexar he challenges an entire cantina and kills the barman over his refusal to serve him....The one time he shows fear is when—imprisoned and wounded—he is visited by the judge...Rather than merciful, the kid seems too indifferent to be merciless, for his failure to kill the wounded Shelby in face of the advancing enemy is hardly charity....Indifferent to the point of suicide, the kid doctors Brown's leg when no one else will; he fetches water right before the eyes of the judge, who has by then become his enemy; and, all too indifferent, he declines to shoot the judge when opportunities present themselves. Nor does he flee the saloon at Fort Griffin to save himself after the judge has virtually told him to his face that he will be sacrificed....

Because the dominant environment in *Blood Meridian* is clearly wilderness, the pastoral allegory reflecting the decline of the agrarian ideal with which it began is easily overlooked. The setting of *Blood Meridian* is the 'howling wilderness' that has haunted the American imagination since Puritan times, though relocated in the Chihuahuahua desert. Yet the kid, like a true pastoral protagonist, passes first through an agrarian landscape—that of his native Tennessee—when running away from home....Before moving on to Texas, the kid stays long enough in New Orleans to experience the decadence associated in pastoral fiction with city life. Here, the same atmosphere of corruption prevails that later infuses the Fort Griffin episode. Following the interlude, the protagonist ships out to Texas, not quite yet reaching wilderness but a purgatorial frontier where 'whores call to him from the dark like souls in want,' where 'come days of begging, days of theft,' and 'where there rode no soul save he'....

As the novel progresses, the narrator's infatuation with the desert landscape makes it seem as if the very hostility of this environment accommodates McCarthy's wilderness pastoralism better than any other setting. Accordingly, the novel's phrase 'optical democracy' comes to define the author's pastoral aesthetic:....'here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships.' This passage, among many others, has prompted Steven Shaviro to observe that in *Blood Meridian* 'the prejudices of anthropocentric perceptions are disqualified. The eye no longer constitutes the axis of vision. We are given instead a kind of perception before or beyond the human'....These killers share in an absolute degree of wildness with bear and land and even the wind. Nor does the narrator differentiate between physical and mental landscape...

James Lilley, expanding on Shaviro's observation, argues that McCarthy's 'narrative voice always emphasizes the horizontal, physical, factualness of things, employing a startling array of precise nouns which shift the focus of the text away from any vertical, symbolic axis with hidden significance.' Lilley compares this kind of description with the landscape photography of Ansel Adams...David Holloway in turn endorses Lilley's point by tracing McCarthy's rhetoric back to 'modernism's own search for the "quintessence," the unmediated moment of epiphany, when what is conceived to be the artifice of life is stripped away, and the inner natural essence of the "thing itself" shines through'....[as in Frost, Cather, and



Hemingway] The technique underlying the novel's egalitarian aesthetic is to elevate nature—as in *Child of God*—to an existential rank equal to that of human beings.

The intention is to identify a wild element, and a concomitant wilderness ethos, on all levels of existence. As exposition (of setting and character) assumes the same status as plot action, the aesthetic leveling is necessarily effected at the expense of the protagonists' status. Recalling the interpretation of *Outer Dark*, it is safe to say that the characters of *Blood Meridian* too are reduced to types. The protagonists' de-individualized status becomes even more obvious in the desert scenes. Nowhere in McCarthy's work is the resistance of wilderness to the logocentric encoding of nature as a cultural artifact more patent, more successful....Reason and culture are explicitly erased by the wilderness landscape....

The tendency to divest the characters of individuality and agency can also be observed in the interaction between them, such as when the point of view shifts three times within a single sentence....The images flood the pages intellectually unprocessed....Passages of this kind—when read in conjunction with the novel's wilderness discourse and its typological reduction of characters—identify the pastoral intention of *Blood Meridian* as the suspension of the human claim to stewardship over Nature....In its post-humanist, 'optically democratic' representation of wilderness, *Blood Meridian* undertakes to imagine nature in its sheer materiality, beyond anthropocentric terms....'It is precisely its lack of human implication that some find *Blood Meridian's* most disturbing feature'....The suspicion that biocentrism is as totalitarian as it seems egalitarian becomes readily apparent when the desert subjects the Glanton gang to its optical democracy (rather than being subjected to human domination) to the point where the gang members too have become feral, lethal, totalitarian, thoroughly adapted to the ecosphere they inhabit....

The equalizing effect of the silence of nature (reflected in the de-individualized characters), though not in the narrative consciousness) is neither countermanded by a new land ethic nor lamented as being inhuman....Apart from the biocentric survivalism of the wilderness, the novel ventures no ethical or historiographic tenets....Despite its Nature mysticism, *Blood Meridian* contains not even the hope for secular transcendence into a pastoral utopia, no trace of pastoral escapism. In this sense, the novel constitutes the nadir of McCarthy's evolving pastoralism, being even more hopeless in its vision of pastoral desolation than *Outer Dark*. Not until *All the Pretty Horses* does a note of pastoral optimism reemerge....

