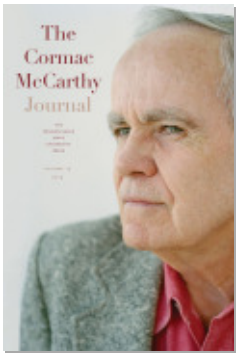
“What’s he a judge of?”: The Effacement of Agency and an Ethics of Reading in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*



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The Effacement of Agency and an Ethics of Reading in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I argue that the character of Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* ought to be regarded as the fictional author of the novel, and that the kid ought to be considered a sign of the reader of *Blood Meridian* within the text of *Blood Meridian* itself. I argue further that the particular challenge the novel presents its kid-as-reader, the act of critical judgment that it requires this figure to perform, is that of apprehending the judge, of judging him. I then argue that the difficulty of accomplishing such an act of judgment is due to the fact that it threatens to repeat the acts of judgment already performed by the judge in the novel, with the implication that if the reader is to avoid doubling such a regime of judgment and its specifically scriptural violence, then this judgment must be performed in a manner that is different to the judgment meted out by the judge in the novel. I conclude my argument by affirming the necessity of an ethics of reading that is in exception to the judge's regime of textual violence, and offer a reading of the novel that demonstrates what such an ethics of reading may look like in practice. KEYWORDS: Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, the judge, the kid, the reader

In Franz Kafka's story, "Before the Law," a man from the country seeks admittance to the law from a gatekeeper who stands guard before it. He is not granted admittance. Instead he waits till admittance may be granted him. He waits until the very brink of death without being admitted, and there the story ends (Kafka 249–51). In Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*, the situation is precisely the inverse. Here the protagonist in question, "the kid"/"the man," and as I argue, the reader, is admitted to the law—whether they like it or not. Furthermore, this composite figure of kid-as-reader in *Blood Meridian* is not even aware that it has been so admitted, that it is on trial, and probably remains ignorant of this fact up to and past the point of its (symbolic) judgment and execution. The agent of this play of violence in three acts is the character known as "the judge," or "Holden."[1]

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The very title of the novel, "Blood Meridian," expresses some of the chief concerns of the work as a whole. If we take its astronomical and geographical definition, "meridian" denotes a line that passes through the poles of the celestial or terrestrial globe ("Meridian, N."). Moreover, this line is entirely imaginary. Thus, when "meridian" is combined with the word "blood," a very real substance, it makes sense to ask: what exactly is the ontology of a "blood meridian"? It is the precise imprecision of this ontology that raises epistemological questions that plague the reader throughout the course of the book. Questions of epistemology also reside in the word "meridian" independently of its relation to "blood," for a meridian is a line we imagine in order to measure the position of a star in the sky, or our own position on a terrestrial surface in relation to the coordinates of certain celestial bodies. The poignancy of all this is that we are forced to *imagine* the thing we require to order both the world and our place in it. Considering the nature of the book, *Blood Meridian*, it is ironically appropriate that the word "meridian" also denotes: the "point or period of highest development or perfection, after which decline sets in; culmination, full splendour"; a "midday drink"; and a "proper name for . . . the Devil" ("Meridian, N.").

In her essay, "*Blood Meridian's* Man of Many Masks: Judge Holden as Tarot's Fool," Emily J. Stinson writes that while "many McCarthy critics have attempted to . . . limit the judge to a single identity . . . none has attempted to assign the judge a role that encompasses everything McCarthy's judge embodies, and rightly so, for the judge seems to surpass any role that could completely define his character" (9). The key word in this statement by Stinson is "seems," for what she precisely sets out to demonstrate in her own essay is that despite appearances, there nonetheless does exist such a role that is "all encompassing of the judge's character," or at least all of the roles assigned to the judge by other critics: those of "creator, destroyer, ruler, and trickster" (20). The work of criticism that Stinson's essay seems most to be in dialogue with is Joshua J. Masters' "'Witness to the Uttermost Edge of the World': Judge Holden's Textual Enterprise in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," in which Masters provides a three-fold reading of the judge as a trickster, ethnographer, and American Adam. Stinson's criticism of Masters takes two forms: the first (implicit) criticism is that he does not successfully pin down the judge's nature since he assigns the judge multiple roles; the second criticism regards Masters' failure to adequately treat one of these roles—the key role for Stinson—that of the Tarot's Fool (12). It is worth restating Stinson's claims: first, the judge has been called many things and rightly so, for he certainly seems to be many things; second, other critics have

attempted to pin him down but have failed because they have given him many names instead of the one definitive name that would establish his nature or role within the book; third, I have discovered the nature of this name that underwrites, perhaps not all the things that the judge is, but certainly all of the things that he has been said to be. This act of judgment is somewhat ameliorated at the end, but it is still essentially an operation of re-presentation as critical capture.

