

“Scanning the Landscape for Some Guidance in That Emptiness”: The (De)Construction of Meaning in *Blood Meridian*

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Abstract

In the diegesis of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985), the decline of religious fervor is accompanied by a trenchant crisis of signification. The need for the reassertion of meaning leads to the advent of an alternative worldview that offers a mythologized view of war as a suitable substitute for religion, but neither of these competing worldviews (nor any other) gets a firm foothold. What is particularly striking, however, is that this conflict surpasses the diegesis, since the narrator - just like the characters - is also torn between these two worldviews, craving for a stable and verifiable way of reading reality, for a paradigm that can be validated beyond any doubt. He fails, in the process creating a schizophrenic narration and, consequently, negating the possibility of verifying meaning.

Keywords: Narrator; meaning; religion; war; form.

Resumo

Na diegese de *Blood Meridian* (1985), de Cormac McCarthy, o declínio do fervor religioso é acompanhado por uma profunda crise no entendimento do sentido da existência. A necessidade de reafirmá-lo conduz ao advento de uma mundividência alternativa que oferece uma visão mitificada da guerra como um substituto apropriado para a religião, mas nenhum destes paradigmas (nem qualquer outro) cimenta de modo convincente a sua posição. O que é especialmente inusitado, contudo, é que o próprio narrador, à semelhança das personagens, está dividido entre estes dois paradigmas, procurando freneticamente um modo estável e comprovável de ler a realidade, uma cosmovisão que possa ser validada para lá de

quaisquer dúvidas. Esta busca revela-se infrutífera, resultando dela uma narração esquizofrênica e, por conseguinte, uma negação da possibilidade de verificar o sentido.

Palavras-chave: Narrador; sentido; religião; guerra; forma.

In Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, Or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), the institution of religion, operating in an amoral and violent world, is in steep decline. The demise of religious fervor generates a crisis of signification and, as a logical consequence, the need for the reassertion of meaning. For that reason, an alternative worldview that presents the sacralization of war as a viable replacement for religion emerges. It is my contention that the novel sanctions neither of these competing worldviews (nor any other): on the one hand, some characters offer resistance to the new paradigm and even stand by religion as a still reliable authority on meaning; on the other hand - and more importantly -, the narrator, who is also torn between these two worldviews (among others), produces a discourse marked by ambivalence and indecision. The outcome is a deliberately enigmatic novel that, remaining skeptical of the possibility of verifying meaning, sees in uncertainty the only certainty.

Blood Meridian takes place in the Mexico and the United States of the mid-nineteenth century, a "heathen land" (McCarthy 84)¹ that serves as the stage for violent confrontations between Indians, Americans and Mexicans, which frequently degenerate into merciless massacres. The world of the novel, then, is adverse to religion, to say the least. In effect, this setting, traversed mostly by amoral men far more concerned with killing and scalping than honoring God, witnesses the decline of the persuasive force of religion in general and Christianity in particular. There are still some apparent believers, but they only seem to follow religion mechanically. For instance, the members of Captain White's company at one point pray for rain, which materializes soon after. The prayer appears to have been answered, but no sign of gratitude or acknowledgement is given for this supposedly divine intervention in their favor, confirming how little religion is worth in their estimation. Shortly thereafter, they are slaughtered, suggesting either God's exaction of revenge or a darkly comical, but meaningless, coincidence. In any case, it is difficult to reconcile the extremes in which the Glanton gang indulge with any semblance of religious zeal.

Occasionally, however, one does come across some believers who seem to have a relatively greater degree of conviction in their professed persuasion, but even these struggle to harmonize their beliefs with the “immense and bloodslaked waste” that surrounds them (186). For instance, Tobin, the so-called “expriest,” rides with the Glanton gang but denies having lost his faith, although his is, at best, a strange and unexpected trade for a self-proclaimed man of God. Recalling a moment when his death seemed imminent, he revealingly says that there “was none to curse and none to pray [to]” (140). He hardly strikes the reader as one that puts much stock into his God. Also peculiarly heretical is the anchorite’s account of the creation of man, which contradicts that proposed by Genesis: “when God made man the devil was at his elbow” (20). It is unsurprising that such an unorthodox cosmogony and theodicy emerge in a land frequently swept by war.

