

**A Suzerain of the Earth:**  
**The Creative Violence of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian***

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## Sammendrag

Denne avhandlingen tar for seg den amerikanske romanen *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*, skrevet av Cormac McCarthy og publisert i 1985. Romanen finner sted i Nord-Amerika mot slutten av 1840-tallet og følger en navnløs tenåringsgutt som rømmer hjemmefra og slår seg sammen med den morderiske Glanton-gjengen. Sammen med denne gjengen tjener han til livets opphold ved å skalpere indianere og andre under Amerikas ekspansjon vestover. Den sentrale karakteren i gjengen er Holden, eller *dommeren* som han blir referert som. Dommeren er en gåtefull skikkelse som later til å legemliggjøre menneskets natur i alle sine kontraster: veldtalende men barbarisk, sofistikert men fryktelig. Disse kontrastene viser seg også å utgjøre hovedtematikken til romanen. Romanen viser at menneskets etablering av lov og orden – overgangen fra villskap til samfunn – ikke medfører å gi avkall på sin voldelige natur. Denne avhandlingen vil heller vise hvordan boken understreker at etableringen av det menneskelige samfunnet er avhengig av ulike former vold – at vold er uunnværlig for den menneskelige tilværelsen. Denne lesningen av romanen innebærer dermed å problematisere definisjonen av vold, og identifisere ytterligere former for sosial vold som er uatskillelige fra samfunnet. Den viktigste av disse voldsformene er en symbolsk eller retorisk vold som er implisitt i språkets struktur og funksjon, og det er nettopp denne volden som er reflektert gjennom både romanens *dommer*-karakter og fortellerstemme.



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## INTRODUCTION

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

Cormac McCarthy

From an initial position of relative obscurity, Cormac McCarthy has over time attracted a readership both immense and diverse, entering into mainstream recognition. To date, his published works include ten novels, two screenplays and two plays. *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*, released in 1985, has by many come to be considered his greatest novel. Harold Bloom calls it “the ultimate Western, not to be surpassed” (255), declaring that “no other living American novelist ... has given us a book as strong and memorable” (254-55). The novel follows America’s westward expansion in the late 1840s, most prominently focusing on the murderous exploits of the Glanton gang, a band of mercenaries and scalphunters, and their expedition into Texas and Mexico. Most of the narrative is focalized through an unnamed character known simply as “the kid” and follows his journey through a world of endless bloodshed and depravity. Soon after running away from home, the kid sets out with a filibuster expedition led by Captain White, only to narrowly escape as the rest of the company is massacred by a Comanche war party. Falling in with John Glanton and his gang, the kid

encounters again the monstrous and enigmatic Judge Holden, whom he has previously come across in Nacogdoches. Holden, commonly referred to as *the judge*, is in many ways the real focal point of the novel. He is a figure who embodies both primal savagery and cultured sophistication, and appears as both prophetic and infinitely resourceful. Emerging as the true authority within the gang, he leads the men towards their doom, insisting all along on the primacy of war and its essential part of the human condition.

Despite its often celebrated status, *Blood Meridian* has also been shown to be deeply polarizing. It is a novel of extremes, both in form and content, and likewise it seems to inspire extreme reactions; to have read the novel is either to love it or loathe it – there appears to be no middle ground. It is considered a challenging text due to its unremitting depiction of graphic violence. Furthermore, the text itself seems to be confrontational: it situates violence front and center in the text and draws unsettling implications regarding its place in the world. The judge's defense of violence dominates the text, and his urging for the centrality of violence – the *holiness* of war – is passed on to the reader. The novel's vision of the world is one in which primal and amoral violence are the central structural elements, permeating every facet of life. Likewise, the novel offers the reader no respite from its constant barrage of brutal imagery. Paradoxically, much of this imagery is conveyed with a prose that is poetic and lyrical – what is often referred to as McCarthy's marked style. The novel thus embodies both extreme violence and artistic beauty, a juxtaposition which many critics find as unsettling as its subject matter. As Steven Shaviro notes, the “baroque opulence” of the text's descriptive power “produces a vertiginous, nauseous exhilaration” where violent death is “attended with a frighteningly complicitous joy” (Shaviro 146). Any critical analysis of *Blood Meridian* thus begins with the problem of its violence. How does one make sense of the seemingly senseless? How can one reconcile the beauty and attraction of the text's language with the ugliness of its subject matter?

Due to its shocking display of violence, the novel has been subject to varied criticism, with a few overarching tendencies emerging. While the novel is begrudgingly admired for the poetic grandeur of its language, many critics label its depiction of violence as excessive and gratuitous, and the text to be void of any ethical dimension that could potentially justify it. Peter Josyph laments the absence of anything in the text “to inspire a wisp of hope for the human race” (52), questioning whether or not it is justifiable to lavish praise on the novel and its author, despite it having “some of the most impressive prose of its day” (52-53). Terence Moran notes the beauty of the novel's “evocative passages” but is simultaneously repulsed by the text's depiction of “horrible massacre or sickening degeneracy” (37). The novel's apparent lack of a moral conscience leads many critics to conclude that the novel either glorifies violence or utilizes it for the sake of sensationalism. Implicit in this kind of criticism is the expectation that the novel needs to have some degree of ethical reference. What many critics find objectionable is exactly the absence of this kind of message – and the sneering sense of nihilism that the text often exhibits in its place. This kind of reading often seems unsatisfying as it rarely takes into account the sense of self-reflexivity present in the novel. As this thesis will show, much of the novel reflects a kind of wry self-awareness of its own preposterous excess, which indicates that the its excessive description of violence is itself a place where meaning can be found.

One critical trend is to rationalize the novel's singular focus on violence by projecting a moral purpose onto the text – to assume that a text of such high artistic quality must also have a moral agenda. Some of the critics who take this stance historicize the novel, reading it as a revisionary account of the American frontier that foregrounds the fundamental horror of its violence, turning the text into an implicit indictment of the violence it portrays. John Sepich claims that critics often overlook the degree to which *Blood Meridian* draws on historical sources, suggests that the novel may be regarded as “three hundred pages of grotesque

evidence” (1). As he asserts, the novel is essentially a historical novel which serves as a “comparison of traditional versions of an event with the author's personalized version” (2). Critics who explore this aspect of the text often draw from Richard Slotkin's multivolume analysis of the mythology of the American West and its vital influence on contemporary American culture. Sara L. Spurgeon argues for the novel's myth-destroying aspects, reading it as “an indictment, bloody and accusatory, of an American national(ist) identity based on the violent conquest of both racialized Others and feminized nature” (85). Neil Campbell takes a similar position, declaring the novel to be “an excessive, revisionist and contradictory narrative of the American West” (217). Many of these critical works fail to fully take into account how the novel often aestheticizes acts of extreme violence, instilling them with a sense of poetic beauty. If the purpose of the text is simply to *represent* frontier violence in a way that foregrounds its barbarity, why then would the text also need to make its “grotesque evidence” more attractive to the reader (Sepich 1)? Moreover, these readings also frequently understate the novel's immense scope and timeless allusions. As numerous scholars have documented, one can encounter in the novel traces of Homer, Greek tragedy, the King James Bible, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, Melville, Twain, Crane, Faulkner, as well as Lucretius, St. Augustine, Darwin and Nietzsche (Parrish 67; Shaviro 149-53; Owens 3, Mitchell 260, 264, 272). Furthermore, the text's descriptive imagery frequently gives the impression of a narrator that reflects and ruminates on the symbolic and metaphysical implications of the landscape as much as on its materiality. While *Blood Meridian* may assume the guise of historical narrative, it also reflects an engagement with aspects of humanity that far exceed the scope of its immediate historical setting. As this thesis will reveal, the novel addresses fundamental and timeless aspects of human society and the presence of violence within it.

Other critics, meanwhile, find intellectual comfort by reading the novel as a moral parable, drawing religious or mythological comparisons. Edwin T. Arnold argues that the novel possesses a moral center that “holds firmly” (62), insisting on a clear moral opposition between the kid and the judge. He concludes that the novel does allow for moral choice by demonstrating that the judge – whom he takes to be the text's satanic figure – indeed can be faced (65). Leo Daugherty reads the text as a gnostic tragedy, envisioning the kid and the judge as part of a Manichean struggle, casting the former as a tragic hero that possesses a trace of the divine spark, and the latter as an evil archon (164-65). While certainly not lacking in creativity, these interpretations often tend to overstate the kid's moral agency, and his function as a challenger to the judge's rule. They ignore his complicity in the novel's violent action, both in the form of direct involvement and as a passive enabler. These readings insist on the kid as a redemptive figure, and moral *good* and *evil* as absolute values. They also, by implication, suggest that violence may be overcome – or renounced – through morally enlightened behavior. However, as this thesis will show, *Blood Meridian* resists such a clear distinction between absolutes, presenting violence as inescapable. The novel refuses an expedient labeling of violence as evil – as something that can be opposed or transcended through a dedication to higher ideals, whether divine or ethical. On the contrary, as this thesis will argue, the novel's version of enlightenment is one which also reflects unconditional violence.

All of these critical tendencies are emblematic of the same problem. They either insist that the text lacks a moral indictment of violence, or that it constitutes such an indictment in the form of a mythical parable or a rewriting of history. Both contradictory accounts thus reflect the same assumption: that violence is something which effectively *can* be renounced. As such, these critical perspectives directly contradict the novel's overarching project, which is to insist on the futility of trying to posit violence as peripheral to the human condition – as an intrusion or pathological aberration from the norm. These readings thus participate in the idealized

distinction between savagery and society that the text itself is committed to overturn. They seem to presuppose that violence is something that can be conquered and risen above – that it is something that can be exorcised, in part, from the reader himself through condemnation of either the text itself for being needlessly violent, or the historical attitudes which the text is purported to challenge. According to *Blood Meridian*, however, violence has always been and remains to be the dominant modality through which humans interact with both the world and each other. The novel presents violence as integral to its alleged antitheses: order, language, creativity, beauty – in short, the presumed virtues of human civilization.

Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek insists that there is something inherently hypocritical about this kind of moral condemnation. By renouncing violence in such a way, one implicitly envisions the normal functioning of society to be one characterized by non-violence, where directly perceptible forms of violent outburst merely constitute a temporary disturbance to the peaceful order of things. However, as Žižek emphasizes, this state of non-violence is an illusion. In his view, “to chastise violence outright, to condemn it as 'bad', is an ideological operation par excellence, a mystification which collaborates in rendering invisible the fundamental forms of social violence” (174). These forms of social violence are the underlying, frequently overlooked forms of violence which can be found to form the very basis of society and human communication – forms of violence which Žižek considers to be both specifically human and far more brutal in their implications. The following reading of *Blood Meridian* will be informed by Žižek's study of social violence. It will adapt his proposed categorization of different varieties of violence in order to unpack and make sense of the violence found in the novel, as well as to establish the relationship between these different forms.

This thesis will thus utilize a definition of violence that may be considered broader than conventional. Some may object to such theorizing of violence and consider it as an intellectual

defense of violence which by implication trivializes or mitigates direct experience of violent events. By broadening the definition, the term may be seen to lose some of its meaning and become more abstract. However, such development of the term is essential to determining the full implications of violence as it appears in the novel. The novel insists on the centrality of atavistic or primal violence in the world. However, as this thesis will show, one can through a thorough examination of violence in the text identify *human* forms of violence with far greater destructive potential.

The novel's overwhelming focus is violence but the text also reflects unfettered creativity. It presents the reader with ornate, poetic language and will frequently alternate between a range of tonalities and narrative potentialities. The narrative's intricacy indicates that *Blood Meridian* is a text in which the possibilities and implications of representation itself are being highlighted and explored. Both the text's central character Judge Holden and the text's narrative voice can be seen to emphasize this thematic focus. For the judge, physical violence and rhetorical violence go hand in hand. The judge's discourse is shown to have the power to directly incite violence, and he justifies his own brutality through his own lofty rhetoric. In a reflection of the text itself, the judge embodies both creativity and violence in equal measure. By drawing from Žižek's categories of social violence, this thesis will show how *Blood Meridian* reveals a violence intrinsic to human creativity: a violence of language and representation that is reflected through artistic practices. The novel expresses this form of violence both through its formal aspects – its narrative strategies and stylistic choices – and its content, most directly through the character of the judge. It is only through an unflinching examination of the text's representations of violence that one can reveal the violence inherent to representation itself. This thesis aspires to do just that: to avoid the temptation to condemn or dismiss the seemingly senseless spectacles of violence staged by the novel, and thus uncover the underlying violence of their representation.

A study dedicated to drawing parallels between the violent aspects of *Blood Meridian's* form and content in the way this thesis determines to do seems not to exist to date. Although other critics have engaged with the violent implications of language in the text – examining either the apparent violence implied or conveyed through the text's stylistic features or the rhetorical violence performed by the judge – this thesis will reveal a thematic unity formed by both dimensions of the novel. By accounting for both the text's violent content and the violent implications of its expression, this thesis will hopefully contribute to a greater understanding of the work.