The kid shows the trickster's aptitude for survival, a skill that includes his willingness to serve any master or institution as long as doing so will help him get by. He serves in turn Captain White, Captain Glanton, a pack train conductor, and a farmer, and works in 'different trades,' at a sawmill and even at a 'diphtheria pesthouse.' Nowhere does he stay for long, and never does he commit himself to the social order, for '[t]he picaro is an outsider to this system, practical, clever, amoral, self-sufficient, and dedicated to making do by the best means available. Staying alive is his most important purpose, and having a good time comes second.' The kid's lack of zeal for the Glanton Gang's genocidal mission earns him the epithet 'mutinous' by the judge...The picaro's response to 'the omnipresent threat of injury and death' is to '[a]dapt to circumstances and take evasive action.' Eventually, however, the kid falls victim to the judge.

The judge in turn represents a type in direct opposition to the picaresque type, and the typological opposition is best explained with the dualism of Senex and Puer in Jungian psychology. Within Jung's dualism of archetypes, the patriarchal type of the Senex stands in juxtaposition to the picaresque type of the Puer who signifies youth and its attendant attributes, such as revolt, transcendence, idealization, and the crossing of boundaries. The Puer represents childhood less than 'the Divine Child, the figure of Eros,...the Trickster, and the Messiah,' and arguably the kid represents the counterpart to the judge's dominant Senex persona. That the picaresque protagonist emulates the archetype of the Puer is also suggested by the fact that he remains nameless. 'Kid' practically translates into the Latin 'puer,' and within the narrative, the terms 'the kid' and 'the judge' are used to refer to these two types rather than—as proper names would—to fictional characters in the usual sense....

Just as he understands war to be the game that subsumes all games, the judge allegorizes life into a dance of death subsuming all dances. He says so to the kid in the concluding chapter, which is so deeply allegorical as to resemble a fable. The kid listens to his enigmatic pronouncements as if in a trance, thus vindicating the judge's very words. His lack of interest even in the face of his foretold death is symptomatic

of his indifference throughout. As the novel is told from *his* point of view and thus channels the narrative gaze, his indifference even regarding his own death reflects the abjection of not just his figure but of the narrative consciousness itself.

In *Blood Meridian* then, the comic way of the picaresque genre is undercut even as it visualizes an uncultivated world (wilderness) and a cultureless society (the Wild West) as a playground of survivalism. The novel manages to balance the interrelationship between man and nature at its lowest common denominator, that of survival. The narrative ecosystem of wilderness that is thus created resembles not the primitive state restored but absolute desolation. The picaro's failure in *Blood Meridian* reflects the text's skepticism toward its own ecopastoral vision and may thus explain the underlying melancholy mood. Narrative melancholia and ambiguity toward biocentric notions infuse the text from the start, though they do not emerge until late in the story....

The bush hung with infant bodies functions as an emblem... 'McCarthy might not be referring to Dante, but this bush certainly belongs to the recognizable iconographic and literary descriptions of Hell in the Middle Ages'.... Judge Holden is introduced as looking 'strangely childlike'.... The grotesqueness of this albino figure is enhanced as the narrative turns him into something like the Antichrist with a Nietzschean rhetoric; a confidence man of altering appearance who appears anywhere, anytime... The judge is constructed as an allegorical agent much like the satanic leader of the triune in *Outer Dark*. While the kid directs the narrative gaze and—like Culla in *Outer Dark*—represents the narrative melancholia over a world gone to ruin, the judge represents a figure of death, Thanatos incarnate.... the personified void of prenatal and posthumous existence.... Desert is the place where the judge, Death incarnate, originates.... The novel ends in a powerful incantation of Death triumphant, narrated in the calculated parataxis of a fugue. This concluding emblem of the judge as 'a bloated angel of war and death' is followed by a strange epilogue allegorizing the mindless westward progress of civilization ["mindless progress"?—this is a mindless sentence]....

The epilogue is ecocritical only in the most apocalyptic sense, as if the prevalence of death were to define once again McCarthy's wilderness pastoralism.... The ecopastoral gist of *Blood Meridian*, then, is that the terms of biocentrism are dictated by the fact of death, more than by ecological interdependence. Instead of a progressive ecopastoralism, *Blood Meridian* offers a post-humanist variation of the baroque *vanitas* pastoralism."