At any rate, most of the believers are already dead by the time we encounter them, and their demise is often gruesome. Thus, what one may call the Christian paradigm is deteriorating swiftly and steadily, causing a crisis in the validation of meaning and opening the door for the affirmation of a new paradigm. Petra Mundik proposes that this paradigm is science:

Blood Meridian is, in many ways, a study of the gradual paradigm shift that occurred during the era that Marshal Berman refers to as “Classical Modernity” (1789-1900). In the West, the Age of Modernity inaugurated the shift away from the mythico-magical apprehension of the world, dominated by the teachings of organized religion, toward the dominance of a rational and scientific world view. (*A Bloody and Barbarous God* 53)

However true that may be in the context of the history of Western civilization, it does not apply so neatly to this novel, in which the main conflict is that between religion and Holden’s deification of war, his “creed of brutality and bloodshed” (Cooper 70). The scientific paradigm is indeed upheld by the judge, but it remains subsidiary to his overarching conception of war, which still relies on a mystical perspective: after Holden states that war is his “trade,” Brown asks him “about them notebooks and bones and stuff,” to which the judge replies that “[a]ll other trades are contained in that of war” (262). “The myth of science,” as Sarah L. Spurgeon argues, “is not enough” (100), and the judge formulates a synthesis of war, religion and science.

Consequently, Holden’s paradigm asserts that one should search for meaning in war: “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). Holden explicitly argues that war creates or confers meaning, owing to the extremely high stakes: “Men are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that . . . the *worth* or *merit* of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard. Games of chance require a wager to have *meaning* at all” (262; emphasis added).

Considering that, even without Holden’s intervention, violence is thriving and religion is already suffering a seemingly irreversible process of disintegration, one may wonder whether his paradigm is necessary at all, but war, by itself, despite shaping the characters’ identity, is not sufficient to assuage all doubts regarding the significance of their lives. The mere “reality” of war does not entail a validation of meaning; a metaphysical reading is needed, and the judge is happy to provide it. In this broad sense, the Christian paradigm and Holden’s address the same needs, hence the attractiveness of both. One can now understand why the rhetoric of the previous paradigm pervades the judge’s presentation of his new worldview, even - or especially - when he is directly pitting them against each other: the religious overtones of his speech on war amount to, in practical terms, an attempt to recover the persuasive power of Christianity that is conducted simultaneously with a subversion of, and in opposition to, Christianity itself.

His preservation of the binding power of the sanctified religious alliance is proof of this. As Tobin reveals, Holden and Glanton have struck a “terrible covenant” (133), and the same applies to the remaining members of the gang, whom the judge, shortly after joining them, has saved - or damned, perhaps - through his preparation of gunpowder, which amounts to an uncanny version of a religious ceremony:

We hauled forth our members and at it we went and the judge on his knees kneadin the mass with his naked arms and the piss was splashin about and he was cryin out for us to piss, man, piss for your very souls for cant you see the redskins yonder, and laughin all the while and workin up this great mass in a foul black dough, a devil’s batter by the stink of it (139)

Tobin even expected that they would have to “bleed into it” (139), stressing the ritualistic dimension of their actions. They may not bleed (yet), but their opponents certainly do, and bloodshed is, for the judge, an integral part of a ritual: “A ritual includes the letting of blood. Rituals which fail this requirement are but mock rituals” (347). Note also that the word “mass,” the common name for the celebration of the Christian Eucharist, appears twice, creating a possible play on words. Aware of

Holden's manipulation of the men, Tobin states that they were "behind him like the disciples of a new faith" (137) and observes that the men fittingly numbered a dozen at the time: "Two men had deserted in the night and that made us down to twelve and the judge thirteen" (134). Wittingly or not, they become the original twelve apostles of a new prophet, Holden rather than Christ. Further emphasizing religious parallels, the judge had previously delivered a sermon: "It was like a sermon but it was no such sermon as any man of us had ever heard before" (137). Although the religious ritual is subverted, its power is retrieved. Herein lies the judge's cunning.