The first chapter of this thesis will mainly focus on *Blood Meridian's* plot and characters, particularly on the violence embodied by the complex figure of Judge Holden. It will define Žižek's categories of violence and explore the text informed by this taxonomy. It will differentiate between multiple aspects of violence and identify specifically human forms rooted in language and representation. It will show that, rather than simply being meaningless, much of the text's violence is inexorably linked to the production of meaning itself. The second chapter will focus on the formal aspects of the text: its narrative strategies and stylistic techniques. It will follow the implications drawn in the first chapter, and through them examine how the novel's style and narration resonate with the thematic insistence on inescapable violence, as well as how the text's narrator reflects the violent methodology of Judge Holden. It will highlight how the narrative voice at work exemplifies the creative violence of representation by alternating between different forms of narrative style. In a general sense, the first chapter will concern itself primarily with violence *in* the text, whereas the second chapter will examine the violence *of* the text.

This thesis marks an attempt to avoid dense terminology in favor of an intuitive nomenclature intended to promote understanding regardless of the reader's theoretical



background. Terms that are introduced should, unless otherwise specified, be understood in a general sense.



## CHAPTER 1

### Creative Violence

Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth.

Judge Holden

His very existence was improbable, inexplicable, and altogether bewildering. He was an insoluble problem. It was inconceivable how he had existed, how he had succeeded in getting so far, how he had managed to remain – why he did not instantly disappear.

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose ... The void breathed hard on my heart, turning its illusions to ice, shattering them. Was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world.

Alan Moore, *Watchmen*

*Blood Meridian* problematizes the separation of violence from humanity. It objects to the idea that violence is something that must be seen as purely destructive and the idealized notion that violence can somehow be cast out from human society. As will be explored in this chapter, the text proposes instead that violence must be viewed as something integral to life, both in the

general sense and in a specifically human context – that it engenders, energizes, and is inseparable from creativity.

What insight, then, can the text provide into the presence of violence in human society? While *Blood Meridian* seems frequently to equate human violence with atavistic, primal aggression, this chapter will also reveal how the text clearly exemplifies *specifically human* forms of violence. To properly grasp these forms, it becomes necessary to broaden the definition of violence. In his work *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Slavoj Žižek explores the place violence occupies in human society. His claim is that clearly visible forms of *subjective violence* are derivative and secondary to more fundamental forms of social violence. Subjective violence can be defined as violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent: “violence enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds” (10). *Blood Meridian* is saturated with violence of this variety, or rather representations thereof. However, to give in to such a reductive definition would be to miss the underlying forms of violence that define culture. As Žižek urges, it is only by taking a step back from this directly visible, subjective form of violence that one can “perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts” (1). The Slovenian philosopher thus attempts to reveal a taxonomy of violence, to cast sideways glances in order to avoid the horror of the directly perceptible. In addition to its subjective manifestation, he identifies *objective* violence which has a tendency to be overlooked, to appear as invisible because it is inherent to the “normal” state of things. As Žižek argues, “[o]bjective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent” (2). Part of what *Blood Meridian* does is to render objective violence visible. Yet, as the text’s critical history suggests, the nuances of these less visible forms tend to become overshadowed by the horrific nature of the novel’s more insistently present and obvious violent spectacles. One thus runs the risk of missing the underlying forms of violence expressed by the text, as

well as their full implications. This chapter will show how the novel renders visible these invisible forms that are fundamental to human society.

Žižek further distinguishes between two forms of objective violence: *symbolic* and *systemic violence*. This distinction is somewhat more ambiguous. *Symbolic violence* is held to be the violence directly pertaining to the workings of language as such. For Žižek, the most fundamental form of symbolic violence is inherent in “[language’s] imposition of a certain universe of meaning” (1). It is symbolic precisely because it operates on the symbolic level: through the production and imposition of meaning as effected through language. As will be shown in greater detail below, this is a form of violence exemplified in the novel through the character of the judge and his claim of suzerainty over the world. It is a form of violence that will be revealed by analyzing the judge’s methodology: the way in which he interprets and represents the world. *Systemic violence*, meanwhile, is defined as “the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (1). It is the “automatic” violence enacted by the social order, by man-made structures of meaning once they have become naturalized and accepted as given. A simplified way to regard this distinction in relation to *Blood Meridian*’s Judge Holden is to consider how these two forms of objective violence relate to the form and content of the judge’s rhetoric. For practical reasons, the following discussion will adapt Žižek’s categories in this manner. As will be shown below, the judge can be said to reflect symbolic violence, that of language, through his methodology, whereas the actual content of his rhetoric comes to reveal systemic violence.

This chapter will follow Žižek’s example and cast sideways glances, to examine the underlying forms of human violence as they are expressed in the novel. It is impossible to merely interpret the text’s instances of subjective violence without also examining the context in which such instances occur, the underlying systemic and symbolic forms of violence that

define human society – that society itself is predicated on. As will be revealed, these forms of violence are inexorably linked to human creativity.

The opening page of *Blood Meridian* introduces the novel's focal character known simply as the kid. His very entrance into the world is marred by violence as his mother is described as having died in childbirth: “The mother dead these fourteen years did incubate in her own bosom the creature who would carry her off” (McCarthy 3). This line serves to foreshadow many of the text’s attitudes towards violence. First of all, it is an early indication of the text's insistence on violence as a central narrative element. By explicitly naming the kid as “the creature who would carry her off” (3), the text foregrounds the kid’s unwitting complicity in his mother’s death, precluding any possibility of his innocence or dissociation from violence. The kid thereby claims violence as his primordial inheritance, which is cemented by the novel’s proclamation that “in him broods already a taste for mindless violence” (3). By opening the narrative and introducing the focal character in this manner, violence is depicted as immediate and inescapable, both for the kid and, by extension, the reader. The kid enters a world beset by violence, leaving the safety of the womb. The deliberate use of the word *incubate*, brings to mind its biological definition, which, according to the *OED*, is “to maintain at a constant degree of warmth that will favour growth or continued survival (e.g. of micro-organisms)” (“incubate”). The kid thus leaves a state of homeostasis for a world of oscillating extremes and excess – a world where “violence is the principal structural element” (Owens 12). This highlights the inherent trauma of birth, and its implicit violence: by being born one’s ultimate destiny is death. The specific focus on death in childbirth as the starting point of the kid’s journey further emphasizes the text's insistence on the impossibility of distinguishing between creative and destructive properties of an act or event. By having the kid’s birth which might normally be considered a wholly generative event directly correspond with the violent destruction of his mother, the novel emphasizes death as an inescapable consequence of life,

whereby creation becomes indistinguishable from destruction. The net effect of these opening lines, then, is to make violence an intimate part of the human condition.

The novel thus insists on the impossibility of non-violence: that violence exists as a direct consequence of life and is linked to both generative and creative events. The violent inheritance the kid claims for himself through his entrance into the world (and the novel) reflects what the novel holds to be the savage nature of all mankind. Leaving home, the kid enters a crucible of violence inhabited by men who “fight with fists, with feet, with bottles or knives. All races, all breeds. Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes” (McCarthy 4). Man’s underlying nature is depicted as savage and primal, with violence as his driving force, his energizing essence. As Hannah Arendt points out, one may take the perspective of viewing life as an unending contest where violence can be read as metaphorical of human industry, youth and vitality, as opposed to complacency and inertia (69). The novel's depiction of man as energized through violent passions can thus be read as the antithesis of Nietzsche's stagnant figure of the Last Man, which Slavoj Žižek summarizes as “an apathetic creature with no great passion or commitment. ... he takes no risks, seeking only comfort and security, an expression of tolerance with one another” (24). However, *Blood Meridian's* explicit foregrounding of violence in all its horrific detail precludes the novel from being read simply as an abstract glorification of violence. Like the event of the kid’s birth, the novel's overall assertion is that violence can denote both life and death simultaneously, and thus that any separation between the creative and destructive attributes of violence is ultimately illusory.

Violent action, by extension, appears to be the driving force of the narrative itself as the reader follows the filibuster expedition westward towards the horizon, driven by a primal attraction to “mindless violence” (McCarthy 3). The kid encounters treasure-seekers along the way, referred to as “[i]tinerant degenerates bleeding westward like some heliotropic plague” (83). The express reference to heliotropism, the property of plants to bend or turn under the

influence of light, denotes a natural, irresistible attraction to the sun, or in the context of the novel, what the sun represents. The text thus further allude to the congruence between life force and violence. The sun, the titular blood meridian, has the life-giving power to sustain and nurture, evident as the kid feels the “warmth of the sun’s ascending” (224), and laments its absence as the world falls into a state of “stillness and cold” that numbs his feet and drives his jaw into a “seizure of cold” (224). It also has the destructive power to consume, as reference is made to its “calamitous advance” that blackens the skin and dries out the eyes of those in its proximity (118). Likewise, America's westward expansion is rendered in both its invasive destructiveness as well as the industrious energy or vitality that serves as its sustaining power. Following in the footsteps of the characters, the reader is irresistibly drawn towards “the distant pandemonium of the sun” (195), the simultaneously sustaining and violently consuming force.

This generative potential of violence is further expressed through the rhetoric of the text’s central character, Judge Holden. The judge speaks of the collective violence of war as a *dance*. The very unity of existence, he urges, is contingent on participating in this dance, which he further references as “a ceremony of a certain magnitude perhaps more commonly called a ritual” (347). The ritual of war can only proceed through the communal spilling of blood, as the judge considers any ritual which fails in this regard not to be a true ritual, but instead “a solitary game without opponent” (347), in which each participant is destined for “a night that is eternal and without name” (349). When examining the potential effects of the ritual proposed by the judge, one may consider Hannah Arendt's claims about the potential effects of collective violence:

As far as human experience is concerned, death indicates an extreme of loneliness and impotence. But faced collectively and in action, death changes its countenance; now nothing seems more likely to intensify our vitality than its proximity. Something we are usually hardly aware of, namely, that our own death is accompanied by the potential



immortality of the group we belong to and, in the final analysis, of the species, moves into the center of our experience. It is as though life itself, the immortal life of the species, nourished, as it were, by the sempiternal dying of its individual members, is “surging upward,” is actualized in the practice of violence. (68)

It seems that through war one may be granted some measure of deathlessness and unity, however transitory, to defend against the innate loneliness of death, the “solitary game without opponent”. As the judge demands of the kid: “the emptiness and the despair. It is what we take arms against, is it not?” (McCarthy 347). The focus of his rhetoric is the ability of violence to stave off the solitude and to foster a sense of unity. “Is not blood the tempering agent in the mortar which bonds?” (347), he asks. The judge's discourse can thus be said to align itself with biological metaphors that seek to glorify violence – metaphors that draw on the centrality of violent struggle for survival in the natural world as indication that the survival of the species in modern society is contingent on our continuing collective allegiance to just such a struggle. However, as Arendt claims, the problem of finding an alternative to this “final arbiter in international affairs” is the real reason for the persistence of warfare:

[T]hat war is so essential to the functioning of our society that we dare not abolish it unless we discover even more murderous ways of dealing with our problems ... will shock only those who have forgotten to what an extent the unemployment crisis of the Great Depression was solved only through the outbreak of World War II. (5)

The judge's urging for the centrality of war in human affairs can thus be read as not simply glorifying violence, but as something that draws attention to our paradoxical reliance on war's generative potential through its convenient ability to externalize social problems and promote group cohesion.

The generative potential of violence that the novel insists on thus applies to the natural, individual and the social level. Struggle and aggression are presented as essential aspects of life, neither inherently good nor bad. The narrative is set in a world that is itself depicted as fundamentally violent, with indifferent violence being synonymous with natural life-force. “The wind has a raw edge to it” (McCarthy 5), the narrator states, while reference is further made to “desert growths propagating *angrily*” (294, my emphasis) and a sun that will “cook impartially” those caught underneath it, unable to find shade (299). The violence of the sun is interrupted only briefly, and then frequently by the elemental violence of nocturnal thunderstorms, as the landscape is turned “electric and wild” (49). The kid and his companions encounter the scars of natural violence all around them as they make their way over the landscape, “[crossing] the blackened wood of a burn and they rode through a region of cloven rock where great boulders lay halved with smooth uncentered faces and on the slopes of those ferric grounds old paths of fire and the blackened trees assassinated in the mountain storms” (198). Desert dustspouts are purported to carry men “aloft like dervishes in those *mindless* coils to be dropped broken and bleeding upon the desert again” (118). As these whirlwinds dissolve, they may, as the narrator states, leave their victims on the ground in anguish, crying out in rage against the elusive “engine of [their] ruin” and find no reply (118).