I have drawn attention to Stinson's essay in this way because there is a problem of criticism—of judgment—performed in Stinson's essay, a problem that is faced by all critics of *Blood Meridian*, myself included. This is because the book demands judgment by its readers (lay or professional), and demands that this judgment be directed in particular at that part of the book (but is it just a part?) that most requires judgment—a character called "the judge." The problem is that the book has gotten there first: it passes judgment on the kid(-as-reader) for any failure to pass judgment, while condemning them on the grounds of any judgment they do pass insofar as it resembles the book's own act of judgment. So while Stinson's reading of the judge in *Blood Meridian* as Tarot's Fool is a valid reading of the character, and a good contribution to McCarthy scholarship, her essay also partakes (as do nearly all) of that scriptural violence for which the subject matter of her essay is already a paradigm. Thus, while we must judge *Blood Meridian*, and thereby judge the judge, we ought to seek to do so in a manner that is different from the judge's own acts of judgment.

In my own approaches to judging the novel, I have favored Masters' reading of the book, and in particular, his reading of the judge as trickster. My preference for this one name is due to the fact that *Blood Meridian* is replete with examples that link the judge with the mythological trickster figure. Since this reading of the judge has already been treated extensively by other critics—Masters and Stinson, and most recently, Scott Yarbrough in "Tricksters and Lightbringers in McCarthy's Post-Appalachian Novels"—it is not necessary to repeat the arguments here in any detail. The appeal of the trickster archetype for a reading of the judge is not merely due to the ample textual evidence identifying the judge with this role, but because it seems—and I use this word advisedly—to resolve the problem of how the judge is both one (Judge Holden) and many other things simultaneously (linguist, dancer, naturalist, warrior, judge . . .). In an essay entitled "Mapping the Characteristics of Mythical Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide," William Hynes provides a transcultural typology of the mythical trickster figure in relation to six major characteristics: (1) "ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster"; (2) "deceiver/ trick player"; (3) "shape-shifter"; (4) "situation-invertor"; (5) "messenger/imitator of the gods"; (6) "sacred/lewd bricoleur" (Hynes 34). It can be shown that the judge fulfills each of these characteristics during the course of

the novel. The first, third, and fifth characteristics demonstrate why, should we be forced to assign the judge a single role, the trickster archetype is so attractive: the archetype inherently makes a *one* of the disparate. Thus when Stinson objects to Masters' reading of the judge because he identifies him with many roles, it is easy to reply that this is just what tricksters do: they are role-players (Stinson 12). But I do not present this in order to contest Stinson's disagreement with Masters, nor her reading of the book. After all, the quotation she includes in her essay—that "[b]ecause the Fool has no fixed number" in the Tarot Trumps, he "is free to travel at will, often upsetting the established order [of the cards] with his pranks" (Stinson 13)—gestures to the very same qualities that Masters and I maintain are important about the trickster. My reason for dwelling on the trickster archetype in this way is for another purpose: to draw attention to a problem, a very old problem, and one that is encapsulated in the question posed to Theaetetus in *The Sophist*: "Now does it strike you that when one who is known by the name of a single art appears to be the master of many, there is something wrong with this appearance?" (Plato 232).[2] Thus the mere assignation of the role of trickster to Judge Holden is no better than any other assignation, for far from solving the problem, it merely re-presents it in the very presentation that it is.

I now seek to argue two main points: that the judge should be understood as the book's *fictional* author and that the kid should be regarded as a sign of the reader inside the text of *Blood Meridian*. The first of these is supported by the fact that the judge (as a character within the book) is himself an author in *Blood Meridian*. Masters argues at the beginning of his essay that each of the three roles he identifies with the judge (trickster, ethnographer, and Adam), "accentuate an aspect of the judge's efficacious textuality" (25), and that the "ultimate manifestation of the judge's textual enterprise is his book, for in it he transcribes, and *captures* the cultures he encounters" (30; emphasis in the original). Rick Wallach has also noted the importance of Holden's journal keeping but turns his attention from its effects on the cultures encountered by the gang, to the gang itself, for the judge's writing "inscribes not only his own destiny, but the destiny of his comrades-in-arms." Wallach also notes that Holden's eeriness derives from how he seems "to stand . . . within the very narrative, guarding the secret of inscription," and that his exercise of "malignant authority is based upon his recursive relationship to textuality itself" (6). When Wallach writes later that "Holden is the fulcrum of *Blood Meridian's* recursivity," he approaches very near my own conclusion that Holden ought to be regarded as the fictional author of *Blood Meridian* itself (10). This strong conclusion of fictional authorship is one half of *Blood Meridian's* secret of inscription and, as I hope to demonstrate in what follows, is amply supported by evidence in the text.