Yet, religion still survives, in however precarious a manner, and Holden's worldview is not undisputed, resulting in a crisis in the validation of meaning. Worldviews must be unchallenged for a reading of reality to acquire at least the appearance of a certainty, to become dogmatic, because the validating power of each paradigm relies on the assumption that its authority is the *only* true authority and proposes the *only* true way of reading reality. By coexisting, these opposed worldviews undermine each other's persuasiveness. It is not surprising, therefore, that the characters display ambivalent attitudes towards Holden's views. Moreover, Tobin resorts to religion to contradict the judge explicitly and directly. Although this act of active opposition is at least partially belied by the compliance implied in his willingness to collect scalps alongside the rest of the gang, he may still be the best mouthpiece for Christianity in the novel. Consequently, Tobin and Holden operate as the chief advocates for two different paradigms and, as such, vie for influence over the kid, who favors the former and opposes the judge - hesitantly and silently at first, until finally clashing with him openly.

Yet, the ambiguous ending complicates the matter: when the judge embraces the kid at the end, the reader does not know whether the latter's attitude amounts to a final act of defiance or a resigned admission of defeat - or even "suicidal indifference" (Hellyer 56). The kid remains an enigma, given that the narrator seldom communicates the character's thoughts to the reader. As Elisabeth Andersen argues, "the conventions that normally structure a novel—the character's errors in judgement, moments of recognition, psychological insight and personal growth—are never pivotal" (92). Sometimes, the narrator even neglects to so much as mention the kid for a considerable number of pages at a time, especially during the battle sequences. The judge also "disappears" for large portions of the novel, as if the narrator cannot decide whether Holden or the kid is the protagonist.

Nevertheless, he tries to assure the reader that the kid is important, seeing him as a Christ-like figure. The opening line of the novel associates the kid with the son of God: “See the child” (3).² This is a loose translation of “Ecce puer” (*Latin Vulgate*, Isa. 41.1), often regarded as a prefiguration of the miracles of Christ, given that Pontius Pilate, when presenting Christ to the crowd, says “Ecce homo” (John 19.5), as Andersen has noted (89-90). Towards the end of the novel, the kid tellingly becomes the “man.” In the next paragraph, the parallel with Christ is again underlined: “Night 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 falling stars, cunningly juxtaposed with an explicit mention of God, can be read as an allusion to the Star of Bethlehem, although they are also, according to Kenneth Lincoln, an obscure reference to a real meteor shower (80). Furthermore, the kid was born in “[t]hirty-three,” that is, 1833, and Christ was thirty-three at the time of his death. This may seem an interpretive stretch, but the truncated manner in which the year is indicated encourages the reader to establish such connections, especially since the narrator has no qualms about being strangely precise regarding dates in other occasions: “On the twenty-first of July in the year eighteen forty-nine they rode into the city of Chihuahua” (174). Therefore, simply stating “[t]hirty-three” invites further probing.

There is at least one more Biblical allusion in the opening paragraphs of the novel: “His folk are known for *hewers of wood and drawers of water* but in truth his father has been a schoolmaster” (3; emphasis added). The italicized phrase derives from John 9.21, 23. This is rather obscure, but more conspicuous religious allusions emerge later on. For instance, the kid is, like Christ, tempted in the desert three times. The tempter is the judge, which would make him the devil - and Holden is, in fact, addressed as the devil by both reverend Green (7) and Tobin (132). Besides facing and resisting the three temptations, the kid is also resurrected, in a sense, after a particularly violent battle: “With darkness one soul rose wondrously from among the new slain dead” (58).