This natural state of mindless, amoral violence is a condition which extends to man himself. On their journey westward, the mercenary expedition is described by the following passage:

Above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed and mute as gorgons shambling the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all. (182)

The novel depicts man as fundamentally primal and savage, little changed since prehistoric Gondwana, and the filibuster expedition as a wild procession, made up by men driven by violent passions. The kid is described as “unwashed”, his “eyes oddly innocent” (4). He “can neither read nor write” (3), and his propensity is towards the “mindless violence” (4) of simple aggression. He and his companions, who share in his primal nature, are described not as fully formed men but as “mud effigies” (9), or “forms excavated from a bog” (13), while one of them, Toadvine, is further referenced as a “great clay voodoo doll made animate” (14). The sense conveyed through these descriptions is that these are not men at all, but rather the mere likenesses of men: rough semblances in the process of emerging from the primordial mud – beings still in the process of assuming definition. Setting out with Captain White's crude militia through a “squalid kingdom of mud”, the men are themselves part of this landscape, the world in its primordial condition. Recounting to the Captain the supposed theft of his belongings, the kid finds it difficult to explain exactly where this purported event may have taken place, stating that “[t]hey wasn't no name to it. It was just a wilderness” (34). Passages such as this evoke the sense that the men belong to a world that is inherently material, a world of mud and undifferentiated wilderness. The text's wild, chaotic world of mindless violence is one where the very mountains seem separated from their moorings, left to stand “footless in the void like floating temples” (115), and where the men's own destinies are prognosticated by the stars “falling across the sky myriad and random, speeding along brief vectors from their origins in night to their destinies in dust and nothingness” (351). The numerous references to an unsettling, phantasmal void point to a precarious lack of meaning, a lack of signification in a land “devoid of order” (182), where men are at constant peril of being swallowed up by the “problematical destruction of darkness” (112).

It is against this backdrop the figure of Judge Holden must be understood. *Blood Meridian* allows one to trace a movement from nature to culture, from a state of lawlessness to

the establishment of law. “[D]ivested of all that he has been” (5), the kid sets out on the road to human society, leaving behind him “terrains ... wild and barbarous” (5), emerging from the seclusion of the “darker woods beyond that harbor yet a few last wolves” (3). Like the rest of his companions, the kid is drawn in by the gravitational pull of the judge, a figure who manifests from the silence of the void – seemingly appearing out of this lack – and imbues existence with structure and meaning. He emerges as a figure whose authority eclipses that of Glanton's, and whose charisma is strangely compelling. The men are drawn to his leadership with both fortuitous and disastrous consequences, as he saves them from an Indian ambush yet ultimately leads them to ruin. The judge is eloquent and prophetic; he appears to have answers to everything and to proclaim the truth about the world, and these are the reasons why the men are swayed by him. As a judge, he embodies *law*, indicating his aspirations to be a “suzerain of the earth” (209), “its keeper or overlord” (209). He further declares that

the man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But the man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (209-10)

The judge's project, to “take charge of the world”, exemplifies how, as Slavoj Žižek articulates (speaking on Kantian philosophy), “*the absolute excess is that of the law itself*. The law intervenes in the homogeneous stability of our pleasure-oriented life as the shattering force of an absolute, destabilizing 'heterogeneity'” (54), meaning that it can compel men to compliance by establishing a standard by which to judge behavior as either lawful or transgressive. The novel's historical setting serves as a fitting stage to explore this transition, as the American westward expansion has often been mythologized and justified as a civilizing mission: something that brings about a development from wilderness to civilization. In *Blood Meridian*,

however, this mission is described in all its violence and brutality, detailing the various atrocities committed by the men as they partake in the taming of the American frontier. Making their way across the plains, the riders are described as “ordained agents of the actual dividing out the world which they encountered and leaving what had been and what would never be alike extinguished on the ground behind them” (McCarthy 182). The establishment of law – the “taking charge of the world” emphasized by the judge – also involves an invasive, violent reshaping of it, an irrevocable “dividing out”. As the novel closes, the epilogue depicts a scene where a man wielding a two-handed implement is “progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground” (355), a scene which John Sepich reads as a likely description of the digging of postholes in preparation for open range fencing (66). The culmination of the novel can thus also be seen as a culmination of the establishment of human law. It depicts a world that has been restructured, and the rightful order of things, as well as its proper boundaries, is in the process of taking shape.

However, if the judge embodies *law*, he also personifies *judgment* in a variety of ways: first of all in the sense that he considers and analyzes, forms opinions and conclusions as to the nature of the world. Whereas the world in its natural, *mindless* state seems devoid of meaning, the judge *interprets* it and grants it meaning. Since the novel never provides any insight into the interior lives of any of its characters, it is the judge's proclamations of truth which constitute the only interpretation – the only ordering – of the world to be found in the text. Moreover, as the judge asserts, his authority over the world is one that should “[countermand] local judgments” (McCarthy 209). He creates his own narrative representation of the world: one that he claims to be absolute truth. He thus invokes his own judgments about the world as a source of authority: as that which has been formally and objectively decided to be true and unalterable. The exact *content* of the judge's narrative of the world – and its violent implications – will be explored further below. First, however, it is necessary to more closely

examine his methodology. As will be revealed, the sense of *meaning* the judge provides can be regarded as an imposition through its form – as human excess.

It is first and foremost through the judge's command of language that he effects his “taking charge of the world”. As critic David Holloway points out, language is “the motor force of Holden's totalizing energy” (192). It is the judge's skill as a speaker which allows him to influence and control the men, effectively usurping Glanton as the *de facto* leader of the gang. As his companions watch him with uncertain interest, the judge dresses and stuffs the skins of the “colorful birds” he shoots, while pressing and preserving the leaves of trees and plants, and stalking the mountain butterflies with his outstretched shirt (McCarthy 208). All of creation is cataloged and enumerated in his ledger book. The way the judge establishes sovereignty over the earth is by demystifying it, by having every last entity “stand naked before him” (209). He “takes charge of the world,” classifies it, establishes meaning where there is none and imposes his own structure, his own order, proclaiming that “[w]hatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent” (209). The judge knows that for man to become suzerain of the earth, he needs to exact his dominion over it, to impose his will over the local judgments of the natural world. As the judge sketches artifacts and records them in his ledger, he proceeds to destroy the original items by pitching them into the fire (147), announcing his intention to “expunge them from the memory of man” (148). Likewise, as he copies ancient paintings, he subsequently erases the original, “leaving no trace of it only a raw place on the stone where it had been” (182). As Žižek points out, there is something inherently violent about the act of symbolization – a violence that operates on multiple levels: “Language simplifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature. It dismembers the thing, destroying its organic unity, treating its parts and properties as autonomous. It inserts the thing into a field of meaning which is ultimately external to it” (52). Moreover, Žižek continues, “[w]hen we name gold 'gold', we violently extract a metal from its natural texture, investing

into it our dreams of wealth, power, spiritual purity and so on, which have nothing whatsoever to do with the immediate reality of gold” (52). By destroying the things themselves, the judge reduces them to signs. They exist purely as representations in his book, serving his purpose. Similarly, the judge effectively silences Glanton by intervening on his behalf in disputes and negotiations, regardless of Glanton himself actually being present, claiming to “*represent* Captain Glanton in all legal matters” (McCarthy 250, my emphasis). As Holloway remarks, when Glanton finally dies, his death is not even mentioned in the relevant chapter summary (192-93). He has been replaced as an authority within the gang – completely eclipsed by his *representative*, Judge Holden. The judge's methodology can in a sense be seen to exemplify the workings of language, the fundamental violence inherent to representation. As Žižek claims, to represent something involves a form of destruction of the represented object, as well as the imposition of external meaning. The judge's method of assuming suzerainty over the world is to control the meaning of things, and, as he himself seems aware, this kind of meaning is in essence symbolic, a product of representation. The judge's methodology thus reflects how language equates to *power* by way of mediating the world and imposing meaning. Holden classifies, structures and delineates the world by applying language, and thus reduces it into signs, into words. By doing so, he also essentially creates the world for his companions since signs have the power, as Žižek notes, to determine a speaking subject's experience of the world, as the speaker cannot disentangle himself from the field of meaning imposed by language: cannot experience the world from a position found outside language (57). By destroying the originals and replacing them with representations, the judge suppresses the distinction between language and the world: between signs and referents. As he declares, “[w]ords are things” (McCarthy 90). The violent implications of this kind of symbolic and linguistic reduction are never more overt than the reduction of men into scalps, and thus currency.

The linguistic dimension of the judge's character is evident throughout the text, as he proves able to communicate fluently with any person he comes across, whether in English, Spanish or Dutch. As Tobin, the expriest insists, he is “as eierhanded as a spider”, and “can write with both hands at a time” (which, incidentally, is further equated to his proficiency at killing Indians with two pistols) (142). It is through the authority he lays claim to with his rhetorical skills that he is able to charm Mexican militants (89), convince the lieutenant of his inability to prove Jackson's guilt in the murder of Mr. Owens (250), and persuade the surrounding onlookers that Reverend Green was “run out of Fort Smith Arkansas for having congress with a goat” (7). From the very beginning, the judge's words are shown to have an innate power to incite men to violent action, exemplified by his allegations against the reverend, which causes gunfire and mayhem to erupt within his canvas tent, leaving men trampled in the mud (7-8). Whereas the rest of the mercenaries may be considered men from “a time before nomenclature was”, the judge stands for such nomenclature. He epitomizes the human compulsion to establish meaning and order – to create something where there is nothing and stave off the darkness that threatens to swallow up the mercenaries huddled together in the precarious night. The creation of this kind of meaning is a generative act, emblematic of reason and civilization, but it is not separate from violence – provides no bastion against it – because language is *itself* an expression of violence. *Blood Meridian* insists that the modality through which humans interact with the world and each other, by establishing symbolic meaning, is inherently violent – and thus that man's allegiance to violence is no less pronounced today than in primordial Gondwanaland.

The gang encounters Judge Holden in the middle of nowhere, sitting on a rock in the desert. The judge is made further reference to as “a mirage” (132) or “a great ponderous djinn” (102). The novel thus calls attention to the judge's innate artifice: his own status as a creation, as an imposed “thread of order” (210). The judge possesses “no trace of any ultimate atavistic



egg by which to reckon his commencing” (326), but appears rather at “the shore of a void without terminus or origin” (326). The meaning and order the judge represents have no referents, no authority other than the force of his utterances, his rhetorical violence. Embedded into the figure of the judge is the awareness that any truth he utters is an imposition, a creation of narrative meaning that aspires to objectivity – truth that is ultimately arbitrary and without mooring, without foundation. As the judge proclaims, “the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way” (258).

The true, underlying order of the world, meanwhile, is one in which each man's “ultimate destination ... is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning” (258). The only movement possible through the narrative of *Blood Meridian*, becomes a movement towards death, as the violent implications of the world coincide with the impossibility of transcending materiality. Man's trajectory through life is one that necessarily must culminate: his spirit is “exhausted at the peak of its achievement” (154), destined only to be extinguished by the “problematical destruction of darkness” (112). The need to imbue the world with meaning and order coincides with a longing for transcendence from its fundamental materiality – a yearning by men “unable to abide the silence of the world” (330). “Death seemed the most prevalent feature of the landscape” (50), the narrator declares and, while plodding through this landscape, he describes the men in their primal condition as riding to the sound of “little deathbells toll[ing] thinly” (32-3). The reader can thus get the sense that this intimate proximity to (or non-differentiation from) the world in its materiality is also oppressive, insofar as it brings the finality of existence into the center of one's experience. This is echoed on a later occasion when, temporarily deprived of the judge's presence, the kid and his companions are simply left to “[listen] to their breathing in the dark and the cold and ... [listen] to the systole of the rubymeated hearts that hung within them” (296). The harsh, clinical description of the men's

hearts, simply referred to as meat – as physical matter – is seemingly devoid of greater significance save that of the steady beat which serves to emphasize that this beating is also a counting down. With the absence of man's order, as embodied by the judge, the void is felt at its most oppressive, bringing the men's corporeal existence into focus as an unbearable immediacy. In this context, the judge's self-justified narrative of the world, his imposition of meaning, becomes a form of authoritative discourse that has the power to lead and unite the men as if they were “disciples of a new faith” (137). As Richard Kearney suggests (in a dialogue with Paul Ricoeur), one part of the attraction of language – of systems of mediated meaning – is to facilitate an escape from the harsh empirical realities of the world (Kearney qtd. in Ricoeur 343). The authority of the judge's discourse, the purpose and unity provided by his ability to imbue the world with structure, with order, is inherently attractive. It fills the silence, the unknowable mystery of an existence which “no man's mind can compass” (McCarthy 259), where the only certainty is the certainty of death. In so doing, the judge provides a measure of transcendence from the materiality of the world, an escape into symbolic meaning. “Only nature can enslave man” (209), the judge proclaims. However, the answer to such enslavement is indicated soon after. As the judge goes on, “[t]he freedom of birds is an insult to me. I'd have them all in zoos” (210). To avoid domination, man, in turn, seeks to dominate. *Blood Meridian* allows one to see man's order – the emergence of human law, language and meaning – as an expression of man's indomitable creative will, and the imposition of this order as a form of excess – a transgressive violence through which man can shed the shackles of his material confinement and claim suzerainty of the earth.