We learn from the ex-priest Tobin that the judge "would go up the side of the mountain and make notes in a little book" (126–27), and a few pages on, with the gunpowder mixture drying in the sun and the Apaches climbing the cone toward the company, the judge, unconcerned "took up his ledger and went on with his entries as before." Contrast this with Glanton, whom Tobin sees watching the judge in the same scene: "he seemed to have had his wits stole" (133). This characteristic of the judge's behavior, his nonchalance and his omnipresent smile, "as if the world were pleasing even to himself alone," suggests that there is a special affinity between the world of the book and the figure of the judge (and all those characters that fall in with him) (219).[3]

With this in mind, there is one further way in which the text of *Blood Meridian* may be associated with the judge as fictional author: through the proliferation of images and descriptions that evoke the theater and the carnivalesque, for the clown, the jester and the harlequin are manifestations of the trickster—or fool—archetype. One early instance is the "family of itinerant magicians . . . dressed in fools costumes" (89). When Glanton and his company ride to the Yuma encampment at the end of the seventeenth chapter, they encounter a party "clad in . . . fool's regalia [that] withal bore themselves with such aplomb that the riders were hard put to keep their composure" (254): a scene that registers a grotesquery entirely of the theater. In another scene describing the Comanches who obliterate Captain White's filibustering mission we read: "all the horsemen's faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns" (52–53). There is, furthermore, an affinity between this description of the Comanches and Glanton's company who are described as being "like circus riders" (129),[4] and then later as "driving the harlequin horses before them through the dust of the streets in a pandemonium of teeth and whited eyes," all of which occur in the third-person narrative voice (165).[5] Following the massacre of Glanton and most of his company, the Yumas are described as "some painted troupe of mimefolk" (276) and soon after as "baleful marionettes" (278). Why would these enemies, these heathens, be spoken of by the third-person narrator in the same terms as Glanton and his men? I believe it is because the judge, the book's fictional author, regards them in just the same light, as men engaged in the game of war: "[m]en are born for games. . . . But trial of chance or trial of worth all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all" (249). But is the judge really the fictional author? Consider the following lines spoken by the judge:

> [t]he truth about the world, he said, is that anything is possible. Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a *medicine show*, a fevered

> dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an *itinerant carnival*, a *migratory tentshow* whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a mudded field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning. (245; emphasis added)

The image of the trickster multiplied throughout the text by the third person narrator is here repeated in the words of the judge in the guise of its theatrical, carnivalesque correlate. The fictional author of the novel is the judge, the man called Holden.

I now wish to turn to what I regard as the other half of "the secret of inscription" in *Blood Meridian*, my thesis regarding the kid-as-reader. I am in no way arguing for an *identification* of kid and reader. In his essay, "'The Very Life of the Darkness': A Reading of *Blood Meridian*," Steven Shaviro has drawn attention to the experience of reading *Blood Meridian*, writing that the novel produces "a vertiginous, nauseous exhilaration"; that a "strong compulsion draws us through the text"; that "[b]loody death is *our* monotonously predictable destiny; yet its baroque opulence is attended with a frightening complicitous joy" (146; emphasis added). My personal response to the book is in accord with Shaviro's own, but I do not see that this should necessarily be the case for all readers. Nor is it what I am arguing at present. Closer to my own position is Shaviro's later statement that "*Blood Meridian* places the reader in the position of one "who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen the horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart," but only insofar as we understand that this positioning is achieved in a purely formal sense rather than by any affective means: the kid is a formal and symbolic positioning of the reader inside the text of *Blood Meridian*. This positioning is thus independent of any questions regarding reader identification or literary affect: it is not a matter of what the reader thinks or feels but of what the text does. I am not making claims about the experience of reading *Blood Meridian*. Instead I am claiming that the text has designated a sign, a space for this activity inside itself. It may be objected that "positioning" is merely a weakened form of identity, and that for a reader to be positioned as the kid within the novel requires that they imagine themselves as a fighter, a killer and a scalp-hunter, and that for many readers this is not a situation they do (or would) ever imagine for themselves: the world of *Blood Meridian* is a masculine world of very masculine violence, and thus it may be argued, the kid cannot be the sign in the text of every reader who encounters the text. But I believe that it is the wager of the book that every reader shares the same problem when grappling with the text itself: that of judging the judge and his "metaphysics of violence" (Bell 118). That the kid is the only sign of

(possible) opposition to the judge inside the text means that those readers who object to the violence in the book and refuse to identify with any aspect of it are all the more positioned as the kid inside the book, for as the judge says to the kid in prison: "even if you should have stood your ground . . . yet what ground was it?" (307).