Georg Guillemin  
*The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*  
(Texas A & M 2004) 73-100

"No text so thoroughly deconstructs the myth of a heroic American West as *Blood Meridian*, with its constantly accelerating body count; it demonstrates that Anglo domination of the North American continent was made possible by illiterate and violent men acting outside any established legal system." [Just like the Apaches and Comanches]

James R. Giles  
"Discovering Fourthspace in Appalachia:  
Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*"  
*The Spaces of Violence* (U Alabama 2006) 16-41

"In the late 1970s Cormac McCarthy moved from Knoxville to El Paso and began research on a new novel rooted in the troubling history of westward expansion. This work would unmask the romantic assumptions that informed the mythology of the western genre and the politics of Manifest Destiny, bringing an obscure and violent moment to life and lifting the events out of the nineteenth century, casting them into the realm of the universal.... *Blood Meridian; or, The Evening Redness in the West* (1985) is an arresting novel that blends all the author's influences, recalling Shakespeare, Melville, Faulkner, and Dostoyevsky, echoing the tone of the King James Bible and Dante's *Divine Comedy*.... The novel emerges in part from the influence of McCarthy's favorite works, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. All three novels share a preoccupation with unanswerable questions related to the existence, nature, and role of the divine, as well as with the possibility of transcendence through human action and benevolence....

He does not firmly reject traditional Judeo-Christian and Classical assumptions and replace them with a fashionable nihilism articulated through absurdist renderings of the human scene. His approach reflects a deeper gravity and ambiguity...In *Blood Meridian*, he adopts and modifies the narrative strategies of Melville and Dostoevsky by giving voice to multiple perspectives. The possibility of a universe absent of transcendent meaning is considered, together with the present potential of a creation dominated by evil. But alive as well in the world of *Blood Meridian* is the ubiquitous 'voice' that binds the physical and spiritual into mysterious unity and reveals itself through discrete gestures of human decency and benevolence. It is this richness of perspective that led Harold Bloom to place *Blood Meridian* among the greatest works of twentieth-century literature. In 2006 a survey conducted by the *New York Times* echoed these sentiments, judging the novel as one of the five finest written by a contemporary American author....

The unnamed 'kid,' a fourteen-year-old runaway who in 1849 abandons his alcoholic father (a bereft schoolmaster) and in striking similarity to Huckleberry Finn 'lights out for the Territory'....Tellingly the kid's initial experience of the events that will define him occurs in the east Texas town of Nacogdoches, which is located on the ninety-eighth meridian, identified by Frederick Jackson Turner as the boundary line that separates the frontier and the wilderness....In literary terms the judge recalls Melville's white whale and Captain Ahab, as well as Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, Milton's Satan, Shakespeare's Iago, and the extraliterary character of the Marquis de Sade. From a religious and philosophical perspective, the judge's many pronouncements throughout the novel reflect the Nietzschean...Superman..., Satan of the Old and New Testaments, Job's comforters, the evil archons or the demiurge of ancient Gnosticism, and he is perhaps most obviously the dark avatar of scientific positivism—in this case of the Enlightenment gone horribly astray. In artfully blending these various conceptions and figurations, he becomes a uniquely contemporary villain, one who espouses a brutish philosophy that McCarthy presents as the ethical outcome of a rigid philosophical materialism....

Among many scholars *Blood Meridian* has emerged as McCarthy's masterpiece, but initial reviews were relatively scant and perplexing....This integration of aesthetic beauty and horror is unsettling to say the least, and *Blood Meridian* must remain for some unapproachable. For others, it is an experience to be encountered once, while some consider and reconsider the novel for its fascinating but ultimately inaccessible depths....*Blood Meridian* is in many ways similar to T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land.' (1922). It is simultaneously traditional and experimental, innovative yet evocative of many classic works in the Western tradition....In his use of the American historical romance, *Blood Meridian* explicitly engages the popular national frontier mythology that begins with the novels of James Fenimore Cooper and finds its modern expression in western novels and films. Complicating this popular genre, however, characters such as the kid and the judge retain the iconic and larger-than-life status of myth, but McCarthy's treatment of their nature is openly revisionist, questioning and even flagrantly dismantling the values that define the frontier hero....

The precise location of the novel's initial setting, on the ninety-eighth meridian, which marks the western edge of Euro-American civilization [and] firmly establishes the narrative as a frontier romance... The gang works directly in the interest of the civil body politic, clearing away the violent and uncivilized natives that stand in the way of progress and civilization. In his eloquence, learning, aesthetic sense and appreciation, as well as his rhetorical charisma, the judge ironically displays the best ideals of refinement associated with Western culture from the Classical Age to the Enlightenment. The fact that he appears also as an unspeakable villain suggests that the novel's historical revisionism is single-minded in its critical attitude toward westward expansionism, as both the violent and the peaceful among the native populations are obliterated by Glanton's and Judge Holden's indiscriminate bloodlust and greed.

This reading is valid, but it must be taken alongside a deeper skepticism in the novel's texture that transcends history, culture and politics, since McCarthy's treatment of the world resonates with a deeper quasi-religious, even biblical language. This language invites the supposition that the evil manifest in the gang and their leaders is not exclusive to them or to the political and economic interests they represent.... The kid witnesses an attack of Comanches who descend upon the army troop as if from another world. The author's extended description is modern and explicitly surreal. The nightmarish quality of the passage lifts the event out of local history, and the bloody conflict echoes the apocalyptic imagery of the book of Revelation....[Politically correct liberals side with the Comanches.]