It is the judge's mastery of language, his control of the representation of things, that indicates that his authority is ultimately a rhetorical one. By suggesting a fundamental distinction between his own order and that of the natural world, of creation itself, the judge demonstrates the awareness that the order he embodies cannot derive its legitimacy from any

external source. Through this awareness the judge ultimately reflects a Saussurean view of language: that the nature of language is not one of simple referentiality whereby words directly correspond to objects or meanings that exist independently of language itself. On the contrary, as the judge agrees, the extra-linguistic world has its own order – one that “no man's mind can compass” (259) – and is thus thoroughly set apart from man's conception of it. The world in its immediacy, as it presumably exists outside language, is simply unknowable, inaccessible as a guarantor of meaning, and it is this insight which has prompted numerous linguists to assert, as Catherine Belsey points out, that “[i]t is only within language that the production of meaning is possible” (*Critical Practice* 24). The judge's project of demystification – his taking charge of the world by imposing onto it meaningful structures in the form of his own law – is thus inseparable from language itself. The truths and laws the judge projects onto creation are entirely discursive constructs, products of language. After insisting on the primacy of war in human affairs, the judge cements his claim by proclaiming how “[t]hat is the way it is and *will be*. That way and not some other way” (McCarthy 262, my emphasis). The judge thus reveals that the basis for making such an assertion is through the power of words themselves – the force of their expression. His rhetoric is *performative* in the sense that his words, which proclaim truth, in effect also dictate it, impose it. What is expressed here by the judge is in part something that necessarily follows the notion of meaning as a human creation, as an effect generated within language rather than something derived from without. Žižek explores this aspect of language through Lacan's concept of the Master-Signifier, asserting that

[human communication] is not balanced. It does not put the participants in mutually responsible positions where they all have to follow the same rules and justify their claims with reasons. On the contrary, what Lacan indicates with his notion of the discourse of the Master as the first (inaugural, constitutive) form of discourse is that every concrete 'really existing' space of discourse is ultimately grounded in a violent

imposition of a Master-Signifier which is *stricto sensu* 'irrational': it cannot be further grounded in reasons. It is the point at which one can only say that 'the buck stops here'; a point at which, in order to stop the endless regress, somebody has to say '*it is so because I say it is so!*'. (53)

If, as the judge proclaims, existence is unknowable, and that the order – the meaning – found therein is simply that which man has granted it “like a string in a maze” (McCarthy 258), then the only real authority behind any statement is a rhetorical one. The truth the judge proclaims thus becomes revealed for what it ultimately is: a self-serving-narrative. The judge's universal law is thus an entirely discursive construct, arising from language, with no external validation beyond its own claim to authority: a violent imposition of meaning that justifies itself through its own expression, its own performative power.

The judge is the ultimate embodiment of this kind of *language power*, appearing as the final authority on all things, the example *par excellence* of what Lacan (and in turn, Žižek) terms university discourse. He is well versed in every tongue, having conversed on one occasion, as Tobin recalls, fluently in five languages (130). In order to persuade the lieutenant to abandon his duty to hold Jackson responsible for the murder he has committed, he cites cases and “translat[es] for him latin terms of jurisprudence” (252), further demonstrating his interpretive authority, his ownership of meaning through mediation. He refutes those who quote him scripture, soberly maintaining that “[b]ooks lie” (123), substituting the truths they divulge with his own grand narrative, his own “ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos” (123). His authority further extends to include geology, “holding an extemporaneous lecture” in this field (123); astronomy, imparting insight into “the ferric nature of heavenly bodies and their powers and claims” (253); and paleontology, uncovering “a great femur from some beast long extinct”, and providing answers to questions from his companions “as if they might be apprentice scholars” (265). He proselytizes (124), philosophizes (263) and “botanize[s]” (134),

appearing as an authority in every field, in any discipline. “What’s he a judge of?” (142), the kid demands of Tobin. The implied answer is all of creation, as he reflects the power of language – that is, the power to mediate the world, and thus to dictate *truth*. In order to convince Sergeant Aguilar and his men of the dark-skinned John Jackson’s sound character despite his apparent pigmentary impediment, the judge elaborately sketches the history of the man,

adduc[ing] for their consideration references to the children of Ham, the lost tribes of Israelites, certain passages from the Greek poets, anthropological speculations as to the propagation of the races in their dispersion and isolation through the agency of geological cataclysm and an assessment of racial traits with respect to climatic and geographical influences. (90)

After this extravagant oratory has concluded, the only option available to the sergeant is to step forward and extend his hand to the perplexed Jackson in recognition of his undeniable merit. The focus is on the judge’s rhetorical power rather than the precise message communicated by his speech. Whereas much of the judge’s proselytizing fails to convince his followers due to their lack of understanding, it is the violent force of his rhetorical prowess that is the true source of his attraction and authority. As the judge later insists when speaking on the performative power of his words: “[t]heir authority transcends [Sergeant Aguilar’s] ignorance of their meaning” (90). The judge exemplifies that, as Žižek claims, human discourse is decidedly *non-egalitarian*, “sustained by an asymmetric axis between master and servant, of the bearer of university knowledge versus its object” (53). By offering exegetical observations on the workings of a divine Creator, the judge has his companions “nodd[ing] among themselves and ... soon reckoning him correct, this man of learning, in all his speculations, and this the judge encouraged until they were right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools” (McCarthy 124). The judge’s proclamations are not accepted as truth

by virtue of external verification against some objective standard of truth – they are accepted as truth simply because they take the form of such, and the judge seemingly revels in his ability to shape men's experience of the world in this manner.

As argued so far, there is something fundamentally violent about the judge's methodology. Like the founding violence of America that serves as the novel's setting, *Blood Meridian* insists on the idea that the transition from nature to culture in general is effected through a founding violence – that the formulation of human law and its imposition onto the undifferentiated wilderness, the extra-linguistic world, is inherently violent in form. Human society is thus predicated on such a violent “taking charge of the world” – an invasive imposition of meaning that is not grounded in anything save its own formulation. This kind of *symbolic violence* may at times seem more abstract than concrete, more theoretical than tangible. It may seem to operate at a level that seems far removed from lived experience. However, it is in the content of the judge's manipulative rhetoric that the novel more overtly reveals the violent potential of Holden's production of meaning. For the judge, the natural, preferred state of the world is war: aggression is paramount, and subjective violence is likened to wolves culling themselves (154). According to the judge's claims, war is the true culmination of man's violent nature, his singular purpose: “It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner” (262).

Empirically speaking, there is no real distinction between the “mindless violence” deemed particular to the kid and his immediate cohort in the opening of the text, and that of the company subsequent to the judge's emergence. The kid's brand of violence does at times show signs of being *instrumental*, serving as the means to obtain something, such as when he smashes “a bottle across [a] barman's skull and cram[s] the jagged remnant into his eye” (27)

in order to obtain the liquor he deems rightfully his. However, most of the incidents in which the kid is implicated at an early point in the text appear overwhelmingly as *expressive* violence, that is to say impulsive and reactive: as spontaneous eruptions of violence in disproportion to the factors eliciting them. The murder of the aforementioned barman was largely brought on by the kid's anger about being played for a fool and then offhandedly dismissed. Upon meeting his future companion Toadvine, the kid “kick[s] the man in the jaw” (9) simply for requesting he step out of the way as they meet on the narrow walkway. As the plot progresses, much of the subjective, interpersonal violence remains the same, expressive and spontaneous. Coming upon a procession of muleteers herding their flock up the slope of a mountain, the gang pointlessly decide to open fire and force them off their hazardous path, causing them to “[fall] crashing down through the scrub juniper and pine in a confusion of cries” (205). In the aftermath of a bar altercation, tempers still heated, Brown casually “pour[s] a pitcher of aguardiente over a young soldier and set[s] him afire with his cigar” (283), leaving him “blackened and shriveled in the mud like an enormous spider (283). The judge's own exercise of violent whims seems equally arbitrary. The rhetorical violence that constitutes the defacement of Reverend Green's character (6-7), the murder and subsequent scalping of a small child only after the judge has earned his trust (173), the purchase and drowning of a litter of puppies (203) – none of these actions serve any conceivable purpose. Instead, they are dispassionately enacted in order to demonstrate an allegiance to his own principles: the knowledge that “it is impossible to transgress when there is no Law to violate” (Shaviro 149). The only law the judge acknowledges is his own, which insists on the primacy of war, on violence as essential to the human condition. He rejects any notion of morality, claiming that “[m]oral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak” (McCarthy 263). According to the judge, such a law constitutes an inaccurate view of the world, as evidenced by how “[h]istorical law subverts it at every turn” (263). Instead, as he goes on to suggest, man should be free to express his violent passions unfettered by such deluded falsities, for it is only

through such expression he is able to take charge of his own destiny, his own place in the world. However, the judge's definition of war is nebulous at best, and seems to extend to include all forms of collective violence. The gang, under his *de facto* leadership, are in no way consistent in their choice of victim, frequently selecting targets of opportunity with little concern for their allegiance, and the outright massacre of civilians becomes the norm rather than the exception. For the judge, war is regarded as “that higher calling which all men honor” (264). As he proclaims, “war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god” (263). The judge's insistence on war as that noblest of human pursuits is as convoluted as it is forceful, taking the form of labyrinthine rhetoric that ultimately amounts to “that is the way it is and will be” (262). It is through language that the judge transforms mindless violence into something *holy*, elevating it into something meaningful. What distinguishes the judge's notion of war from the mindless violence of primal aggression is simply the fact that it is rhetorically justified. The exact nature of this justification is less important than the emphasis that is being placed on the creative power of language, of representation, to violently reshape the world, to “take charge” of it. *Blood Meridian* thus suggests that war is simply collective violence in its rhetorically justified, sublimated form – a transformation that can occur only through language.

This kind of creative transformation is particular to man. As the judge knowingly imparts, “[i]f war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay” (323). It is this capacity to justify and legitimize his actions, to transform simple aggression into something holy which enables man to distinguish himself from the rest of nature. It is through the judge's taking charge of the world that man is able to transcend the primordial “clay”, to evolve from mere “mud effigies” (9) and “forms excavated from a bog” (13), and assume a form that is fully human. The judge



appears as the embodiment of this form, appearing in all his cultured sophistication and eloquence as the ultimate ideal of civilized man. It is this violent taking charge of the world through language that signifies man's differentiation from the rest of nature. By announcing his intention to become the world's suzerain, or overlord, the judge embodies the order of man, man's ascension from being *of* nature to being *above* nature. The judge exemplifies how man's dominion over the world, his suzerainty of the earth, is indistinguishable from man's accession to language, as it is through language, the fundamental human activity, that he is able to make the world meaningful, to transcend the natural world by creating his own order, his own law.

The entry into human society is thus not marked by the expulsion of violence from society. Indeed, embracing the judge's order has done little to rid the men of their violent tendencies. Arriving in the city of Chihuahua, the mercenaries head to the public baths in order to wash themselves of the desert grime accumulated through their scalphunting adventures. Having disrobed, the men are described as “all tattooed, branded, sutured ... [bearing] great puckered scars inaugurated God knows where by what barbarous surgeons across chests and abdomens like the tracks of gigantic millipedes, some deformed with fingers missing, eyes” (176). By descending into the baths, they turn the water into a “thin gruel of blood and filth” (176). The men are each inscribed by violence, bearing scars, brands and wounds – irrevocable marks that cannot be cleansed by this mock ritual of purification. Instead of cleansing the men, the water is polluted by their presence. Civilized man has his violent nature firmly intact but, as the judge exemplifies, he also seeks to rationalize it, to legitimize it. It is through such justification, through the judge's sanctioning of violence by elevating it to the status of war, that violence is embedded into the fabric of society – that violence is rendered normative. It is through repetition, through his campfire sermons where his narrative of the world unfolds that this self-legitimizing narrative both takes hold of the text itself, and comes to dominate the experience of his companions. Through the judge's forceful rhetoric, his narrative assumes the

guise of objective truth – of universal law. This can be related to what Žižek terms *systemic violence*: the potential for the social order to be inherently oppressive through, for instance, the creation of systems of meaning (of classification, of definition) that justify or *automatize* the exclusion of – or violence against – certain groups of people (12). This is a form of violence that is particular to man. During a brief respite from his arduous journey through the desert, the kid encounters an old hermit living in voluntary seclusion from the rest of humanity. He bemoans human nature, insisting that “[y]ou can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature that can do anything. Make a machine. And a machine to make a machine. And evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it” (McCarthy 20). As the hermit’s claims indicate, mankind has, through the symbolic order – through man’s unique status as a *speaking animal* (Žižek 52) – gained the ability to consolidate violence, to self-perpetuate and automatize it like “a machine”. It is through language that man has been able to objectify violence, by creating systems of man-made meaning that exist independently of the individual – to transform violence from subjective to objective form. This is the kind of *objective excess* that Žižek speaks of: a “direct reign of abstract universality which imposes its law mechanically and with utter disregard for the concerned subject caught in its web” (12). The violent implications of this kind of objective meaning are visible throughout *Blood Meridian* and its description of a burgeoning capitalist enterprise based on the ruthless accumulation of scalps. The text’s numerous instances of subjective, interpersonal violence are secondary to the underlying systemic violence which serves as their direct motivation and impetus – man-made meaning whose validity or logic remains largely unquestioned. This form of violence may take on a certain invisibility through naturalization: by being repeated until it assumes the guise of truth through its familiarity, through its apparent normalcy. As it becomes established as social reality, it comes to appear as given – to be accepted as unalterable fact. However, the text makes the violent implications of the judge’s discourse directly explicit through his specific justification of war. It is through

*language* that the judge establishes *war* as a sanctioned form of violence in the form of a universal law that both legitimizes his actions (and the actions of his companions) *ex-post facto* and serves to incite future acts of violence by establishing a state of war as natural and unavoidable. This view of language runs contrary to popular beliefs about language and its place in society, assumptions that maintain that the accession to language, commonly regarded as the very medium of reconciliation and peaceful exchange, involves leaving violence behind. As Jean-Marie Muller insists, writing for UNESCO, “[s]peaking is the foundation and structure of socialization, and happens to be characterized by the renunciation of violence”. Instead, far from simply erupting sporadically, as an external intrusion into society, or as Muller insists, a “radical perversion of humanity”, *Blood Meridian* emphasizes how violence is inextricable from human society, and how language as a medium involves unconditional violence.