As with the judge, the kid—whose nomenclature in the book proceeds from "the child" (3), to "the kid" (5) and finally "the man" (321)—is also a figure of dispute among critics. The question often debated is whether the kid, the novel's ostensible protagonist, is a moral agent or not. It is a debate that concerns the wider problem of "whether the 'pervasive shocking nature of McCarthy's fiction [as a whole] is gratuitous or justified,'" for if the kid is not a moral agent, then no one is, since his repeated acts of mercy and assistance are the only significant ones in the book (Owens 11). In the following discussion I will argue that the question of the kid's moral agency depends entirely on whether the reader of the novel has any such agency, for the kid in my conception is nothing more than an opening out of the text toward the reader. In fact, the matter in question extends beyond mere moral agency to the question of subjective agency in general.

The reason why the kid is a figure of dispute is simple: there is enough evidence to regard him as a (potential) ethical subject and enough evidence to support the contrary argument, that these scraps of morality are insufficient to sustain such agency. According to Barclay Owens, a critic such as Edwin T. Arnold emphasizes the presence of moral growth in the kid, despite this character's failure to confront the judge, but for Owens, Arnold's "extreme faith in McCarthy as a creator of moral parables seems far-fetched and overstated" (Owens 11). Instead, Owens believes McCarthy's thesis to be one in which "mindless, atavistic violence is the true nature of mankind, a genetic heritage in common with apes and wolves," a thesis that Owens believes encompasses the kid as well (12). Since I regard the kid as a sign of the reader, my own view of the kid's agency remains finally indeterminate. I believe that there exists enough evidence for both views to arise but not enough for them to be finally validated, and that this indeterminacy is a deliberate function of the text—a trick played by the text on the reader-critic. Without ever allowing the reader access to the kid's inner thoughts, but providing just enough evidence of a psychic life through descriptions of his words and actions, the text entangles us in the problem of *being* the kid, a problem that is essentially that of apprehending the judge: of judging him. The reader must either find a way to oppose the judge, or they must offer themselves up entire to "the blood of war," go "to the floor of the pit," see "the horror in the round" and "learn at last that it speaks to [their] inmost heart." Only then can they begin to "dance" (McCarthy 331). There is a

third option, the one enacted by the kid in the book, and likely by most readers of the book as well: a path of vacillation and doubt, a path that finds its conclusion in the murder of "the man" in the jakes at the end of the book.

Blood Meridian is structured as a "Bildungsroman"—we encounter the kid in the opening pages of the book and the rest of the novel is for the most part taken up in tracking his movements until his implied, though nonetheless certain death at the end of the novel. He is first designated as the "child." It is neither name nor title. This character is, in the beginning stages of the book, not the figure of an everyman, but rather an "everyperson," for the designation is not even gendered. This textual figure, with the appearance of a "character," could be anybody, could be "anyreader." It should also be noted that the words "child," "kid" and "man" are never capitalized, as is also the case with the "judge" when not conjoined with "Holden." In this way, the text emphasizes that these designations are not names but mere descriptors. This supposed character, "the kid," never has a name, not even when he is a grown man who has experienced and done much that would set him apart from others. It is in this way that the text makes clear, that as regards the kid, there is no question of agency, psychology, or even character as it is conventionally conceived. Rather, "the child," "the kid," and "the man" designate a textual void that the reader of the text must fill: the "kid" is the name that does not name, it is a nonidentifying appellation. The judge and the (ex-)priest are the only other characters in the novel with titles for names, but the priest is also called "Tobin" and the judge "Holden." Thus "judge" and "priest" refer to functions or qualities, and are further distinguishing markers of character.[6]

Blood Meridian is a text that accomplishes magnificent feats of description, both of landscape and person, and there is entailed in this a very subtle interweaving of the roles of the reader and kid inside the text. "See the child" (3), instructs the narrator at the very beginning of the novel. It is a direct address by the narrator to an implied addressee of the text, which I take to be the reader. (It is also curiously performative, oral even, and as such has a great affinity with the oratory and storytelling of the judge in various parts of the novel.) This address is followed by a description of the child, who by the second sentence we are informed is a boy. The second paragraph continues the second person address: "[n]ight of your birth." This could double, for the briefest of moments, as an address to the reader too, since it is not yet clear who is talking or to whom. It is, we discover, the father addressing his son. It is curious to note that the first part of the book (a brief section of the first chapter) maintains the present tense, whereas the rest, aside from a few shifts to present tense, is written in the past tense. The present tense is then an exception introduced at

the beginning of the book through a second-person address by the narrator to an addressee/audience/reader. It is, however, in Chapter 4 of the book, when the kid has joined Captain White's filibustering expedition, that this combined quality of narrative tense and the play of third and second person narrative becomes most interesting for what it reveals about the novel as a whole.