McCarthy's revisionism takes aim not just at late-nineteenth-century American progressivism, but at the natives themselves, who manifest the same depravity as their eventual conquerors. The primary target of the author's hard visionary indictment is human nature, as well as any ideology—scientific, social, or religious—that would claim that human perfectibility is in any way remotely attainable....He draws heavily from his predecessors among the American Naturalists, particularly Jack London and later Ernest Hemingway [a Modernist, not a Naturalist]. This Naturalism is specifically expressed in the notion of 'optical democracy'...

The thematic tie that links the judge to antireligious materialism and philosophical Naturalism becomes clear in his many monologues, in which he reveals himself as a natural historian and an avatar of Enlightenment science. As the Marquis de Sade (in the embrace of personal freedom in sexual perversion) can be seen as the political outcome of individualistic positivism taken to the darkest extreme, so the judge can be seen as a potential result of the assertions of a modern science taken to the philosophical extreme, which privilege the phenomenal over the numinous, the material over the transcendent....As the dark manifestation of Enlightenment science, the judge is the bleak personification of a version of positivism largely unacceptable to those who might argue for a model of scientific inquiry defined by optimistic, even progressivist notions of human improvement....

Amid this focus on the natural world, these strange suggestions of the divine exist, evidenced in the reference to God, the notion of an alternative order, and the mysterious idea of man's mirrored destiny in another realm of being. McCarthy continually attempts to blend the tactile and experiential with the mystical and sublime, always with full recognition of the world's indifference and brutality....Like the white whale in *Moby-Dick*, he is describe as ubiquitous, since in the former priest Tobin's words, 'Every man in the company claims to have encountered that sooty-souled rascal in some other place'....[Unlike the Judge the white whale is not malevolent, he merely defends himself; the Judge is more like the squid.]

Through the judge, McCarthy blends the evolutionary naturalism of the late nineteenth century, with its recognition of the violence in nature and the indifference to human suffering inherent in natural law, with the radically human-centered philosophy of Nietzsche. War and violence are unavoidable characteristics of existence, and order is achieved only through deliberate and forceful acts of violence. Through that destructive impulse the individual human achieves the closest thing to divine status....'War is God'....The kid says very little...functioning as a heroic counterbalance to the judge's view of things.... In the end he responds to circumstances with a moral rectitude and resists the judge's pronouncements even unto death. In spite of Judge Holden's verbal and physical power, one of the kid's final statements to him after encountering him many years later is simple and poignant: 'You aint nothin.' The kid's resistance is implicitly founded on a faith in the transformative power of moral order and meaning, as well as ethics and benevolence, and at the center of these virtues is the question of God and his nature.

There is a striking power in the way in which McCarthy imagines how God becomes incarnate in the world, which is made clear to the kid as he quietly ruminates on the question of the divine. This evolving recognition is brought about by the former priest Tobin. The former priest plays a central and fascinating role in revealing the kid's internal conflict. Clearly of a different ethical frame than the rest of the gang, the kid has many opportunities to kill the murderous judge, an act that would confirm in large part the judge's version of reality. But he does not do so. Still, he remains skeptical of any transcendent purpose or value, at first denying the God that many in the gang, ironically, still hold to be real....The judge emerges in this context as a rather conventional Satan figure intent upon converting his protégé to his worldview and behavior. On the one hand, the judge speaks to the kid with an intensely paternal language, which resonates with religious implications, when in their final interchange the judge says, 'Don't you know that I'd have loved you like a son?'...The kid responds to the silent voice the former priest illuminates in a quiet moment in the wilderness. This voice articulates its mystery language in resonating echoes in all that can be seen, felt, and intimidated by the heart....

In the end the kid invites his own death by reducing the judge to 'nothing,' simply by dismissing him with relative silence. His death then becomes a measured victory that echoes Christ's death on the cross, at least insofar as he is destroyed but never internally defeated, and he stands as an example of moral rectitude and heroism in the face of omnipresent evil....Bloom does concur with Daugherty in seeing the epilogue as

a complex image of hope, as an allusion to the myth of Prometheus, a figure in Greek mythology who in defiance of the greater gods gives fire to the human race, and who in the context of *Blood Meridian* perpetually stands in opposition to the judge....The image of fire here is somewhat ambiguous, but in later novels [especially *The Road*, 2006] it is a vivid, striking, and evocative intimation of the divine....Human beings must fall into the hell that is the material world, and through a mysterious process of purification they may reach the 'fire' that is associated with the Father and the 'light' that is Christ."