It is through language that man has objectified human violence as a discrete element, as something that exists independently of the individual. By the end of the novel, each individual member of the Glanton gang, save the judge, has met a violent end. However, the perpetual, circular movement of the judge's *dance* continues. The judge both partakes in and directs this dance by taking possession of one of the fiddles, continually repeating his mantra: that he himself will never die. The dance (along with its foremost participant) is emblematic of the arts, of human creativity. However, as the judge points out, this dance is also predicated on a founding violence – it can be only begin with the “letting of blood” (McCarthy 347). After all, as the judge urges, it is only by a violent restructuring of the world that he can become the suzerain of the earth – that he can ensure that “the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will” (5). As he proclaims, the failure to do so – the lack of nerve to exact the necessary force, and thus failing to build structures that stand the test of time – will deny man his destiny, his very humanity: [W]hoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry.

But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe” (154). The overtly violent content of the judge's rhetoric is thus secondary to the violent methodology through which he takes charge of the world. Whether envisioned as a machine (by the hermit) or a dance (by the judge), it is through the establishment of man's law that he has forever altered the terms of his own existence, and thus that the judge can claim a kind of immortality. This kind of immortality, the persistence and self-perpetuation (“like a machine”) of man-made structures of meaning, constitutes a kind of excess through which man violates the natural limitations of his physical existence, his mortality. As the hermit asserts, speaking on the hearts of men: “[i]t aint the heart of a creature that is bound in the way that God has set for it” (20). It is by speaking that man has effected this transgression, what Slavoj Žižek confirms to be “a violent derailment of nature” (56), the ability to allow his violent impact on the world to persist as a violence beyond its proper, natural bounds – a violence that, unlike self-limiting aggression, can never spend itself.

The judge's dance of discourse – this machinery of man-made meaning – can ultimately not belong to any one individual. Indeed, the judge seems to appear wherever men are congregated. He first emerges within a crowded canvas tent, and when the kid meets him again, he arrives together with the rest of the Glanton gang, appearing as their natural authority figure. When Tobin recounts how they initially encountered the judge, he seems unable to shed much light on his origins, instead detailing this event with a sort of bafflement. According to Tobin, the men encountered Holden perched on a rock in the middle of “the greatest desert you'd ever want to see” (McCarthy 132). “You couldnt tell where he'd come from” (133), Tobin remarks, as there was no horse around that could have carried him there, nor did he even have a canteen (133). Concerning the rock on which the judge was sitting, Tobin explains that it was the only rock to be seen in that desolate land, as if the judge himself had brought it with him. Tobin further identifies this rock as a *merestone*, as it serves “to mark him out of nothing

at all” (132). As the *OED* confirms, a merestone is a stone that is intended to mark a *boundary* (“merestone”), and in the context of the novel, this boundary point comes to symbolize man's entry into the world of language, of society – of humankind. As previously mentioned, the judge's existence is alluded to as incorporeal throughout the text, being referenced on several occasions as a djinn or a mirage – as something spectral, or conjured forth from a void. “You aint nothin”, the kid defiantly tells the judge (McCarthy 349), to which the latter knowingly replies “[y]ou speak truer than you know” (349). The judge is in many ways less an agency than a communal manifestation, something produced through human congregation. Wherever men are gathered, the judge, predictably, appears. As Tobin confirms, “[h]e’s been all over the world” (130) and every man in the company claims to have encountered him before in some other place (131). It is around the campfire that the men repeatedly seek refuge from the night, from “the problematical destruction of darkness”. This fire is also a communal fire which “does contain within it something of men themselves” (258). It is around this fire that the judge’s narrative is generated and repeated – that the production of meaning occurs. The judge appears as part of this communal fire, the flames “deliver[ing] him up like he were somehow native to their element” (102). He sits with “his torso bared to the flames as was his practice” (137), seemingly emanating heat, sitting “half naked and sweating for all the night was cool” (154). Nourished by the warmth that this fire provides, the men form a new kind of unity – a unity which allows them to “[advance] upon that landscape with a single resonance” (238). This is what the text refers to as “the communal soul” (160), and that the judge makes further reference to as “the common” (323). As the narrator confirms, “[f]or although each man among them was discrete unto himself, together they made a thing that had not been before” (160). The judge is consubstantial with this communal fire which seems to generate and perpetuate his violent narrative of the world. The text thus emphasizes that, indeed, the judge's order is the social order, his violence is man's violence. However, in much the same way as the judge seems to possess an awareness of his own artifice – the arbitrary nature of his “thread of order”

(210) – the text itself seems aware of the fact that the meaning and order that originate through such communal production is illusory. If the darkness of the world is illuminated by the men's communal fire, the text also reminds the reader that there is a “will to deceive that is in things luminous ... [that] may also post men to fraudulent destinies” (127).

As argued in this chapter, the judge's discourse can be said to represent violence in its form, through its condition as an imposed order, and the symbolic reductiveness inherent to language; and its content, following the judge's insistence on war as being humanity's true purpose. One can find that the same is true of *Blood Meridian* in general. As will be explored in the chapter to follow, the excess of the novel's language, and its formal staging of violence, can be said to constitute a self-reflexive awareness of the violence that is inherent to representation, whereby the construction of the narrative meaning proposed by the text constitutes an act of creative violence. As will be shown, the novel itself seems aware of its own violence, reflecting this awareness by assaulting the reader with extreme and visceral descriptions and imagery.

## CHAPTER 2

### Textual Violence

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigour, coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins.

Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense"

As argued in the previous chapter, *Blood Meridian* shows how language and representation can be considered violent. This is emphasized through the complex figure of the judge who stands for the symbolic violence that is inherent to the construction of meaning by which "the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will" (McCarthy 5). The novel seems to explicitly reflect violence in all its aspects and formulations in order to convey this fundamental insight about language – that it cannot expel violence from society by establishing a new standard of non-violence. On the contrary, society itself is based on a violent "[taking] charge of the world" (210).

Moreover, the symbolic violence of the judge allows for the naturalization of subjective, physical violence by transforming it into something meaningful, thus excusing the savagery the judge and his companions indulge in. This is where the violence of language comes to reveal itself more insistently: when language is used to justify or rationalize overt instances of subjective violence. As the judge seems to be aware, one's attitudes towards an act of violence depend on the meaning ascribed to such an act – how this act is defined or *represented*. The judge's powers to dictate truth and impose meaning equate to the power of representation. It is this power that has enabled the judge to justify violence – to transform it into something *holy*. When considering the text's myriad representations of violence one thus also has to consider that a form of violence is inherent to the act of representation itself.

If violence is inherent to language and representation, then the implication follows that *Blood Meridian* as a text must necessarily partake in that same violence, itself an expression of violence. The fact that meaning is produced in language makes the stylistic choices at work in the text essential to understanding the work. As Catherine Belsey confirms:

Indeed, form and content cannot be read separately. Style in general, itself a form of signification, is necessarily a place where meaning resides. If ideas never exist as free-standing entities, it makes no sense to isolate an imagined content independent of the specific genre, vocabulary, sequence of images or lighting effects which compose *this* individual work. (“Poststructuralism” 55)

If, as this thesis has argued, *Blood Meridian* reveals how language itself may be considered violent, how is this insight reflected or exemplified in the novel's formal features? How can the text's expression – its narrative strategies and stylistic choices – add to a greater understanding of the text?



*Blood Meridian* may reveal how language is violent, but it also demonstrates its inherent creativity. As will become clear, the novel deploys various narrative strategies and techniques. It frequently alternates between a terse realist prose and a more overtly stylized, poetically inflected diction. The overall impression is of a text which seems to be exploring the creative possibilities for how to represent violence. How can the interplay and contrast between these different techniques contribute to a greater understanding of the text? Can the narrative strategies employed alter one's experience of violence, or justify it? The following chapter will address these questions, and explore how the creative violence of language embodied by the figure of the judge extends to the presentation of the novel, and is reflected in its formal and stylistic features.

The most immediate and visceral way the novel seems to embody a form of violence is through its vivid descriptive passages that aim to represent physical violence in all its graphic detail. One may consider the massacre of Captain White's army, which describes men

leaping from their mounts with knives ... passing their blades about the scalps of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs, and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals ... and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries ... and everywhere the dying groaned and gibbered and horses lay screaming. (McCarthy 56-7)

This passage, and others like it, utilizes a terse realist prose that is propelled onwards by verbal forms or derivatives specifically chosen to stand for violent action: “leaping”, “snatching”, “hacking”, “chopping”, “ripping”, “gutting”. As critic Steven Frye notes, many of the novel's descriptive passages, such as the one referenced above, mimic techniques of cinematic realism that seek to reflect the intense subjective experience of the action portrayed – the most

prominent comparison being Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*. The result is a heightened, visual effect that is further enhanced by the lack of commentary, allowing the imagery to bring the excesses of violence to the forefront without intrusive stylization or subjective evaluation. In reference to the above passage, this effect is augmented by the accompanying violent cacophony of sound, registering “loud cries” followed by “groan[ing]”, “gibber[ing]” and “screaming”. The descriptions of violence at work in *Blood Meridian* are often based on this kind of forceful, multisensory rhetoric that seeks to realistically represent violent action in a way that extends the experience of the text's violence against its characters onto the reader. A close examination of the form of the verbs discloses how the actions performed by the attackers are referenced as ongoing events, through the use of the present participle (“leaping”, “hacking”...). The reactions of the dying victims, however, are listed as past actions, through the use of the past tense verb (“groaned”, “gibbered”). The victims are no longer part of the here and now, the immediate present tense in which the majority of the novel is written. The remains of their “*preterite* lives” (28, my emphasis) seem now to belong to the past, as if the text is impressing upon the reader the lethality of language: the linguistic violence that can turn present into past – living matter into dead – by way of tense shifting.

It is through such descriptive passages one also discovers the text's overall propensity for rhetorical and descriptive excess. Take, for instance, the charging Apache riders bearing down on White and his men, described as

[a] legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream ... one whose horse's whole head was painted crimson red and all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of Christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke

like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools. (55)

The full, unabridged passage goes on for much longer, without punctuation, as if defying containment, assaulting the reader through its relentless expression. The unstoppable tide of violence is emphasized by the sentence flow. Once again, it is the overwhelming excess of the imagery that is the most prominent feature, where the only possible response by the onlookers becomes, as voiced by the sergeant, a stupefied “Oh my god” (55). The reader's reaction to the violent spectacles staged by the text is in a sense anticipated by the reactions of the characters bearing witness to them, whether in the form of incoherent gibbering, or overwhelmed disbelief. This sense of anticipating the reader's response is further suggested by the narrative strategies at work. The recurring alliterative use of *h*, as in “a legion of horrors, hundreds...” or “a horde from a hell more horrible...” evokes, as critic Lee Clark Mitchell points out, “a horrified heaving of breath, gasped in full-throated, full-throttled explosives” (270). As before, the uninterrupted descriptive accumulation of both images and sounds, of men “gaudy and grotesque”, of men “howling”, “screeching” and “yammering” aims to represent violent movement and action by using prose that explicitly utilizes a form of descriptive excess. The text thus adopts formal techniques that can themselves be said to be violent to the extent that they intensify the effect of the represented events, assaulting the reader with violent and discordant imagery. At the same time, the text demonstrates a self-reflexive awareness of its own excess, the violence it performs against the reader.

Within the span of few paragraphs, the text stages multiple eruptions of mostly unrelated violence. A bar fight is brought on by “a muttered insult from a nearby table” (McCarthy 188), escalating into a bloodbath and the subsequent opportunistic scalping of the slain men (190). Next follows the decimation of a Mexican township, whose inhabitants seeking refuge in the local church, are “dragged howling one by one” (191), to be “slain and

scalped on the chancel floor” (191). Shortly thereafter, the filibusters gun down a company of mounted lancers, leaving them “dead or dying on the ground” (192), before riding down and scalping the fleeing survivors (193-94). These events appear to be without narrative import, offering no progression or resolution, no obvious moral insights or emotional relief. It is instead as if the text relishes in guiding the reader through a grand tour of atrocity, staging spectacles of violence that appear less like a cohesive plot than as a series of events stitched together with the constantly reiterated refrain “they rode on”. The lack of interiority, or of any description that denotes inner or emotional reactions to what the characters bear witness to, makes the narrative unfold like a dispassionate enumeration of events that, while often poetically rendered, seem largely unfettered by subjective or moral judgment beyond the rationalization provided by the judge's narrative of war. The graphic murder of infants (165), the drowning of a litter of puppies (203), the unceremonious killing and subsequent scalping of an Apache child after it has come to trust the judge (173) – the text's countless examples of wanton brutality appear often excessive to the point of absurdity. Rather than to offer any real progression to the plot, the text stages violence as much to incite a visceral reaction from the reader than anything else.