These religious allusions and associations reveal that the narrator himself, feeling “without referents in the known desert about” (117), is immersed in the search for meaning that torments the characters. Because he projects his own insecurities onto what he sees, even the shadows become “contorted on the broken terrain like creatures seeking their own forms” (69). His attention to the act of interpreting is equally revelatory of his concerns: “The other effects [Holden] spread with the palm

of his hands as if there were something to be read there” (117-8); “Glanton looked upwards, briefly, as if there were anything to ascertain in that perfect china sky” (155). He is not a detached observer, but a tormented searcher who, in his quest for meaning, voices his hopes about the validity of the Christian paradigm.

Nonetheless, the attempt to revive religion prompted by his hunger for signification proves misguided and haphazard. He indiscriminately filters characters and events through a religious lens even when the result is incongruous and borders on the ludicrous, as in the kid’s case: despite being compared with Christ, the kid does not measure up to that standard. Even the character is aware of his inadequacy in the face of religion. When queried about whether “God made this world . . . to suit everybody,” he says that “I dont believe he much had me in mind” (20). When Tobin tells him no one “is give leave of [God’s] voice,” he retorts that he “aint heard no voice” (131). The narrator duly transcribes this dialogue but does not refrain from establishing Biblical parallels in unlikely situations. For instance, he points out that the kid journeys for “[f]orty-two days on the river” (4), alluding to Christ’s forty days in the desert. This exercise often results in a forced application of sacred rhetoric, which can be quite absurd: “At night whores call to him from the dark like souls in want” (5).

At certain times, however, the narrator, as if backtracking, voices his awareness of the kid’s shortcomings. After all, despite comparing the character with Christ, he also states that he is simply “a pilgrim among others.” If Christ was baptized in the Jordan, the narrator points out that the kid merely “waded out into the river like some wholly wretched baptismal candidate” (29). The kid is indeed christened later, but the ceremony, which takes place while he is incarcerated, is hardly orthodox, and the narrator, despite indulging in yet another of his countless similes, makes no attempt to aggrandize the situation: “A Spanish priest had come to baptize him and had flung water at him through the bars like a priest casting out spirits” (324). As a result, the associations made by this self-contradicting narrator are always precarious, disallowing a consistent reading. There are comparable discrepancies in his treatment of Holden, who, regardless of his role as a devilish entity, is also presented “like some great pale deity” (98), “like a great ponderous djinn” (102) or “like an icon” (154). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Holden has been variously regarded as an “Old Testament God” (Pastore 45) and as an evil archon.³ What is ultimately certain is that the narrator offers several interpretative possibilities but favors none.

Despite the religious comparisons, the narrator does not necessarily have a bias or preference towards the Christian paradigm. In fact, he also attempts to assert

Holden's paradigm, following the judge's lead in presenting war as inevitable: "they berated the old man and swore at him until he moved off down the bar muttering, and how else could it be?" Answering his own question, the narrator asserts that it could not be any other way, because "these things end" invariably in "confusion and curses and blood" (43). Contravening the copious religious associations, the narrator - in the two only instances in which he clearly penetrates the kid's mind - regards the character as someone in whom from the start "already broods a taste for mindless violence" (3) and who "comes down at night like some fairybook beast to fight with . . . [m]en from lands so far and queer that standing over them where they lie bleeding in the mud he feels mankind itself vindicated" (4). If that were not sufficiently obvious, the narrator even presents him as the progeny of war: "he went forth stained and stinking like some reeking issue of the incarnate dam of war herself" (58). This would appear to prove Holden right. Yet, the narrator's unwillingness to report the kid's activities during any of the manifold skirmishes belies the notion that this character is an appropriate standard bearer for the judge's paradigm. In short, the narrator alternately treats the kid as a torch bearer for the two paradigms, although he leads an existence that conforms to neither, as if he had fallen short of both.