Steven Frye  
*Understanding Cormac McCarthy*  
(U South Carolina 2009) 66-90, 93

"*Blood Meridian* (1985) seems to me the authentic American apocalyptic novel, more relevant even in 2010 than it was twenty-five years ago. The fulfilled renown of *Moby-Dick* and *As I Lay Dying* is augmented by *Blood Meridian*, since Cormac McCarthy is the worthy disciple both of Melville and of Faulkner. I venture that no other living American novelist, not even Pynchon, has given us a book as strong and memorable as *Blood Meridian*, much as I appreciate Don DeLillo's *Underworld*; Philip Roth's *Zuckerman Bound*, *Sabbath's Theater*, and *American Pastoral*; and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Mason & Dixon*. McCarthy himself, in his Border Trilogy, commencing with the superb *All the Pretty Horses*, has not matched *Blood Meridian*, but it is the ultimate Western, not to be surpassed.

My concern being the reader, I will begin by confessing that my first two attempts to read through *Blood Meridian* failed, because I flinched from the overwhelming carnage that McCarthy portrays. The violence begins on the novel's second page, when the fifteen-year-old Kid is shot in the back and just below the heart, and continues almost with no respite until the end, thirty years later, when Judge Holden, the most frightening figure in all of American literature, murders the Kid in an outhouse. So appalling are the continuous massacres and mutilations of *Blood Meridian* that one could be reading a United Nations report on the horrors of Kosovo in 1999.

Nevertheless, I urge the reader to persevere, because *Blood Meridian* is a canonical imaginative achievement, both an American and a universal tragedy of blood. Judge Holden is a villain worthy of Shakespeare, Iago-like and demoniac, a theoretician of war everlasting. And the book's magnificence—its language, landscape, persons, conceptions—at last transcends the violence, and convert goriness into terrifying art, an art comparable to Melville's and to Faulkner's. When I teach the book, many of my students resist it initially (as I did, and as some of my friends continue to do). Television saturates us with actual as well as imagined violence, and I turn away, either in shock or in disgust.

But I cannot turn away from *Blood Meridian*, now that I know how to read it, and why it has to be read. None of its carnage is gratuitous or redundant; it belonged to the Mexico-Texas borderlands in 1849-50, which is where and when most of the novel is set. I suppose one could call *Blood Meridian* a 'historical novel,' since it chronicles the actual expedition of the Glanton gang, a murderous paramilitary force sent out both by Mexican and Texan authorities to murder and scalp as many Indians as possible. Yet it does not have the aura of historical fiction, since what it depicts seethes on, in the United States, and nearly everywhere else, well into the third millennium. Judge Holden, the prophet of war, is unlikely to be without honor in our years to come.

Even as you learn to endure the slaughter McCarthy describes, you become accustomed to the book's high style, again as overtly Shakespearean as it is Faulknerian....The prose of *Blood Meridian* soars, yet with its own economy, and its dialogue is always persuasive, particularly when the uncanny Judge Holden speaks....Judge Holden is the spiritual leader of Glanton's filibusters, and McCarthy persuasively gives the self-styled judge a mythic status, appropriate for a deep Machiavelli...Though all of the more colorful and murderous raiders are vividly characterized for us, the killing-machine Glanton with the others, the novel turns always upon its two central figures, Judge Holden and the Kid.

We first meet the judge on page 6: an enormous man, bald as a stone, no trace of a beard, and eyes without either brows or lashes. A seven-foot-tall albino, he almost seems to have come from some other world, and we learn to wonder about the Judge, who never sleeps, dances and fiddles with extraordinary art and energy, rapes and murders little children of both sexes, and who says that he will never die. By the

book's close, I have come to believe that the Judge is immortal. And yet the Judge, while both more and less than human, is as individualized as Iago or Macbeth, and is quite at home in the Texas-Mexican borderlands where we watch him operate in 1849-50, and then find him again in 1878, not a day older after twenty-eight years, though the Kid, a sixteen-year-old at the start of Glanton's foray, is forty-five when murdered by the Judge at the end.

McCarthy subtly shows us the long, slow development of the Kid from another mindless scalper of Indians to the courageous confronter of the Judge in their final debate in a saloon. But though the Kid's moral maturation is heartening, his personality remains largely a cipher, as anonymous as his lack of a name. The three glories of the book are the Judge, the landscape, and (dreadful to say) the slaughters, which are aesthetically distanced by McCarthy in a number of complex ways.

What is the reader to make of the Judge? He is immortal as principle, as War Everlasting, but is he a person, or something other? McCarthy will not tell us, which is all the better, since the ambiguity is most stimulating. Melville's Captain Ahab, though a Promethean demigod, is necessarily mortal, and perishes with the Pequod and all its crew, except for Ishmael. After he has killed the Kid, *Blood Meridian's* Ishmael, Judge Holden is the last survivor of Glanton's scalping crusade. Destroying the Native American nations of the Southwest is hardly analogous to the hunt to slay Moby Dick, and yet McCarthy gives us some curious parallels between the two quests. The most striking is between Melville's chapter 19, where a ragged prophet, who calls himself Elijah, warns Ishmael and Queequeg against sailing on the Pequod, and McCarthy's chapter 4, where 'an old disordered Mennonite' warns the Kid and his comrades not to join Captain Worth's filibuster, a disaster that precludes the great catastrophe of Glanton's campaign.