The novel's descriptions of physical violence thus often seem crafted with the express intent to unsettle the reader. But it is perhaps the novel's lack of moral commentary – the lack of any real ethical comfort afforded by the narrative – which constitutes a greater affront to the reader's composure. This effect is augmented by the text's use of humor. The character of Toadvine, one of the kid's companions, is often found to embody a kind of levity that defies the bleakness of the men's circumstances, frequently making his observations known through the comic banality of uneducated folk speech in the vein of: “[g]entlemens...I'll guarangoddamntee ye I know what that there is about” (84). Captured by Mexican soldiers, Toadvine and the kid are chained up and driven through the streets amid the “dried scalps of

slaughtered indians strung on cords” (76). Overseen by “a goldtoothed pervert” (79), the two prisoners are made to crawl around the gutters and gather up human filth, “dragging behind them their sacks of refuse” (79). Contemplating their dismal situation, Toadvine, with trademark sardonic wit, asks the kid: “How do you like city life?” (79). At a later point in their journey, this same Toadvine can be found sauntering into a Mexican saloon where he demands of the barkeep: “What have you got that a man could drink with just a minimum risk of blindness and death” (106). Throughout the text, violence is often punctuated by dismissive humor in place of moral introspection. This is true for both isolated outbursts and prolonged spectacles. Moments after entering “a squalid mud town” (243), Jackson shoots Mr. Owens, the proprietor of the local saloon. The narrator notes how “a double handful of Owens's brains went out the back of his skull and plopped in the floor behind him” (249), after which Brown casually interjects: “Most terrible nigger I ever seen...Find some plates, Charlie” (249), offering a wryly comedic dismissal of the saloonkeeper's grisly death. After the massacre of the Gileno camp – and the judge's subsequent scalping of a young Apache boy – the company arrives in Chihuahua, and shortly thereafter the local saloon. A riotous scene of debauched revelry follows, and the celebration soon devolves into exuberant, non-specific gunfire amidst a distressed street harpist, and “a horde of luridlooking whores” (180), some of whom are grappling and tumbling over “in a crash of brandyglasses” (180). Amidst this chaos, “Jackson, pistols drawn, lurche[s] into the street vowing to Shoot [sic] the ass off Jesus Christ, the longlegged white son of a bitch” (180). When morning arrives, “Bathcat and the harpist [lie] asleep upon the banquet table in one another's arms” (180), surrounded by “dark patches of drying blood”, while outside in the street the remains of a bonfire that has “consumed a good part of the hotel's furnishings” can be found (180). *Blood Meridian*, in typical fashion, pairs what is perhaps the most elaborately violent spectacle in the text (including the graphic butchery of infants) with a comedic spectacle to match. The text seems committed to blatantly refuse to grant the violent events it stages any kind of solemnity or reverence, instead

exploiting these moments for comedic effect. As the novel aspires to extend its violence onto the reader, it does so with a kind of callousness that may further disturb his moral equilibrium – a sort of cheerful bravado that reflects the mocking presence of the ever-smiling judge.

As mentioned above, the text's treatment of violence is often direct and graphic, with prose that emulates the immediacy of its experience. However, this is merely one of a multitude of narrative perspectives used to reference such events. The judge's murder and subsequent scalping of a child is revealed indirectly through temporary focalization on Toadvine, whose momentary absence causes the reader to miss the unfolding of the event itself. Consequently, the murder is summarized unceremoniously by the sentence: "Toadvine saw him with his child as he passed with his saddle but when he came back ten minutes later leading his horse the child was dead and the judge had scalped it" (173). In instances like this, violence is presented as mundane and trivial. The event is not given special focus, nor does the narrative indulge in dramatic overtures leading up to the act itself. At other times, violence is summarized in aggregate by straightforward sentences like: "they fought them running for eight days and nights on the plain and among the rocks in the mountains and in from the walls and azoteas of abandoned haciendas" (172). On yet other occasions, violence is merely alluded to in woeful resignation, as when the narrator states that events must conclude "[how] these things end. In confusion and curses and blood" (43). Frequently, violence is referenced through its grisly aftermath, sometimes resembling an ekphrastic image that revels in the described object with a kind of grotesque wonder, as when the riders come across a tree hung with the impaled bodies of dead infants, "[b]ald and pale and bloated, larval to some unreckonable being" (61). Ultimately, these disorienting and unsettling shifts of style and mode preclude a stable perspective from forming, one from which to regard the depicted violence and become acclimated to it through its predictability. The net effect is thus to create a narrative that often seems naturally predisposed to put the reader on edge through its stylistic shifts.

*Blood Meridian* thus embodies violence and excess in its expression – in its formal features and narrative strategies – as much as it does through its violent content. The text appears to be aware of its own excesses, as if metaphorically reflecting the creative violence inherent to language and textuality. The violent power of language is emphasized as the novel utilizes narrative strategies that themselves appear violent, and the text seems self-aware of the violence it gleefully performs against the reader. However, the underlying violence being emphasized by *Blood Meridian* is revealed first and foremost through the production and transformation of meaning. In order to more thoroughly explore this aspect of the text's violence, one must first identify two separate modes of representation. As discussed above, the text employs a variety of stylistic perspectives, often shifting between them. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these stylistic shifts is that between two narrative tendencies that often seem like distinct modes. One may, for the sake of practicality, refer to these modes as a *realist mode* and a *poetic mode*. As will be detailed below, the narrative voice that speaks in *Blood Meridian* alternates between these two modes – between a realist mode that soberly and objectively appears to proclaim truth by using narrative techniques that seem to mask the text's representational nature, and a poetic mode that overtly alludes to its own artifice, that makes the text's status as a representation visible. It is by examining the interplay of these two modes that one can reveal the underlying violence of language that the novel exemplifies.

*Blood Meridian's* realist mode of narration is, as has been formerly touched upon, characterized by a straightforward enumeration of events that seemingly aims to capture events in their immediacy, as if with a kind of detached objectivity. Using simple, descriptive prose, the narrator may soberly declare how “[i]n the doorway there lay a dead child with two buzzards sitting on it” (64). On another occasion, describing the massacre of a Gileno settlement, this same narrator notes with unvarnished description how

one of the Delawares emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by the heels each in turn and bashed their heads against the stones so that the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew and humans on fire came shrieking forth like berserkers and the riders hacked them down with their enormous knives. (164-5)

This narrative mode utilizes a familiar diction and makes less use of similes and metaphors overall, having these appear as less intrusive when they do feature, such as the subtle and unambiguous reference to “berserkers” found in the quote above. The passage marks the absence of an evaluative consciousness that would reflect on the horrific spectacle, opting instead for a kind of cinematic clarity. When listing multiple observations in succession, this narrative voice makes frequent use of parataxis, linking together clauses with the conjunctive “and”. Describing a band of Apache warriors riding in pursuit of Glanton and his men, the narrator describes how they

crossed before the sun and vanished one by one and reappeared again and they were black in the sun and they rode out of that vanished sea like burnt phantoms with the legs of the animals kicking up the spume that was not real and they were lost in the sun and lost in the lake and they shimmered and slurred together and separated again. (116)

As critic Denis Donoghue notes, this is a way to link multiple things together without subordination, to have the narrative appear as an objective enumeration of events with no proposed relation of cause and effect. The result, as Donoghue states, is “to make the details appear to compose themselves as a picture” (416). Even when the sentences do include intricate words or metaphorical language, like the simile “like burnt phantoms”, these phrases are subsumed, assimilated into the parataxis in a way that dulls their distinctiveness from the rest of the narrative. They appear less conspicuous, being “subdued to the reign of *and*”



(Donoghue 416). The result is a kind of leveling effect where nothing is given particular focus, and the presence of an interpretive or evaluative consciousness – one that might scrutinize or grant importance to any one thing in favor of another – becomes less perceptible. As noted by critics Phillip A. Snyder and Delys W. Snyder, this leveling effect is further aided by the minimal use of punctuation. As the two critics point out, the text only rarely makes use of commas, which would usually serve to denote clause subordination. Furthermore, quotation marks are entirely absent from the text, the dialogue embedded directly into the narrative rather than clearly distinguished from it (34). This paratactic, non-hierarchical structure – augmented by the subdued diction and metaphorical restraint that likewise characterizes these passages – allows the narrative to aspire to a kind of objectivity in which the text's representational nature becomes partially concealed, simulating the immediacy of a direct apprehension of the described events.

As suggested earlier, one can in stark contrast to this *realist mode* identify a distinct *poetic mode* which is contemplative and frequently dense, or even abstruse. A strange, arcane diction characterizes many of the passages written in this style, featuring words like “archimandrite” (McCarthy 287), “argosy” (184), “blasarius” (99), “catafalque” (201), “ciborium” (203), “demiculverin” (244), “ossuary” (184), “katabasis” (129) and “pyrolatrous” (118). When in this mode, the text consistently speaks with a narrative voice that is extravagant and poetic, ruminating in esoteric similes and metaphors. A cart carries the bodies of the dead “like a hearse from limbo” (81). An attacking Yuma stamps his feet and gesticulates angrily “like some wild thaumaturge out of an atavistic drama (289). The incinerated corpses of Mexican villagers are referenced as the “charred coagulate of their preterite lives” (228). Frequent use of poetic alliteration can be noted, with references made to “castle and keep” (120), a “windfashioned watchtower” (120), a “devonian dawn” (197) and a “seamless sea” (320). The resultant effect is that of an ornate, even ostentatious prose style, and the narrative

voice that speaks here seems dramatically unlike the one associated with the rudimentary, unadorned passages discussed above. As has been formerly argued, the text's realist mode of narration serves to conceal or downplay the text's own representational nature. The *poetic* mode, however, signifies the presence of this kind of interpretive or evaluative consciousness. The intensified use of metaphorical language, where things are overtly interpreted – inspected, classified and compared – breaks the illusion of an invisible lens on the world. Instead, the text often utilizes a style that is self-consciously artistic – a narrative voice that draws attention to its own mediated nature, its own status as artistic creation.

When the company encounters a group of squatters occupying a barricaded presidio, the appalling sight of a snake-bitten horse is rendered in imaginative detail, described as

[standing] in the compound with its head enormously swollen and grotesque like some fabled equine ideation out of an Attic tragedy. It had been bitten on the nose and its eyes bulged out of the shapeless head in a horror of agony and it tottered moaning towards the clustered horses of the company with its long misshapen muzzle swinging and drooling and its breath wheezing in the throttled pipes of its throat. The skin had split open along the bridge of its nose, and the bone shone through pinkish white and its small ears looked like paper spills twisted into either side of a hairy loaf of dough. (122)

Where elsewhere similes were employed unobtrusively, here they threaten to overtake the description entirely. The similes are elaborate and reflective, drawing inferences that extend far beyond the immediate bounds of the depicted scene, emphasizing the interpretive consciousness that must be present in order to draw such comparisons. Rather than serving to narrow down meaning, these similes are imaginative and fanciful. “Fabled equine ideation”, is a markedly stylized turn of phrase which defies immediate recognition, stalling the reader's movement through the sentence, forcing him to pay extra attention to its presence. Indicating

the infected horsehead, the narrator invokes a baffling combination of imagery, mixing the sickly with the culinary – bread with bone – along with ears “like paper spills”. The effect is not to narrow down meaning but to offer the impression of being in the presence of a creative imagination – an interpretive lens through which the world and events are being mediated. The reference to the horse's head as being “grotesque” suggests the presence of subjective judgment. The same can be said for the narrator’s acknowledgment of the horse's appearance as signifying a state of agony, as a creature's pain cannot be observed empirically but must be *interpreted* from outward signs. In these passages, then, one can to a larger extent feel the presence of an evaluative consciousness mediating events and interpreting sense impressions, rather than attempting to mimic the world in its immediacy. Considering the aftermath of a massacre, the narrator notes how

the dead lay with their peeled skulls like polyps blueely wet or luminescent melons cooling on some mesa of the moon. In the days to come the frail black rebuses of blood in those sands would crack and drift and break away so that in the circuit of few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. (184)

The prominence of clause subordination (“so that”), along with the esoteric imagery, causes the phrases to mount and build, to mark their presence more insistently. As before, the description points outside itself, outside the immediacy of the portrayed scene, both spatially and temporally. Through juxtaposed similes which vary drastically from one to the other, the prose achieves a kind of kaleidoscopic effect where the description defers exact meaning in favor of simply being evocative, alluding simultaneously to different possible meanings latent in the same scene. Initially, the peeled skulls are considered in medical terms, as wet polyps, although complicated by the inclusion of the unconventional adverbial form “blueely” which appears as a poetic flourish. In the second simile, however, one is treated to a strange juxtaposition of imagery that approaches the psychedelic. The sense conveyed by “luminescent melons cooling

on some mesa of the moon” is entirely abstract, as melons neither exhibit luminescence nor can they typically be found on the moon, whether on mesas or elsewhere. The resultant effect is one of opaque uncertainty, a form of distancing from the scene, brought on in turn both by the abstruse nature of the similes themselves and the discord generated by the simultaneous presence of multiple descriptive potentialities. This sense of distancing is the effect of *language itself* coming to the forefront, counteracting the sense of immediacy achieved through the simple, realist prose that otherwise characterizes much of the text.