Following a night camped in a church, Captain White's company sees "on the skyline to the south . . . clouds of dust that lay across the earth for miles" (50). The cause of the dust turns out to be a herd of "cattle, mules, horses . . . several thousand head and [by] late afternoon riders were visible . . . a handful of ragged indians . . . [and others] in hats, perhaps Mexicans" (51). We soon learn that Captain White is intent on a massacre of these herders. A long descriptive passage then begins, making us see the herd and the herders, and there now occurs the second instance of a second-person narration in the book: "[a]lready *you* could see through the dust on the ponies' hides the painted chevrons . . . and now too *you* could hear above the pounding of the unshod hooves the piping of the quena, flutes made from human bones . . ." (52; emphasis added). It would perhaps not be an exaggeration to say that at this moment the language of description erupts, as if each image were engendering the next, with the result that the 360-odd words that remain of the paragraph are accounted for by only two sentences. It is also at this point that we realize that the captain's intention to massacre these herders must be counted a terrible hubris:

> some among the company had begun to saw back on their mounts and some to mill in confusion when up from the offside of those ponies there rose a fabled horde of mounted lancers and archers bearing shields bedight with bits of broken mirrorglass that cast a thousand unpieced suns against the eyes of their enemies. A legion of horribles, hundreds in number. . . .
>
> Oh my god, said the sergeant.
>
> A rattling drove of arrows passed through the company and men tottered and dropped from their mounts. (52–53)

Now the act of seeing formerly attributed to the reader in the second person becomes transferred to the kid in the third person:

> The kid would have reached for the bloody hoop-iron point but then *he saw* that the man wore another arrow in his breast to the fletching and he was dead. Everywhere there were horses down and men scrambling and *he saw* a man who sat charging his rifle while blood ran from his ears and *he saw* men with their revolvers disassembled trying to fit the spare loaded

> cylinders they carried and *he saw* men kneeling who tilted and clasped their shadows on the ground and *he saw* men lanced and caught up by the hair and scalped standing and *he saw* the horses of war trample down the fallen and a little whitefaced pony with one clouded eye leaned out of the murk and snapped at him like a dog and was gone. (53; emphasis added)

In a book that gives war such scope and heightened expression, this passage stands out as an eruption of violence that is equally an eruption of style, and which, through the contrast of second-person address and third-person description, serves as the symbolic fusion of the reader and the kid through an evocation of seeing.

There are other instances in the novel that echo this relationship between persons and books. In Chapter 11, a "Tennessean named Webster had been watching [the judge]" who, following his forays into the Keet Seel ruins, sits sketching the relics he finds there into his ledgerbook. When the judge is finished Webster asks him "what he aimed to do with those notes and sketches and the judge smiled and said that it was his intention to expunge them from the memory of man" (140). It is both a revealing and unnerving anticipation of the kid's disappearance at the end of the novel. The conversation continues:

> But dont draw me, said Webster. For I dont want in your book. My book or some other book said the judge. What is to be deviates no jot from the book wherein it's writ. How could it? It would be a false book and a false book is no book at all.

Yet this is exactly what the reader-as-kid must accomplish: prove the falsity of a book that will otherwise erase them like specimens from a redundant past.[7]

One final piece of evidence in support of my argument that the kid ought to be regarded as a sign of the reader in the text is the moment in the book when Glanton, who with the rest of the gang has settled at the ferry, is surprised by the revenging Yumas in his bedroom: "Glanton spat. . . . Hack away you mean red nigger, he said, and the old man raised the axe and split the head of John Joel Glanton to the thrapple" (275). Steven Shaviro has argued that there is no grandeur in Glanton's death, but I disagree. One merely needs to compare this scene to the death of the other characters in the book, but especially the kid, who quite literally disappears into the judge, to appreciate that this simple act of naming, a naming in full, reads like the eulogizing of Glanton—like an epitaph inscribed in stone (Shaviro 151). The reason for this special treatment of Glanton by the narrative voice is due to the special relationship that exists between the

judge and Glanton: "They've a secret commerce. Some terrible covenant" says Tobin of the two, and then adds that "the judge . . . and Glanton rode side by side . . . conversin like brothers" (126). The affinity between Glanton and the judge, and Glanton's relationship to the narrative voice, is further revealed by the following passage:

> [t]hat night Glanton stared long into the embers of the fire . . . he was equal to whatever might follow for he was complete at every hour. Whether his history should run concomitant with men and nations, whether it should cease. He'd long forsworn all weighing of consequence and allowing as he did that men's destinies are given yet he usurped to contain within him all that he would ever be in the world and all that the world would be to him and be his charter written in the urstone itself he claimed agency and said so and he'd drive the remorseless sun on to its final endarkenment as if he'd ordered it all ages since, before there were paths anywhere, before there were men or suns to go upon them. (243)

The text validates Glanton because the judge does, and it is telling that the passage that immediately follows the above quoted text, reads: "[a]cross from him sat the vast abhorrence of the judge. Half naked, scribbling in his ledger." Glanton is, in the judge's words, "that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart" (331). He is also, according to the judge, that man who: "sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry [and who] will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and . . . by such taking charge . . . effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate" (199).