McCarthy's invocation of *Moby-Dick*, while impressive and suggestive, in itself does not do much to illuminate Judge Holden for us. Ahab has his preternatural aspects, including his harpooner Fedallah and Parsee whaleboat crew, and the captain's conversion to their Zoroastrian faith. Elijah tells Ishmael touches of other Arabian mysteries: a three-day trance off Cape Horn, slaying a Spaniard in front of a presumably Catholic altar in Santa Ysabel, and a wholly enigmatic spitting into a 'silver calabash.' Yet all these are transparencies compared to the enigmas of Judge Holden, who seems to judge the entire earth, and whose name suggests a holding, presumably of sway over all he encounters. And yet, the Judge, unlike Ahab, is not wholly fictive; like Glanton, he is a historic filibuster or freebooter. McCarthy tells us most in the Kid's dream visions of Judge Holden, towards the close of the novel (chapter 22)....

I think that McCarthy is warning his reader that the Judge is Moby-Dick rather than Ahab. As another white enigma, the albino Judge, like the albino whale, cannot be slain. Melville, a professed Gnostic, who believed that some 'anarch hand or cosmic blunder' had divided us into two fallen sexes, gives us a Manichean quester in Ahab. McCarthy gives Judge Holden the powers and purposes of the bad angels or demiurges that the Gnostics called archons, but he tells us not to make such an identification (as the critic Leo Daugherty eloquently has). Any 'system,' including the Gnostic one, will not divide the Judge back into his origins. The 'ultimate atavistic egg' will not be found. What can the reader do with the haunting and terrifying Judge?

Let us begin by saying that Judge Holden, though his gladsome prophecy of eternal war is authentically universal, is first and foremost a Western American, no matter how cosmopolitan his background (he speaks all languages, knows all arts and sciences, and can perform magical shamanistic metamorphoses). The Texas-Mexican border is a superb place for a war-god like the Judge to be. He carries a rifle, mounted in silver, with its name inscribed under the checkpiece: *Et In Arcadia Ego*. In the American Arcadia, death is also always there, incarnated in the Judge's weapon, which never misses. If the American pastoral tradition essentially is the Western film then the Judge incarnates that tradition, though he would require a director light-years beyond the late Sam Peckinpah, whose *The Wild Bunch* portrays mildness itself when compared to Glanton's paramilitaries....The Judge might be Iago before *Othello* begins, when the war-god Othello was still worshipped by his 'honest' color officer...The Judge speaks with an authority that chills me even as Iago leaves me terrified....

If McCarthy does not want us to regard the Judge as a Gnostic archon or supernatural being, the reader may still feel that it hardly seems sufficient to designate Holden as a nineteenth-century Western American

Iago. Since *Blood Meridian*, like the much longer *Moby-Dick*, is more prose epic than novel, the Glanton foray can seem a post-Homeric quest, where the various heroes (or thugs) have a disguised god among them, which appears to be the Judge's Herculean role. The Glanton gang passes into a sinister aesthetic glory at the close of chapter 13, when they progress from murdering and scalping Indians to butchering the Mexicans who have hired them....From this point on the filibusters pursue the way down and out to an apocalyptic conclusion...[I] urge the reader to hear, and admire, the sublime sentence that follows directly, because we are at the visionary center of *Blood Meridian*: 'They rode out on the north road as would parties bound for El Paso but before they were even quite out of sight of the city they had turned their tragic mounts to the west and they rode infatuate and half fond toward the red demise of that day, toward the evening lands and the distant pandemonium of the sun.'

Since Cormac McCarthy's language, like Melville's and Faulkner's, frequently is deliberately archaic, the *meridian* of the title probably means the zenith or noon position of the sun in the sky. Glanton, the Judge, the Kid, and their fellows are not described as 'tragic'—their long-suffering horses are—and they are 'infatuate' and half-mad ('fond') because they have broken away from any semblance of order. McCarthy knows, as does the reader, that an 'order' urging the destruction of the entire Native American population of the Southwest is an obscene idea of order, but he wants the reader to know also that the Glanton gang is now aware that they are unsponsored and free to run totally amok. The sentence I have just quoted has a morally ambiguous greatness to it, but that is the greatness of *Blood Meridian*, and indeed of Homer and Shakespeare. McCarthy so contextualizes the sentence that the amazing contrast between its high gestures and the murderous thugs who evoke the splendor is not ironic but tragic. The tragedy is ours, as readers, and not the Glanton gang's, since we are not going to mourn their demise except for the Kid's, and even there our reaction will be equivocal.