The narrator of *Blood Meridian*, then, is as confused as the characters, if not more so. It would even be tempting to hazard that there is no "unified" narrator, but rather a succession of narratorial voices that contradict each other, creating instability regarding the meaning of what is narrated. Alternately, one may be tempted to propose that these irregularities are due to narratorial limitations. Still, I would contend that a different phenomenon is at play here. Lydia R. Cooper argues that "the omniscient narrator remains so far removed from the individual characters that there are never shifts into the perspective of any single character" (66). That is over-emphatic, as there are a few occasions in which the narrator does penetrate the characters' psyches, but what interests me here is that she describes the narratorial entity as an omniscient narrator. If she means that he is free to access any diegetic datum, I agree with her, even though that might seem to contradict my observations vis-à-vis the narrator's erraticism. I classify the narrator as "omniscient" because he has full access to physical diegetic "reality."

Indeed, the narrator demonstrates that he is able to access the past. Consider this example: "This Angel Trias who was governor had been sent abroad as a young man for his education and was widely read in the classics and was a student of languages" (178). Even more impressively, the narrator's knowledge of the past can

extend for hundreds of millions of years: he speaks of “the brutal wastes of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all” (182) and of the “devonian dawn” (197). Likewise, he can see into the future, as attest his occasional prolepses: “The pale dust of the enemy *who were to hound them* to the gates of the city seemed no nearer” (172; emphasis added); “within a few days [the severed heads] would become mottled white and altogether leprous” (177); “four hundred miles to the east were the wife and child that [Glanton] would not see again” (181). Furthermore, we have seen that the narrator can read the characters’ minds if he wants to.

Yet, it is undeniable that the narrator seems out of his depth on some occasions, as when he discusses “the great puckered scars inaugurated God knows where by what barbarous surgeons” (176). However, I do not regard this passage as the result of his inability to determine the circumstances in which those scars came into being; it is rather the result of his penchant for roundabout ways of expressing narrative details. Consider the tortuous manner in which he tells us that the male victims of “white men who preyed on travelers” had been castrated: “Some by their beards were men but yet wore strange menstrual wounds between their legs and no man’s parts for these had been cut away” (161). The narrator obviously knows that the wounds are not menstrual in nature, but he does not let that get in the way of crafting a resonant image and a bizarre conceit. Such dictional quirks also explain why he at one point explicitly vents his frustration regarding the shortcomings of language: “In the afternoon they came to a crossroads, what else to call it. A faint wagon trace that came from the north and crossed their path and went on to the south” (70). Whether the novel “refuses to acknowledge any gap or opposition between words and things” (Shaviro 17) or not, this passage does not derive from the narrator’s supposed feebleness, but rather from his temperament.

The narrator’s purview of the diegesis, then, is complete when it comes to physical reality. His dilemma, however, is that his powers of inspection of the material world do not give him any firm insight into the metaphysical realm. This is his motivation behind his frugal disclosure of the mental processes of the characters. Being selectively silent about them, he endeavors to preserve their mystery, so that they can be read in disparate ways: when, for example, he keeps mum about the kid’s thoughts, he strategically ensures that the character remains open to interpretations aligned with the Christian paradigm *and* Holden’s worldview alike. In other words, he hedges his bets, sometimes despairingly holding onto religion as a means for the

validation of meaning, other times adopting the judge's paradigm. This tense coexistence of multiple - and mutually exclusive - perspectives in the narration can be seen in the proliferation of disparate statements, the epitome of which perhaps being the incongruous description of the combatants. They are alternately presented as evil doers and pilgrims: in some moments, they, endowed with "pagan eyes" (177), may be "[i]tinerant degenerates bleeding westward like some heliotropic plague" (83) or "like oafish demons routed from a fen" (94), in "just those whited regions where they've gone to hide from God" (45); in other moments, they can look "like devouts at a shrine" (60), "like God's profoundest peons" (75), "like acolytes" (184) and, when dead, "like maimed and naked monks in the bloodslaked dust" (57). The narrator never reconciles these different and incompatible readings; he merely piles them up with abandon.