The narrative voice's positioning of the reader inside the text dramatizes an encounter between the reader of the book and the judge, the book's fictional author. We are thus presented with a remarkable situation in *Blood Meridian*, or rather the inversion of a situation—recall that the fourth of Hynes' characteristics of the trickster as a "situation invertor," and Stinson's remark about the Fool's ability to upset established order—one in which the reader is situated as a character inside the text, occupying the position of the kid, while the judge exists, in a metatextual way, outside the story of the text, as fictional author. Consider the following passage describing the judge, and note especially the transition from past tense to present and then back again: "[h]is fingers trac*ed* the impression of old willow wicker on a piece of pottery clay and he *put* this into his book with nice shadings, an economy of pencil strokes." Now the shift: "[h]e *is* a draftsman

as he *is* other things, well sufficient to the task. He *looks* up from time to time at the fire or at his companions in arms or at the night beyond." Finally, a return to the use of past tense: "Lastly he *set* before him" (140, emphasis added). It is as though the text were saying: "Even now *I* (the judge) exist, beyond this world where *you* (the reader) are fixed"—a situation in which the kid-as-reader sits "mute as a tailor's dummy," rendered powerless by the radical ambiguity of the trickster and his environment—the text (169).

This strange reversal that occurs in *Blood Meridian* serves to confirm Masters' analysis regarding the judge's textual efficacy. We have discussed and seen ample evidence of the judge-as-trickster, but also of the judge-as-ethnographer and American Adam, where the former concerns "his ability to interpret" and the latter "his capacity to name." I have taken Masters' statement that the judge, insofar as he is an author "is also an expunger," and extended it by arguing that this expungement ought to be understood as extending, in symbolic fashion, to the reader of *Blood Meridian* itself: it is insofar as the judge is the fictional author of the text that he "remains free from the telos endemic of a closed system" (Masters 26). Conceiving the judge as the fictional author of *Blood Meridian* also helps to explain why he remains an "ahistorical" and *self-written* figure" (Masters 28; emphasis in the original). The reciprocity between the world of the book and the judge as author of the book also lends weight to Masters' statement that the "judge functions as a synchronizing structure, pure cause and pure effect" without a "self," a structure that Masters correctly perceives as drawing strength from the failure of people to "question their role in the judge's machine"—his book, the book we read, and are read by in turn (Masters 29–30).

For all my agreement with Masters, I cannot accept his or Shaviro's nihilistic conclusions regarding the text. In his essay Masters quotes Shaviro's statement that *Blood Meridian* "is not a salvation narrative; we can be rescued neither by faith nor by works nor by grace" (Shaviro 113). In his own essay, Masters bases this conclusion on the kid's "inability to tell his story and construct a text, a text perhaps capable of transcending the judge's textual order" (35). Since I regard the kid as a sign of the reader in the text, the question of this possibility of exception—it is not a matter of transcendence—must, of necessity, be deferred to the particularity of each reading of the novel, must bear witness to how these readings compare with the book's own textual enterprise. And this means that the reading that requires immediate scrutiny is my own. What then is my objection to what I have called Shaviro's and Master's nihilistic conclusions? And is it possible to present a satisfactory alternative?

I certainly will not contend with either the judge or these critics' conclusions regarding the force of the judge's book by evoking some Nietzschean will to

power. The judge has already performed that feat (in its totalitarian, fascist guise). Shaviro, for his part, lays nihilistic assault on any attempt to render the human subject a kind of ground of resistance to the judge's regime of textual violence:

> subjectivity is not a perspective upon or projection into the world, nor even a transcendental condition for our perception of the world; it is just another empirical fact, an inherence within the world like any other. There is no interiority, no intentionality and no transcendence. The radical epistemology of *Blood Meridian* subverts all dualism of subject and object, inside and outside, will and representation or being and interpretation. We are always exiles within the unlimited phenomenality of the world, for we cannot coincide with the (nonexistent) center of our being . . . (150)

Elsewhere Shaviro writes that there

> is no reserve of potentiality in *Blood Meridian*; everything is cruelly, splendidly actual. There is no transcendence, and no possibility of standing out from Being. There is no stance by which subjectivity might fold back upon itself, thereby affirming and preserving itself, or at least attenuating the shock of those multiple, fatal encounters that mark its inherence in the world . . . (152)