My passion for *Blood Meridian* is so fierce that I want to go on expounding it, but the courageous reader should now be (I hope) pretty well into the main movement of the book. I will confine myself here to the final encounter between the preternatural Judge Holden and the Kid, who had broken with the insane crusade twenty-eight years before, and now at middle age must confront the ageless Judge. Their dialogue is the finest achievement in this book of augmenting wonders, and may move the reader as nothing else in *Blood Meridian* does. I reread it perpetually and cannot persuade myself that I have come to the end of it. The Judge and the Kid drink together, after the avenging Judge tells the Kid that this night his soul will be demanded of him. Knowing he is no match for the Judge, the Kid nevertheless defies Holden, with laconic replies playing against the Judge's rolling grandiloquence. After demanding to know where their slain comrades are, the Judge asks: 'And where is the fiddler and where the dance?'

I guess you can tell me.

I tell you this. As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior's right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers. And yet there will be one there always who is a true dancer and can you guess who that might be?'

You aint nothin.

To have known Judge Holden, to have seen him in full operation, and to tell him that he is nothing, is heroic. 'You speak truer than you know,' the Judge replies, and two pages later murders the Kid, most horribly. *Blood Meridian*, except for a one-paragraph epilogue, ends with the Judge triumphantly dancing and fiddling at once, and proclaiming that he never sleeps and he will never die. But McCarthy does not let Judge Holden have the last word. The strangest passage in *Blood Meridian*, the epilogue is set at dawn, where a nameless man progresses over a plain by means of holes that he makes in the rocky ground. Employing a two-handled implement, the man strikes 'the fire out of the rock which God has put there.' Around the man are wanderers searching for bones, and he continues to strike fire in the holes, and then they move on. And that is all.

The subtitle of *Blood Meridian* is *The Evening Redness in the West*, which belongs to the Judge, last survivor of the Glanton gang. Perhaps all that the reader can surmise with some certainty is that the man striking fire in the rock at dawn is an opposing figure in regard to the evening redness in the West. The Judge never sleeps, and perhaps will never die, but a new Prometheus may be rising to go up against him."

Harold Bloom, ed.  
Introduction  
*Cormac McCarthy: New Edition*  
(Infobase Publishing/Bloom's Modern Critical Views 2009) 1-7

"*Blood Meridian* is careful to acknowledge the diversity of past Indian experience—from warrior tribes to agricultural ones—and that they shared no point of commonality other than that they lived on the American continent before the Europeans arrived. McCarthy cannot tell the Indians; story as Homer did the stories of the Achaeans and Trojans....It is important to note that McCarthy does not quite oppose the Europeans against the Indians, as would happen in a conventional Western. To be sure, the judge and his gang kill Indians (as well as Mexicans and Americans) and their violent misdeeds transgress against the warrior culture whose passing John Grady laments. In the encounter between White's men and the Comanches, however, both sides have been transformed prior to their meeting. The Indians are draped in the garb of Euro-American history...

These Westerns are not revisionist histories in the way that term is normally understood. They accept violence as a condition of being alive and they are not simply (and easily) critiquing a cartoonish version of an exceptionalist American history. While *Blood Meridian* speaks of the 'vast abhorrence of the judge,' the judge's last words praising the civilization of the Anasazi are not demeaned by his revolting actions. John Grady admires the Comanche and the Kiowa for having been warriors and does not resent the fact that some of his forebears were killed by them....

The aim of the novel is not to castigate men for their violent acts but to portray those acts as precisely as possible and to see if they mean anything other than the primal surge of power experienced during their expression. The judge, the most violent character in American literature, is also the most learned and civilized. The scalphunters are hired to kill Indians by the agents of civilization. They are the shock troops of Euro-American civilization and the novel clearly establishes a correlation between the necessity of violence and the building of civilization."

Timothy Parrish  
"History and the Problem of Evil in McCarthy's Western Novels"  
*The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Steven Frye  
(Cambridge U 2013) 70-72

"Cormac McCarthy's brilliance as a writer cannot lessen the strangeness of his narratives. What other novelist moves so quickly from loving descriptions of flora, fauna and rock formations into bloodthirsty violence? It is almost as if one had married those meticulous books on geology by John McPhee to the worldview of film abattoir director Sam Peckinpah. So much compassion is cherished on the weeds and stones, that hardly any is left over for the poor inhabitants of McCarthy's savage borderlands.

The character of Judge Holden in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is peculiar in the same way that this book is peculiar. In fact, Holden would hardly be believable...if it wasn't for the example McCarthy sets himself. The judge is capable, as the occasion war-rants, of ruthless violence or remarkable delicacy. He is fastidiously concerned with the geology, the history, the archeology of his Western surroundings. He will give learned discourses on arcane and sundry topics, in polished periods that stand out incongruously given their settings and audience. And then he will travel on to his next act of bloodletting.