Nonetheless, even that is too simple for him, and he proceeds to present yet another alternative interpretation of the characters' behavior - simple barbarism - by employing animalistic tropes: "Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes" (4); "they once again began to hoot and to pummel one another like apes" (68); "They were half naked and they sucked their teeth and snuffled and stirred and picked at themselves like apes" (79); "the limbs and toothless paper skulls of infants like the ossature of small apes at their place of murder" (96); "they lay gazing up with ape's eyes" (161). Comparisons with dogs also recur: "in his sleep [the kid] struggled and muttered like a dreaming dog" (21); "They walked on into the dark and they slept like dogs in the sand" (69). Other options are available: "They entered the city in a gantlet of flung offal, driven *like cattle* through the cobbled streets" (75; emphasis added). As evinced by some of these examples, the choice of verb can also be a means of comparison: "[Toadvine] clawed at the mud" (10); "the hermit crawled away" (21); "They crouched in silence eating raw meat" (155).

If there is a trend towards the animalization of humans, there is also a penchant for regarding animals as possessing human traits of one kind or another: "birds flew crying softly after the fled sun" (112). Intriguingly, the characters treat horses almost as people - Glanton often speaks to his horse, and, early in the novel, we are told that "the judge turned and watched" the kid and "turned the horse, as if he'd have the animal watch too" (15) -, but the narrator does the characters one better by portraying the horses as beings that show more feeling than many a human, often drawing attention to their wails: "some of the horses began to scream" (119); "the horse shied and moaned" (161). As always, his similes are revelatory: "the horses

stood like roadside spectators” (125). It is no wonder, then, that he goes out of his way to highlight with unstinting attention to detail the animal skins worn by the warriors and the body parts of human beings worn by their horses:

they saw one day a pack of viciouslooking humans mounted on unshod indian ponies riding half drunk through the streets, bearded, barbarous, clad in the skins of animals stitched up with thews . . . and the trappings of their horses fashioned out of human skin and their bridles woven up from human hair and decorated with human teeth and the riders wearing scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears and the horses rawlooking and wild in the eye and their teeth bared like feral dogs and riding also in the company a number of halfnaked savages reeling in the saddle, dangerous, filthy, brutal, the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh. (83-4)

Furthermore, this passage contains a simile that connects horses with dogs, manifesting the tangled web of comparisons that characterizes the confused and confusing narratorial discourse. The narrator continues this trend of unsettling associations by placing necrophagous birds side by side with religious icons: “the carrion birds sat . . . with their wings outstretched in attitudes of exhortation like dark little bishops” (62); “vultures squatted along the dusty entablatures and among the niches in the carved facade hard by the figures of Christ and the apostles, *the birds holding out their own dark vestments in postures of strange benevolence*” (76; emphasis added).

Descriptions of the land yield similar contradictions. The narrator is prone to use Christian rhetoric in his portrayals of the setting of the novel, referring to “a terra damnata” (64), a “purgatorial waste” (65) and an “evil terrain” (94), but he prefers to resort to astrological language elsewhere: “[the survivors] slept with their alien hearts beating in the sand like pilgrims exhausted upon the face of the planet Anareta” (48). Yet, he may also describe the territory as a “cinderland” (64), “a squalid kingdom of mud” (32) or “the void” (102, 111, 115, *passim*), a phrase which pervades the novel in different permutations, becoming, for instance, “the shoreless void” (52), “the greater void beyond” (69), “that hallucinatory void” (120) or “that lonely void” (155). Another expression that surfaces accompanied by various qualifications is “the waste.”

Interestingly, the narrator sees this inhospitable landscape as the best setting for an inquiry into the nature of man: “not again in all the world’s turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man’s will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay” (5). This central

question, which the narrator introduces at the beginning of the novel, directly pertains to the problem of meaning, and different characters answer it differently. For the judge, man asserts his will and is not clay, since war gives meaning to his existence: “If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay” (323). Tobin, influenced by Christianity, rather argues that we are dust, and the kid adopts his opinion: “[Holden] aint nothin. You [Tobin] told me so yourself. Men are made of the dust of the earth” (313). Later, he will say the same to Holden’s face: “You aint nothin” (349). Nonetheless, the narrator, as always, is ambivalent. Sometimes, he subtly suggests that man has indeed shaped “the stuff of creation”: “Bone palings ruled the small and dusty purlieus here and *death seemed the most prevalent feature of the landscape*” (50; emphasis added). On other occasions, he appears to propose that man is merely “another kind of clay”: “old women with faces dark and harrowed *as the land squatt[ed] in the gutters*” (77; emphasis added); “The men . . . paled slowly in the rising dust until they assumed once more the color of the land through which they passed” (169); “Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock” (182).