Evoking Spinoza a few pages later, Shaviro then insists "that the order of words and images is literally the same as the order of actions and events. The judge affirms an ontological parallelism between thing and representation, between 'being' and 'witness'" (154). Shaviro follows this by stating that mimesis "is not an imitation of the real so much as an aggressive and provocative solicitation of the real." It is here that Shaviro's argument founders. For having equated the order of words and things, Shaviro then speaks about the solicitation of the real by representation, which means that there is a gap, a difference to be crossed. And well there should be, for without it there could be no reason to speak about solicitation, and moreover, solicitation as appropriation: "the judge duplicates the world by obsessively copying all that he encounters into his notebooks; his simulations of various objects allow him to dispense with or even destroy the originals . . ." (155). What else could impel the judge's aggressive attempts to appropriate the world (of the book and its reader), but the gap that exists between this desire (to re-present the world) and its fulfillment?

Those familiar with this work of Shaviro's will know it to be an essayistic tour de force that takes into itself the virile velocity of its subject matter, interspersing

its own evaluations with frequent quotations from the novel itself. But this is also precisely its problem. The essay is simply not cautious enough and flies too close to the sun. The novel itself contains the warning Shaviro should have heeded: pursued in the desert by the judge and his fool, harried by the judge's disembodied voice, the ex-priest says to the kid: "Dont listen. . . . Stop your ears. . . . Do it, he whispered. Do you think he speaks to me?" (McCarthy 293). Rick Wallach delivers the necessary critical supplement to this caution: "we should be wary of the judge's pronouncements; the real hostility operates, like the tarot cards, on the metatextual level" (Wallach 10).

This mention of the Tarot is the appropriate place to return to a feature of the cards remarked on by Stinson: "the Fool has no fixed number [in the series of twenty-two Trumps]" since his designation is zero" (13). But there are some further interesting things to note about the traditional order of the Trump cards that are unnoted in Stinson's essay: first, that the penultimate card in the Trump series is the card "Justice," termed "Judgement" or "The Last Judgement" by A. E. Waite in his *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*, and second, that the final card is "The World." There is little reason to dwell on the interpretation of the former card for we know enough about the nature of judgment and its agent in *Blood Meridian* not to have to resort to any further symbolic importation. Of the last card however, "The World," Waite has this to say: "[i]t represents . . . the perfection and end of the Cosmos, the secret which is within it, the rapture of the universe when it understands itself in God. It is further the state of the soul in the consciousness of Divine Vision, reflected from the self-knowing spirit" (Waite 156). What bearing could all this have on a reading of *Blood Meridian*?

Rick Wallach has remarked that the judge's weight of "twenty-fourstone" (McCarthy 128), an "English measure . . . equivalent to 336 pounds," is a number that is in turn "practically identical to the novel's page count" (Wallach 10). Practically, but not quite identical, for the length of the novel in its first edition exceeds this number by precisely one page, and this page, 337, contains the novel's epilogue. The novel therefore exceeds with its epilogue the judge's own corpus by a margin. The trickster/fool has therefore not yet attained the world—cannot pass judgment on it, for there is yet a remainder, an untraversed (and untraversable) gap—however slight. Having argued that the judge is the novel's fictional author, I must now conclude that the epilogue must be attributed to some(thing/one) other.

There are further details, in part also structural, that corroborate this conclusion by extending the correspondence Wallach has identified between the judge and the book. *Blood Meridian* is divided into 23 chapters and an epilogue (23 ¼ chapters let us say). Given the clockwork images contained in the

epilogue, I read the novel's structure of 23 ¼ chapters in horological terms: while the final, twenty-fourth hour—which is also the zero hour and the Tarot Fool's numbered designation—is approaching, there yet remains time, time to resist, time to disprove the judge's words that man's "spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day" (146–47). This reading also accords well with other details in the novel's epilogue, in which "*the wanderers in search of bones and those who do not search . . . move haltingly in the light like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet*" (337). Masters has already spoken of the judge's "machine" (Masters 30), and here we see its return in the component mechanisms of a time-keeping automaton. Wallach for his part has drawn attention to how the kid, "[d]uring his desert battles with the judge . . . crouches among the ribcages of sheep or mules as though reduced to an atavistic throwback or fetus himself," and these images of sheltering within death return with the wandering bonepickers in the epilogue as well (4).

We should recognize in all of this an encroachment on the epilogue, conceived as an exception to the judge's textual regime, by that regime itself. But what of the figure of the "*man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground*"? Is he of the judge's order or not? 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*" (McCarthy 337). In the context of all we have learned about the judge and his desire for conquest, God and his works ought in this instance to be read as an unnamed, uninterpreted, and unstructured remainder, rather than any "making whole" that would merely repeat the judge's acts of totalization. God, contrary to the judge's earlier statement, is not here "the forcing of the unity of existence" (249).