Here is a passage that conveys both the exquisite beauty of McCarthy's writing, as well as its incorporation of mind-numbing brutality as an accepted part of the landscape. The body of a dead youngster, who has probably been abused and murdered, is being laid to rest—which in the world of *Blood Meridian* means having his corpse thrown into the mud. McCarthy writes:

'His neck had been broken and his head hung straight down and it flopped over strangely when they let him onto the ground. The hills beyond the mine pit were reflected grayly in the pools of rainwater in the courtyard and the partly eaten mule lay in the mud with its hindquarters missing like something from a chromo of terrific war. Within the doorless cuartel the man who'd been shot sang church hymns and cursed



God alternately. The squatters stood about the dead boy with their wretched firearms at rest like some tatterdemalion guard of honor.'

The reader doesn't know whether to savor those carefully chosen words that your spellchecker would probably reject—tatterdemalion, chromo, cuartel—or to cringe at the callousness of the scene described. This is McCarthy at his most stylized and disturbing; indeed, at his best, I would suggest. He excises the tragic from his tragedies, and thus makes them more a part of everyday life. At the same time, his accounts retain a larger-than-life resonance, a combination of grandeur and horror, because of the respect he pays to each cuartel and cactus along the way.

Other authors have stood out for their descriptions of landscapes. I typically view this as a minor achievement for a novelist—far more impressive are those writers, such as Dostoevsky or James, who explore the inner landscapes of the soul, I would argue, than those who merely relate the passing scenery. Yet I make an exception for McCarthy. His bleak settings are almost external manifestations of the emotional lives of his characters. No other writer is quite so skilled at making his readers feel the psychic tremor at the heart of the merely geographical.

And McCarthy has a thousand ways of describing a sparse desert that most passersby would characterize merely as 'empty.' I would need to cite several dozen examples to convey the full richness of this aspect of *Blood Meridian*, but readers merely need to open to a random page to find an instance of this skill. Just as a librarian throwing a dart at the text of *The Sun Also Rises* will inevitably strike upon an account of eating or drinking, or doing the same with Updike will encounter some creative variant on copulation, the same technique applied to the world of *Blood Meridian* will doubtless intersect a description of prairie or desert or hill country.

A typical McCarthy passage: 'They rode all day upon a pale gastine entrained upon a hollow ground that rang so roundly under the horses' hooves that they stepped and sidled and rolled their eyes like circus animals....On the day following they crossed a lake of gypsum so fine the ponies left no trace upon it' The characters of his books both haunt these landscapes and are haunted by them in turn.

But don't be fooled by this into surmising that there is not much plot in *Blood Meridian*. Cormac McCarthy mimics the conventions of those old Western dime novels, with some fisticuffs or near-death experience showing up every few pages. One might even trace the similarities between this novel and, for example, a book such as Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*. But though Grey is a much better writer than most highbrow critics realize (they would hardly know, since genre novels of all sorts, and especially Westerns, merely exist for them as objects of scorn, not curiosity), McCarthy is in a class by himself in celebrating in narrative form the prickly, lonesome dramas of life in the Southwest. Of course, an even more striking difference exists between McCarthy's book and Grey, Wister, *et al.* The Western genre demands villains and heroes; while in the world of Cormac McCarthy, a Nietzschean will-to-power prevails, and heroism is at best a rumor, at worst a deception.

The story of *Blood Meridian* follows the exploits of a young man—unnamed in the book and merely called 'The Kid'—who falls in first with a group of U.S. Army irregulars, and then with the Glanton gang. John Joel Glanton is a real historical figure, who operated as a leader of mercenaries tracking down and scalping Apaches for Mexican authorities. But soon their violence is directed at anyone who crosses their path at the wrong time. Just as inevitably, their perfidy starts to seep into their dealings with each other.

Although the unnamed 'kid' is the ostensible focal point of the story, McCarthy is clearly far more fascinated by Judge Holden, the erudite nihilist who accompanies Glanton on his depredations. A survey conducted by *Book* magazine in 2002, placed Holden as one of the fifty greatest characters in fiction since 1900. And with good reason. The paradoxical behavior of this savage savant serves as the magnetic center of the novel, and personifies that mysterious combination of brutishness and scrupulousness that permeates *Blood Meridian*.

The judge, with his pedantic displays of learning, is best situated to pass judgment and offer some overarching interpretation to the cascading violence of this world gone mad. After all, Holden is the master

of court cases, precedent and principle. But in *Blood Meridian*, all verdicts are provisional, more a matter of chance or destiny, and power vetoes the prerogatives of reason at every turn. Even judges in such settings mostly mouth empty words or out-and-out lies. Truth-telling here is reserved, it seems, only for the author himself.”

Ted Gioia  
*The New Canon.com* (2014)

Michael Hollister (2014)