This fluctuation – between detached objectivity and self-aware interpretation – can be detected more overtly in the narrator's intermittent subjectivity. As explored in the previous chapter, the judge's narrative of the world comes to dominate the text through repetition. It emerges as the authoritative narrative of the world of *Blood Meridian* through its own telling, through the rhetorical authority of the judge himself, and has the power to make his companions into “disciples of a new faith” (137). As will become clear, so too does the narrative voice of the text seem to form and take hold through its own telling after fluctuating between different narrative possibilities. The first chapter opens with isolated description of the kid and his immediate environs, recited in third person, before the narration switches to reflect on the “[n]ight of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The Dipper stove” (3). The narrator thus exhibits a brief subjectivity, indicated by addressing the kid directly as “you” and naming himself as “I”, as well as the almost exclamatory “God how the stars did fall”. After this bout of initial uncertainty, however, the voice goes on to crystallize itself into an omniscient narrator. One may consider as a comparison the narrative of the judge, which aspires to a kind of universality through the judge's own rhetorical authority that asserts that “this is the way it was and *will be*. This way and *not some other way*” (262, my emphases). The judge's rhetoric is performative in such a way that, through its expression, it silences other competing voices

and asserts the primacy of the narrative it communicates, since none of his companions are able to challenge it. So too does the narrative voice of the text, after briefly alluding to its own subjectivity, assert its *omniscient* authority in the text, suggesting, as the judge does, that authoritative meaning, or the semblance of such, is a rhetorical effect, something that can only arise through its expression. The narrative voice that emerges is one that may be called *universal omniscient*. The absence of interiority, opting not to reflect on the psychological or emotional responses to the events witnessed by any of the characters, adds to the overall impression of the text as that of an objective enumeration of events unfolding in time, much like the historical sources from which the text actively draws. The narrator clearly possesses knowledge far surpassing that of any of the novel's characters (with the possible, suggested exception of the judge), being privy to past, present and future. This is evident as the text on several occasions offers prescient commentary on calamities fated to befall individual members of the Glanton gang, or simply summarizing impending events before they occur. The explicit subjectivity of the narrative voice, however, will intermittently return to the narrative. Speaking on the folly of youthful exuberance, the narrator ponders on “how many youths have come home cold and dead from just such nights” (41). Ruminating on the seeming inevitability of erupting violence, this same voice asks of the reader “and how else could it be?” (43). This occasional intrusion of the narrator serves in conjunction with the overt stylization of the text's poetic mode to remind the reader of the status of the text as representation, belying its own authority. By so doing – by *representing* historical narrative as self-reflexive artistic creation – the text draws attention to how any text, however transparent its language may be, or whatever degree of objective detachment the narrative voice aspires to, is necessarily a narrativized rather than objective account. The overt demonstration of language as creative is thus also what reminds one of its simultaneous violence, by serving as a reminder that the meaning it proposes, like any meaning conveyed by any text, is also an imposition.

The attention is thus drawn to the text itself as mediation, as artistic representation that includes purposeful aesthetic stylization. It is through this *opacity* of language, generated by the various techniques detailed above, that one can be made increasingly aware of how the nature of language is not simply referential, a way of naming what exists independently of language itself. The stylistic techniques at work here counteract what Catherine Belsey refers to as “the tyranny of lucidity” (*Critical Practice* 4), the way language as a structure, as an imposed classification of the world, has a tendency to conceal itself simply because of its familiarity, through communicating clear and unequivocal meaning. Instead, *Blood Meridian* makes language itself visible through a form of estrangement – by making the familiarity of language decidedly unfamiliar. Its prose is purposefully intricate and conspicuous, drawing attention to its own artistry, its curious mechanisms and latent ambiguities. It is exhibitionistic in a way that demands attention to its own presence. At the same time, by presenting duplicitous descriptions that conceal as much as they reveal, the text underlines the illusory nature of stable meaning, thus exposing the arbitrary violence that connects signifiers and signifieds, that tethers material utterances to meaningful concepts.

The prose thus draws attention to how it often functions explicitly on the symbolic, interpretive level by its continuing use of simile and metaphor. This is further emphasized by the explicit use of imagery that overtly invoke the representational nature of the text. References are made to “paper horses” (McCarthy 119), “paper mountains” (228), “paper birds” (225), “the paper skulls of infants” (96), shadows “like pencil lines” (47), and a moon that is designated a “pale replica” (91). Indian riders are named “baleful marionettes” (293), while a wolf “hung like a marionette from the moon” (124). The larger scene, or the world in general, is described as “reflected grayly in the pools of rainwater” (126), or “like a scene viewed in a diorama” (173) – or even more pointedly “like wonders much reduced. Rough likenesses thrown up at hearsay after the things themselves had faded in men's minds” (81). If

the text invokes its own representational nature by the marked presence of an evaluative consciousness implicit in the use of metaphorical language – whereby things are interpreted and compared – the text further emphasizes this insight by specifically invoking imagery of replicas and reproductions, overtly comparing the sights the novel has to offer with representations of every kind. In similar fashion, the text alludes to its status as a fictional work through intertextual references. As critic Barclay Owens points out, the very first sentence in the text, “See the child” (McCarthy 3), serves as an ironic echo of Alexander Pope’s “Behold the child, by Nature’s kindly law / Pleased with a rattle, tickled with a straw” (Owens 3). As the kid’s initial introduction concludes, the narrator proclaims him “the child the father of the man” (McCarthy 3). As numerous critics have pointed out, this is a reference to William Wordsworth’s “The child is the father of the man / And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each in natural piety” (Wordsworth 322). Through metaphorical language, the text makes further literary allusions, describing a militia as “falstaffian” (McCarthy 233), or referencing “attic tragedy” (122). The text is being self-consciously representational, seemingly aware of how it is ushering the reader through a world of mediations, and consequently the entire notion of stable, universal meaning is subverted through its very expression. As mentioned previously, there is, within the figure of the judge, the self-reflexive awareness of the artifice of the meaning he proposes. “[E]xistence has its own order and that no man’s mind can compass” (259), he claims, so that any meaning, any symbolic structuring of the world he provides can never be anything else than an imposed narrative. Like the judge, the narrative voice of the text demonstrates an awareness that what is presented on the page is a narrative, an imposed mediation – meaning that must be established through the text’s own authority since it can never be a true reflection of any presumed extra-linguistic order. The text, rather, seems aware of how it creates its own world, one that cannot be validated by anything outside itself.

Through this kind of representational self-awareness, *Blood Meridian* problematizes the connection between language and the world – between representation and what is represented. If, as the text suggests, truth can never hope to be anything else than an imposed narrative, “creation...shaped to man's will” (5), then such truth may not be ascertained or verified through reference to any outside, objective standard of truth. This resultant instability of meaning makes itself visible throughout the novel in several ways. Much of the novel, especially when indulging in similes and metaphors, appears hazy and dreamlike. Desert plants are purported to come into bloom “like phantasmagoria in a fever land” (172). A company of mounted lancers, slain by the mercenaries, are referenced as falling “like soldiers slaughtered in a dream wide-eyes and wooden and mute” (192). The mercenaries themselves, meanwhile, are described as progressing through a town “like supernumeraries in a dream” (191). On another occasion, when entering the city of Chihuahua to a hero’s welcome, the men come bearing on poles “the desiccated heads of the enemy” through a “fantasy of music and flowers” (174). Like many of the poetically inflected similes in the text, these formulations give the impression of events as filtered through an evaluative consciousness. However, the surreal quality of these images further questions the reliability of the narrator as a stable perspective. By referencing phantasmagoria and fantasy, often taken to mean figments of the imagination (*OED*, “phantasmagoria”; “fantasy”), as well as making numerous allusions to things dream-like or hallucinatory, the narrator seems self-consciously to allude to events as something *dreamt up*, as something conjured up from a creative imagination – as things whose connection to anything outside their own formulation is dubious and uncertain.

Even when events appear to be measured and evaluated in the form of reflective similes, any meaning found is often tenuous, the imagery shifting iridescently between different, contradictory interpretations of the same scene. As in a scene referenced above, the narrator may move from a tangible, medical depiction, “like polyps bluely wet” (McCarthy



184), then veer off into cosmic abstraction before returning to ponder enigmatic “rebuses of blood”, the preceding simile left unresolved. Similes are commonly left open-ended, often involving multiple comparisons juxtaposed with “or”, seemingly defying a clear correlation between the things compared. Like the “rebuses of blood” the narrator ponders, the sense made by much of the text's imagery appears ambiguous and cryptic. Exact meaning is often denied and left constantly out of reach, with the images instead appearing like “shadow[s] ... begging for referents” (343). As the text seems to demonstrate, there can never be one authoritative account of something – no singular, unequivocal meaning. When the narrator's interpretive presence becomes more overt, *meaning* in *Blood Meridian* seems often to exist as *potential* meaning, truth as *potential* truth.

As if to emphasize the uncertain nature of such *truth*, the novel offers an alternative and often contradictory version of events in the form of the chapter summaries. In the beginning of each chapter one can find a short chapter summary detailing the events that are to be played out on the pages to follow. Each of these summaries is essentially a representation of the associated chapter – an account that sometimes conflicts with events as actually detailed in the chapter. The summary seems to occasionally fill in the blanks, to add information not clearly available in the chapter itself. In chapter IV, the summarized version of events seems to answer the question pondered by the kid and fellow survivor Sproule in the subsequent chapter: “What kind of indians was them?” (59). The summary confirms that they have in fact been “Attacked by Commanches” (44), although this is never explicitly determined in the text itself, leaving the two survivors to simply reference their attackers as “them indians” (62). While listing the Yuma massacre of the Glanton gang in the summary to chapter XIX, the murder of Glanton himself is notably omitted (274). While one could argue that his death may be inferred from the mention of the larger massacre, and thus that it needs not be overtly listed, the summary still makes particular mention of the “Murder of Jackson” (274), which occurs shortly before

Glanton's own demise as part of the same massacre. It would seem that in this summarized version of events, Glanton's final part in the narrative, the ultimate fate that he has so emphatically been chasing – “[forswearing] all weighing of consequences” (256) – has been denied him. The culmination of his journey has been violently excised from this alternate version of the narrative. The resultant discord between the two conflicting representations of events draw attention to the rhetorical violence implicit in the telling of any narrative – implicit in the interpretive consciousness which includes or omits at leisure, imposing its own “thread of order”.

The constant shifts between narrative styles and perspectives may be further revealed to show how something can shift and grow in apparent meaning and import depending on how it is represented. If the text seems aware of how its own representation of the world (like the judge's representation of the world within the text), is just that, a representation, then meaning can never be established by any other authority than the text itself. Anticipating the text's multiple contrasting depictions of the sun, the two titles of the novel seem to offer distinct perspectives on the same scene. The primary title, *Blood Meridian*, appears to be an obvious allusion to the novel's insistent focus on bloodshed, anticipating the sunlight the “color of blood...seeping” (47) that the text later serves up. However, the often omitted second title, *The Evening Redness in the West*, suggests a more conventionally picturesque interpretation of that same sun. The title itself, then, seems to impress on the reader the arbitrariness of meaning, as if presaging the novel's own narrative and stylistic fluctuations. The title itself hints at the way the text will come to employ language to manipulate one's experience of any given scene. Seeing the sun rise, and feeling “the warmth of [its] ascending” (224), the kid is described as seeing it hanging pleasantly on “a sky of china blue” (225), with birds likewise drawn to its nurturing glow. On another occasion, however, the sunrise is depicted as dire and portentous, as “the head of a great red phallus...pulsing and malevolent” (47), seemingly emitting a light

the “color of blood seeping up in sudden reaches” (47). When the kid sets out to Texas, the narrator notes how he “watches the dim shore rise and fall. Gray seabirds gawking. Flights of pelicans coastwise above the gray swells . . . . Earthen causeways across the marshland. Egrets in their rookeries white as candles among the moss” (5). Here the landscape is described with neuter austerity (to borrow a phrase from the text itself), through simple and often fragmented prose. Metaphors and similes, such as “white as candles”, likewise appear straightforward and unobtrusive, serving as simple visual aids that aid clear understanding. However, on a different occasion, observing a coastal landscape ostensibly much like the one described above, the kid “watche[s] the sun on the hammered face of the water . . . island clouds emplaned upon a salmoncolored othersea. . . . where the stars are drowning and whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea” (320). Here the reader is confronted with a version of a similar scene that through metaphorical language and poetic stylization transforms the landscape from concrete to abstract, to take on previously unimagined connotations – connotations that seem both spiritual and ontological. The text thus exemplifies how different modes of narration determine one's impression of the landscape, showing how scenes may shift and grow through *representation*, as if emphasizing the creative potential of representation itself. Like the shifting figures of the judge and the fool in the desert – “figures now quick with clarity and now fugitive in the strangeness of that same light” (297) – the reader's impression of something depends primarily on the manner in which it is brought to light, the manner in which something is represented. As the judge represents the world, imposing on it his own brand of meaning through his rhetorical suzerainty, so too does the text itself seem aware of how it performs a rhetorical violence that works by framing events, as Mitchell puts it, “through a narrative eye that selects, disposes, excludes, embellishes” (261). Like the judge's rhetorical manipulation – his gleeful manipulation of his companions (and his subsequent mockery for how easy it is done) – the text exemplifies how language may be used to shape the

experience of the reader, emphasizing the consistency with which the reader's experience of any given thing is transformed through narrative style.