To understand why, we need to pay close attention to the language of the epilogue: the wanderers "*cross in their progress one by one that track of holes [made by the solitary man] 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*" (337). Less "some continuance," more "the validation of a principle": it is this that introduces an exception of undecidability, a decision that asserts the rights of indecision itself.

Let us recall the nature of a "principle." Considered in philosophical or theological terms a principle is "[t]hat from which something originates or is derived; a source, an origin." Another definition of the word considers it a "fundamental source from which something proceeds; a primary element, force, or law which

produces or determines particular results; the ultimate basis upon which the existence of something depends; cause." A less substantialist, more epistemological understanding of "principle" is of a "fundamental truth or proposition on which others depend; a general statement or tenet forming the (or a) basis of a system of belief, etc.; a primary assumption forming the basis of a chain of reasoning" ("Principle, N."). What we need to attend to in the text of the epilogue in *Blood Meridian* is how this ground that a principle is supposed to be is itself grounded—and thus itself ungrounded as ground—by the necessity of a process of its own validation. Whether or not there is salvation, there are, contrary to Shaviro's position, most certainly faith, works, and grace: the grace of a remainder (of God's works—his fire); the work of making this remainder erupt into a world; and the faith of an ungrounded principle, of a wager, that this work indeed belongs to the world.

What is remarkable about all this is how closely it approaches the judge's own position in *Blood Meridian*. He too asserts the necessity of a wager:

> 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. Games of sport involve the skill and strength of the opponents and the humiliation of defeat and the pride of victory are in themselves sufficient stake because they inhere in the worth of the principals and define them. But trial of chance or trial of worth all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all.
>
> Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. Who has not heard such a tale? A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man's hand or that man at his. What more certain validation of a man's worth could there be? This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate. The selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one. In such games as have for their stake the annihilation of the defeated the decisions are quite clear. This man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, 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. (249)

What is accomplished by this remarkable performance is nothing less than a rhetorical sleight of hand, for the assertion of the absolute necessity of a wager—of the existence of chance—for the founding of a subject's being ("validation of a man's worth") is given only in order to eliminate chance altogether.[8] How can chance, which is nothing less than the absolute fracture of any ontological or epistemological unity, become the condition of unity, and thereby, the guarantor of its own elimination?

It is not within the scope of the present article to give this problem the full philosophical treatment it deserves. In lieu of (final) judgment I will assert the following Mallarméan maxim: "UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS N'ABOLIRA LE HASARD," and that consequently, "Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés" (*Collected Poems* 124–45).[9] What this gives us is an attenuation of the effects of judgment; delimiting judgment in an act of judgment itself; what this gives us is an ethics of reading that is in exception to the judge's own textual regime of appropriation and effacement. We have judged, but we have judged otherwise.

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NOTES

1. I have chosen here to refer to the complex figure of kid-as-reader with the object pronoun "it" rather than the subject pronoun "them" or "they" since it seems to me to be inappropriate to assume the status of subject for this figure when the possibility of subjectivity is precisely what the novel seems to hold in question.

2. The reference is to the Stephanus Number.

3. John Sepich, in a concordance of smiles and laughter in *Blood Meridian*, counts no less than thirty-nine instances of the judge smiling or laughing in the book (*Notes on* Blood Meridian, 156–58).

4. This reference occurs in Tobin's narrative.

5. "Harlequin" is the English form of the Italian "Arlecchino": "A character in Italian comedy, subsequently in French light comedy; in English pantomime a mute character supposed to be invisible to the clown and pantaloon; he has many attributes of the clown (his rival in the affections of Columbine) with the addition of mischievous intrigue; he usually wears

particoloured bespangled tights and a visor, and carries a light "bat" of lath as a magic wand" ("Harlequin, N.").

6. The Delawares, it is true, are also without personal names—yet "Delaware" is a highly specific cultural designation and there must be comparatively few potential readers of the novel who could fulfill its terms.

7. Readers may notice the reversal of phrasing that occurs here. This is because the emphasis now begins to fall on what the reader-as-kid does, which is to say, thinks, rather than on the text's positioning of the reader as the kid (the kid-as-reader) within the text itself.

8. This holds in the case of both games of chance and games of skill, for a game of skill would have no appeal if there was not the chance that a player's skill was not equal to that of his opponent, if there was not the chance of defeat.

9. The translation reads: "A THROW OF THE DICE WILL NEVER ABOLISH CHANCE," and "All Thought Emits a Throw of the Dice" (Collected Poems 124–45).

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