As a result, the narrator neither sanctions nor negates any paradigm, simply hopping from one to the other and giving each a try - several tries, in fact. To say that his narration is a messy *mélange* may be an understatement. The troubling questions with which the characters are confronted also afflict the narrator - and, on him, the impact of this epistemological and existential doubt seems to be magnified tenfold, the intradiegetic queries acquiring a new breadth by surfacing on an extradiegetic dimension. The bulk of twentieth-century narrative fiction has accustomed its readership to narrators that, at most, only make veiled comments on the narrative, and many writers have expressed their desire to maintain narratorial “objectivity,” however awkwardly and naïvely that concept may be defined. By contrast, McCarthy has boldly experimented with the conventions of the narrative voice, crafting a virtuoso novel told by a conspicuously jittery narrator that is not immune to the characters’ plights.

Desperate for meaning, he restlessly scours the diegesis for evidence that would prove one paradigm correct and offer a meaningful account of the world. Unable to find such evidence, he is forced to champion different views alternately, as if stuck in an existential merry-go-round. The consequence of his bizarre juxtaposition of different views is a want of commitment to any. Ultimately, he fails to assert coherent meaning, precluding the possibility of validating a paradigm. Several paradigms are presented, but none is denied or approved - and, therefore, none is truly embraced.

There is merely a clash between different views that yields no clear victor. The narrator is conscious of an impasse in the apprehension or production of meaning, and the frequent contradictions brought about by his disparate similes may indicate a “refusal of the idea that meaning inheres” (Holloway 14).

Therefore, *Blood Meridian* is marked not only by the instability of meaning but also by the questioning of the possibility of validating meaning itself. The novel denies neither the Christian paradigm nor Holden’s; it rather problematizes the verification of meaning, which appears impossible, owing to our limitations. The human mind is a part of the very reality that it tries to understand and from which it tries to extract - or to which it tries to confer - meaning. As the anchorite argues, a “man’s at odds to know his mind cause his mind is aught he has to know it with” (20).⁴ Even the judge admits this, in what is perhaps his only moment of weakness:

This universe is no narrow thing Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in the maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man’s mind can encompass, that mind itself being but a fact among others. (258-9)

Holden temporarily concedes that his paradigm, like any other, does not necessarily reflect the order of reality, being merely a fabricated order or “that which you have put there.”

Despite this obstacle, the narrator persists in his attempts to find verifiable meaning until the very end of the novel, as the epilogue⁵ demonstrates: “*In the dawn there is a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground. He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there*” (355; italics in the original). Once again seeking religion as a validating paradigm, the narrator asserts that the perforated rock has been “put there” by God. Nevertheless, the perforation of the rock can be taken as a sign of the waning power of God - if not his outright inexistence. In this sense, the man, in addition to making holes in the rock, is also poking holes in the narrator’s view. The reference to the placing of the rock echoes another episode, creating further hermeneutical complications: “we come upon the judge on his rock there in that wilderness by his single self. Aye and there was no rock, just the one. Irving said he’d brung it with him” (135).

We may also recall that the kid wanted “to make [his] mark in this world” (37), which is what the man quite literally does. Yet, the broader implications of this tardily introduced character remain mysterious. Harold Bloom, however, hazards a guess: “Perhaps all that the reader can surmise with some certainty is that the man striking fire in the rock at dawn is an opposing figure in regard to the evening redness in the West. The Judge never sleeps, and perhaps will never die, but a new Prometheus may be rising to go up against him” (7). Notice, however, the tentative manner in which Bloom makes his assertion: “some certainty” (an almost oxymoronic phrase), “may,” “perhaps” (employed twice). *Blood Meridian* often demands such hesitations. Given the irregularities and enigmas favored by the text, every affirmation seems to require extensive qualification. In effect, the same reference to “fire” that may lend credence to Bloom’s reading can also serve as the linchpin for a diametrically opposed interpretation. One could argue that the unnamed figure confirms the judge’s creed, since fire has previously been presented as Holden’s element: “The judge like a great ponderous djinn stepped through the fire and the flames delivered him up as if he were in some way native to their element” (102).