One thus gets the impression that the differing ways violence may be represented is for the text as vital as the actual events being detailed. When discussing *Blood Meridian's* use of metaphorical language, Stephen R. Pastore explores what he holds to be the novel's idiosyncratic inflation of similes (53). Rather than using "the" or "a" when drawing comparisons, the text will frequently substitute these words with "some", such as when the judge is said to be "like *some* great pale deity" (McCarthy 98, my emphasis). Pastore counts nearly a hundred instances of such "some-similes" in the text, claiming that, rather than functioning like descriptive devices that narrow down meaning, these similes repeatedly make broader allusions, giving the impression of pontification. His claim is that this appears as a conscious stylistic choice that serves to instill the prose with *gravitas* (Pastore 53). As far as *Blood Meridian* is concerned, this can be found to be true in general. When indulging in complex similes and poetic rumination, the prose seems specifically crafted to lend an air of profundity to the proceedings. The overall effect of both the elevated diction and the stylistic flourishes that characterize these passages is that of sentences that stand out from the rest of the narrative. These sentences appear purposefully crafted in order to ensure a certain rhetorical impact, forming intricate passages from which the reader comes to expect deeper meaning. As Nancy Kreml argues, these passages slow down the reader's processing of thought and thus his progress through the text (46). Both the syntax and the complex words that characterize the novel's poetic mode constrain the reader, forcing him to spend more time and effort on parsing and making sense of the text, and consequently "to feel the weight of meaning more heavily" (Kreml 48). What would otherwise be little more than the absurd slaughter of men, babies, mules, horses, bears, cats and puppies is transformed through the creative violence of its telling, becoming something that claims for itself a certain gravity. As explored in the previous

chapter, Judge Holden demonstrates the violent power of language to justify *mindless violence* by elevating it, transforming it into something *holy* – something that appears to possess deeper meaning and significance. The text itself exemplifies this same power. Through narrative style, it sublimates violence. It transforms the otherwise banal series of violent and barbaric events, elevating them to the status of poetry, imbuing them with both aesthetic beauty and a more profound sense of meaning. It is this transformation, effected through the creative, generative potential of language that has made critics come to acknowledge *Blood Meridian*'s violence as both “exhilarating” and “transcendent” (Mitchell 271), to praise the novel's “hymns of violence” in all their “sumptuousness and splendor” (Shaviro 145). It is this beauty and *weight of meaning* that has attracted such widespread critical attention to *Blood Meridian* – that has secured its frequently recognized literary value and ensured its status as a significant work. When critics and readers comment on the novel's beauty and artistic value – despite its problematic content – it is frequently these stylized, ornate passages they reference. How violence is represented in turn affects how it is received. As *Blood Meridian*'s critical history suggests, the narrative stylization associated with the novel's *poetic mode* makes the horrors described more palatable, not simply revolting but also strangely compelling. It changes one's impression of the text's depictions of violence, making these appear as more meaningful, more aesthetically resonant. The text excuses – or *justifies* – its frenzied obsession with extreme violence through the power of its telling, by its own virtuosic artistry.

Through the text's poetic mode, the narrative thus comes to more closely resemble the rhetoric employed by the judge. Both the judge and the text's narrator appear to be able to justify violence by elevating it, by representing events in such a manner as to make them appear more meaningful. With the eloquent, ornate formulations that characterize this mode, the narrative voice seems to mirror the prophetic voice of the judge himself, the tone becoming more ostentatious, the diction more inflated – even bombastic. The text itself thus comes to

demonstrate the performative power of language – how its powers of persuasion does not depend on the exact content communicated as much as the manner in which something is expressed. As Nancy Kreml states, “the length and complexity of these sentences literally, almost physically, constrain the reader to find meaning” (46). Like the judge, the text itself seems to both proclaim and conceal truth. However, the force of the expression transcends the need for exact understanding, often able to impress on the reader how it carries valuable insight. Like the judge's speech to Sergeant Aguilar, the words and phrases uttered transcend one's ignorance of their meaning – transcend the need for exact understanding. As noted by Snyder and Snyder, this rhetorical style – that can be linked to both the text and the character of the judge – “empowers the narrator or speaker with a certain hegemonic authority over the discourse” (35). While these phrases defy precise meaning, the language itself resonates and appears to communicate meaning – even profundity – simply because of the rhetorical weight behind the utterances, the apparent authority of the voice that speaks.

It is thus through these stylistic oscillations that the text reveals the violence that is specifically human – the violence of language. Within the narrative, the judge appears as the sole interpretive presence in the text, as the text offers no real insight into any of the other characters' interior lives, their interpretation of the world or events. The judge embodies the power of language to mediate the world – and thus to define it. Following periods of *mindless violence*, the judge provides the rhetorical justification for the violence perpetrated by himself and the rest of the gang, imbuing the senselessness of their actions with meaning. The text reveals this same authorial power at work, showing how one's experience of the world is altered depending on the narrative techniques utilized, revealing the illusory nature of stable, unequivocal meaning. In one moment, the text depicts the world with a kind of stark, objective realism that capture events with unmitigated brutality as if mimicking the world in its immediacy. In the next moment, events are filtered through a more overt interpretive presence

– a conspicuously present narrative imagination which serves, at least in part, to justify or mitigate the violence of these events. The narrator of the text thus seems to demonstrate the human power to translate the world into language in the same way as does Judge Holden. The novel draws attention to the violent potential of rhetoric and artistic production to reinterpret the effects of violence, to frame violence in such a way as to justify it by making it appear more attractive and meaningful – to resignify the harms done by violent acts.





## CONCLUSION

The world goes on. We have dancing nightly and this night is no exception.

Judge Holden

This thesis has committed to show how *Blood Meridian* reveals the creative violence implicit in the production of meaning in society, thus undermining, or deconstructing, the usual distinction between language and violence. While the novel assaults the reader with its representations of violence, it also expresses a violence *of representation* – a specifically human violence inherent to man’s unique ability to influence and shape the world through language and rhetoric. This creative, *symbolic* violence can transform lived experience, but by doing so it is also able to naturalize and automatize *systemic* forms of violence.

The judge emerges as the “author” of the world. He creates the world and its social order for his companions. Rather than being a mere antagonist, the judge is revealed to be emblematic of civilized man. He cannot be defeated or cast out from society because what he really represents is the monstrous excess of man himself. The judge also exemplifies how truth must begin as a persuasive and insistent utterance, its truthfulness claimed through its performance. The narrator of the text reflects this same awareness. Through his apparent sense of nihilistic glee and an excess of violent descriptions and details, the narrator seems aware of his own violence – his ability to unsettle and assault the reader. But more crucially, indicated

by the text's stylistic variations, he seems to be aware of how his powers of representation – the rhetorical violence he exacts on the page – define the reader's experience of the world and events. If the *authorial* power of the judge reveals how he creates the world for his companions, the narrator demonstrates how he, in turn, creates the world of the text.

The narrative voice of the text constructs the world and fashions truth in much the same way a historian may shape one's experience of past events. As Paul Ricoeur states, history itself constitutes a narrativization of the world: “Historians order the events of the past according to certain choices of narrative structure or plot” (341). One such narrative may tell a tale of “kings, battles, treaties and the rise and fall of empires” while another may have a “plot of suffering rather than that of power and glory” (341). History itself constitutes a narrativized account of the past, filled with socially accepted “truths” that in turn serve to influence the present. *Blood Meridian* makes this comparison overt by specifically *representing* historical events and then narrating them with a voice that seems to alternate between detached objectivity and overt artistic interpretation. It thus displays the violent power of representation, undoing the illusion that historical accounts depict events independently of the creative forces narrating them. On first sight, this interpretation may seem to align itself, in part, with a reading of the text that views it as a revisionary historical novel. However, what *Blood Meridian* serves to disclose is that any narrative of the world, whether of the past or the present, is necessarily an imposition, and thus an act of symbolic (or discursive) violence. A revisionary account is ultimately a contradictory *narrative* whose truths are no more innately truthful than the narrative it challenges. Any narrative is ultimately a product of a verbal utterance whose only grounds for validity is itself – a narrative whose inaugural authority is implied by the judge's assertion: “that is the way it is and will be. That way and not some other way”. (262).

Over time, such narrative accounts of the world can solidify into institutionalized or deeply entrenched systems of meaning that naturalize and thus legitimize certain forms of violence while arbitrarily exposing others to condemnation or critique. As the judge exemplifies, certain forms of violence may be designated “holy” – something to be excused or even encouraged. The judge's insistence on violence for its own sake emphasizes the violent implications of such systems of meaning. For Žižek, this kind of systemic violence is inherent to capitalism, which he calls a “self-engendering monster that pursues its path disregarding any human or environmental concern” (10). Indeed, scholars have convincingly established the violence inherent to global capitalism, documenting internal and global inequality, destructive environmental effects, and the erosion of regional or cultural distinctiveness. (Marks ch. 5; Noble et al ch. 30). Whereas it is common for people to condemn or express their distaste for most forms of subjective violence, it remains dubious how many people in the western world would truly give up the security and comforts afforded them by the “smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (Žižek 1) – systems that are violent and exploitative on a grand scale. As Žižek states, “it is deeply symptomatic that our Western societies which display such sensitivity to different forms of harassment are at the same time able to mobilise a multitude of mechanisms destined to render us insensitive to the most brutal forms of violence” (174). As the kid exemplifies by his ambivalent passivity to the judge's order, he remains a cog in these mechanisms – this *machinery* of meaning – and is unable to escape the judge's terrible embrace (McCarthy 351). It is tempting to claim, as Žižek does, that “[s]ometimes, doing nothing is the most violent thing to do” (183).

As *Blood Meridian* shows, it is inherent in the power of representation to excuse or justify violence. Whether or not an act is recognized as violent depends entirely on the symbolic meaning ascribed to this act. This becomes apparent when examining how sensitivities to certain kinds of violence change over time. As Steven Pinker notes, both

physical and psychological violence directed at children (whether at home or in school) were for centuries considered perfectly acceptable in many Western societies, regarded simply as necessary discipline (517-18). Today, most people in these same societies would consider such behavior reprehensible. Žižek offers another example: “the castrato voice was once the very voice of angels prior to the Fall; for us today, it is a monstrous creation” (58). As he remarks, “[t]his change in our sensitivity [to violence] is sustained by language; it hinges on the shift in our symbolic universe” (58). What this seems to suggest is that there are few things that are intrinsically violent. One’s experience of something being violent depends entirely on how it is socially defined – the meaning ascribed to this act or event in the symbolic order. It is man’s ability to influence how violent acts are experienced – to condone or condemn arbitrarily – that form the ultimate expression of human excess. As Žižek insists, “the highest form of violence is the imposition of this standard [of normalcy] with reference to which some events appear as violent” (55).

The violent implications of such imposition of meaning can be further illustrated by how the classification and ranking of human groups have frequently served to legitimize imperialism and race violence. As Audrey and Brian D. Smedley assert (speaking on such tendencies in North America), “by the nineteenth century, all human groups of varying degrees of biological and/or cultural diversity could be subsumed arbitrarily into some racial category, depending on the objectives and goals of those establishing the classifications” (26). It does not take much effort to see this kind of domination reflected in the judge’s own imposed system of classification that insists on everything occupying its natural place. It is also echoed by Captain White’s assertion that “[w]hat we are dealing with here is a race of degenerates ... a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves” (McCarthy 36).

If this line of argument has an air of speculation about it, it is because the discussion has now mostly left the novel itself in favor of attempting to draw some of the wider

implications of this reading. Ultimately, these implications exceed the scope of this thesis, so for now it will have to suffice to have briefly alluded to them.

The ultimate impression to be gained from the novel, however, is that violence is inevitable. It seems impossible to distance oneself from it. The text rejects the idealized notion that violence can be expelled from society in favor of a sort of pragmatism. Rather than serving as a moral admonishment, as a sort of instructive text whose final words are “this is who you are – make the necessary changes” (Owens 43), the novel seems instead to impress upon the reader: “this is who you are – do not fool yourself into believing otherwise”. The insight that the novel seems to impart is that a true understanding of the world begins with the acknowledgment of one's own violent nature. Civilization doesn't signal a break from primal violence, but can be seen as a continuation of it, as part of a continuum of violence where our ability to speak has enabled violence to proliferate in new, unpredictable ways. This conclusion of all-encompassing violence may seem both pessimistic and fatalistic. However, if there is a silver lining, it is this: the acknowledgment of the violence embedded in language and social practices is what opens up the possibility to temper one's skepticism against deeply entrenched structures of meaning – to remain wary of absolute truth despite the comfort such sureness may bring.



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