Bloom’s appraisal, however, is not necessarily wrong; it is possible to see the man in that light. My point is merely that the novel does not privilege that reading over another, and I would underline that, although the role of the man in the novel is not clear, the narrator overtly tells the reader that the perforations are aimed at verifying a principle:

On the plain behind him are the wanderers in search of bones . . . and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie He strikes fire in the hole and draws out his steel. Then they all move on again. (355; emphasis in the original)

The narrator, then, devotes the concluding words of the novel to stressing the difficulty of proving meaning. Indeed, “verification” and “validation” are the operative words in this section. Like the man, the narrator tries to authorize meaning, only to fail miserably. No such authentication is attained in *Blood Meridian*; it remains elusive. Still, he keeps trying: like the figures in the epilogue, he moves on again, searching not for bones but for a voice that “speaks in . . . the bones of things” (124), to steal Holden’s turn of phrase.

In conclusion, the hostile landscape of *Blood Meridian* is the stage not only for sanguinary wars but also for conflicts between contradictory ways of reading reality. Focusing on the construction of meaning, the novel deconstructs its supposedly authoritative nature. Yet, it challenges authorities on meaning more than meaning(s). What is negated, therefore, is not the existence of meaning or the significance of human lives, but rather the possibility of confidently verifying that meaning, of truly unveiling that significance, whatever it may be. Hungry for the assuagement of their epistemological qualms, the characters are tempted by various potentially valid interpretations of the world but are ultimately unsuccessful in reaching a consensus. Troubled by the same vexing questions and unable to fully commit to any paradigm, the strangely reticent narrator creates a hybrid text whose fragments do not fit together: his reach exceeds his grasp. Constantly “scanning the landscape for some guidance in that emptiness” (71), he is Sisyphus redux, forever doomed to carry uphill not one but several boulders - that is, several paradigms -, only to see them roll downhill forthwith. Failing to keep any of them from falling, he simply restarts the process. A novel of doubt and indecision, *Blood Meridian* explores the burden of seeking and making meaning.

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¹ Henceforth, I will use only page numbers for citations of *Blood Meridian*.

² It could also be ventured that this sentence recalls the opening of *Moby Dick*: "Call me Ishmael" (Melville 3). Both sentences are three words long, are in the imperative mood and refer to the protagonist. Nevertheless, Ishmael asserts his own identity; the kid is not given a name, and the narrator speaks for him. (*Blood Meridian* has, of course, been read several times in light of Melville's novel. See, for instance, Polasek 82-94). There are also echoes of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: the kid runs away from home in the fourth paragraph of McCarthy's novel, which, as a result, seems to start where Twain's ended, that is, when Finn decided to "light out for the Territory" (Twain 281), even though the kid's motives are not as "innocent" as Huckleberry's. (For further parallels between both novels, see Worthington). Wordsworth is also alluded to at the beginning of *Blood Meridian*: "All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man" (3). For Sean Pryor, "[t]he introductory portrait of that child ends with an ironic reference to Wordsworth that separates the time of poetry from the time of this novel, a time when childhood wonderment could survive into adulthood from a time when that innocence is always already lost" (30). What all these references share in common is that they encourage comparisons that bare the kid's shortcomings.

³ For a Gnostic reading of the novel, see, for example, Daugherty 122-33 and Mundik, "This Luminosity" 196-223.

⁴ In McCarthy's draft of *Whales and Men*, a comparable claim is put forward: "What argument could you advance for the principles of logic that did not presuppose them?" (qtd. in Monk 2).

⁵ For a brief account of different readings of the epilogue, see Busby 282-90.