

A Frontier Myth turns Gothic: *Blood Meridian: Or, the Evening Redness in the West*

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Cormac McCarthy's Appalachian novels and early short stories evoke the Southern Gothic style because of their setting as well as their use of Gothic elements including incest, necrophilia, and doppelgangers. *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* are perhaps the most Gothic of the novels, exploring the social taboos and repressed urges which comprise the Gothic unspeakable. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy takes the Gothic sensibility a step further. Although it has resisted the fate of McCarthy's Southern novels, which have been compared to the works of Southern Gothic icons such as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and James Dickey, *Blood Meridian* also exhibits characteristics associated with the Gothic. Set in a distinctly Gothic landscape of the Southwestern frontier in the United States, bloodcurdling descriptions of violence are rendered in strikingly beautiful language to play on the sublime effects of attraction and repulsion. The novel's engagement with the violence and bloodshed during our conquest of the West further serves as a Gothic double of our civilization and sets it apart from more comfortable cowboy myths told as bedtime stories or in history books. Due to its preoccupation with the unspoken realities of America's mythologized past, a past still celebrated in countless Western novels, pulp biographies, ballads, and films, *Blood Meridian* can thus be properly called Frontier Gothic.

In contrast to the British Gothic literary tradition whose voices of dissent critiqued structures of class and gender, American Gothic literature has been a voice of caution about an optimistically prosperous new nation. Early novelists such as Charles Brockden Brown, for instance, recognized inherent discrepancies within the young nation's social systems and addressed them in their essentially Gothic works.¹ Despite this critique, the nation was driven by the idea of creating a better New World. U.S. unanimity was further created by mythologizing the nation's expansionist past, a historical whitewashing enabled by the fact that the nation's history was written by the victors, the conquerors of the new territory: white Euro-Americans. McCarthy challenges this version of the past in *Blood Meridian*, subverting the official, mythologized history with the eclipsed reality of violence. Moreover, he discloses the ethical contradictions within that process as ruthlessly as the violence he describes. This cruelty is mitigated, though, by the lyrical beauty of the language McCarthy uses to describe the scenes of horror, turning the sublime narrative into a Gothic mirror image of the contradictions addressed in *Blood Meridian*. Moving from the dark side of humanity on an individual level in his Appalachian Gothic to a larger, national and meta-historical scale in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy populates the Gothic setting of the arid Southwest with similarly Gothic characters that make it not simply another novel about the frontier, but a Frontier Gothic that like other Gothic works in American literature subverts and interrogates nationalistic presuppositions of innocence.

Classification of *Blood Meridian* has been controversial and its designation as Gothic indecisive at best. Critics, such as Guillemain, usually recognize the novel's biocentrism or its extreme violence which, according to Alan Bourassa, creates a sense of the nonhuman without which the human could not exist. A novel will only haunt us as a

great work when it goes beyond the human by exhibiting the nonhuman, he explains (19), concluding that in the world of *Blood Meridian*'s world the human is rendered "uncanny and grotesque" (126), both of which are Gothic attributes. Perceiving a sense of the sublime, Caryn James sees a connection between "the Faulknerian language and unprovoked violence" of McCarthy's former books and the demand in *Blood Meridian*'s to "witness evil not in order to understand it but to affirm its inexplicable reality" (31). His language, James insists, "invents a world hinged between the real and surreal, jolting us out of complacency."² McCarthy's complex revision of the frontier myth thus reveals that, as Idiart and Schulz phrase it, "embedded within the national narrative is the ideological construction of the inferior 'other' whose exclusion effects national solidarity" in the form of white supremacy (127).

The Gothic novel in Great Britain, and as it was later adapted in Europe, developed as a countermovement against the Age of Reason. In a letter to Madame du Deffand in 1767, Horace Walpole, author of the allegedly first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), explained that it was "not written for this age which wants nothing but cold reason" (*Correspondence* 260). His work came to provide all the tropes a Gothic novel was supposed to have in order to invoke terror and horror in its readers, but most importantly, Walpole fashioned the Gothic notion of guilt. In his preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, he says: "the sins of fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation" (7). While the elements of the Gothic as a genre have changed over time, guilt has become the propelling force of American Gothic in particular, whether in Hawthorne's tales of Puritan sinfulness, the infamy of slavery in Toni Morrison, or McCarthy's mythoclastic rendition of how the West was won.³ The Gothic in America serves to address the nation's otherwise unacknowledged ghosts, ghosts that critics such as John Cant see haunting our nation's exceptionalist presumptions of innocence that seek to submerge our awareness of our genocidal social foundations. As Leslie A. Fiedler points out:

in the United States, certain special guilts awaited projection in the Gothic form. A dream of innocence had sent Europeans across the ocean to build a new society immune to the compounded evil of the past from which no one in Europe could ever feel himself free. But the slaughter of the Indians, who would not yield their lands to the carriers of utopia, and the abominations of the slave trade, in which the black man, rum, and money were inextricably entwined in a knot of guilt, provided new evidence that evil did not remain with the world that had been left behind. (143)

It seems, then, that Gothic is the appropriate mode for American literature to deal with particular aspects of its experience as it addresses the latent tension between order and disorder, containment and excess, utopia and reality, official and unofficial history.

Although early American writers such as James Fenimore Cooper dismissed the American scene as unsuitable for the Gothic genre because America is based on principles of common sense, his own works display Gothic elements. Folsom identifies *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) as a Gothic quest narrative in which unconquered American forests replace the British subterranean passages to become "a symbol of an interior state of mind which may or may not recognizably equate with a definable

external landscape” (31). Thirty years later, Nathaniel Hawthorne similarly claimed that “No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a Romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a common-place prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land” (*The Marble Faun* 3). He added that “romance and poetry . . . need Ruin to make them grow.”

Since Hawthorne’s work is preoccupied with the darker side of his own as well as America’s Puritan past, his statement is ironic and reflects America’s utopian notions of prelapsarian innocence. In “Young Goodman Brown” and other works, Hawthorne’s characters are the embodiments of the paradox of American Gothic. As David Mogen, Scott P. Sanders, and Joanne B. Karpinski state, “In a sense, the very concept of American Gothic is paradoxical, since so much of American culture denies the possibility of the Gothic [supernatural] experience” (13). And yet Americans, who so willingly engaged in, approved of, or at least ignored “the slaughter of the Indians, who would not yield their lands to the carriers of utopia” (Fiedler 143), proved to be an avid audience for Gothic fiction. One reason for this is that, as Peter N. Carroll points out, “beneath the florid plenty of the New World,” Puritans saw “the Devil lurking in the wilderness” (11), a wilderness associated with both the supernatural and the monstrous. As James Folsom says, the preoccupation of the Puritan was to discover “whether or not he was one of the elect or one of the damned” (35), and “the literary result of this cultural obsession has often been an uneasy statement of the fact that perhaps man is both.” According to Folsom, there is “a duality at the heart of human nature” which is also a crucial element in Gothic works (35, 36).

This duality at first remained a thing outside the mind; evil was projected onto the inscrutable wilderness. Before Edgar Allan Poe turned the Gothic into something distinctly psychological, however, Charles Brockden Brown adapted Gothic tropes to the American scene, playing with but not focusing on the internal aspects of human duality. He writes in his foreword to *Edgar Huntly* (1799):

It is the purpose of this work...to exhibit a series of adventures, growing out of the condition of our country...Gothic castles and chimeras, are the materials usually employed for this end [to appeal to the reader, but] the incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness, are far more suitable; and for a native of America to overlook these, would admit of no apology. (3)⁴

Brown’s “western wilderness” soon expanded into the unconquered American landscape of the Southwest with its intensifying Indian warfare and conflicts with Mexico, thus changing the territory into something distinctly Gothic. Scott P. Sanders calls the “immense and various formations” of the deserts “the tangible substance of Southwestern Gothic [and] the fundamental spirit of this place whose prehistory is inscribed in the landscape” (“Southwestern” 56). To Sanders and others, the Southwest represents a “geological Gothicism,” a Gothic landscape that we helped people with ghosts during our expansionist past. Challenging Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis” of 1893 in which he claims that “the advance of American settlement westward explains[s] American development” (79), Patricia Nelson Limerick counters that the

“origin myth” of Anglo America romanticized the cruel reality of Anglo American conquest (322). With “the [American] dream turned nightmare, the Garden of the Lord metamorphosed into the Great American Desert” and the Western American writer acknowledges that the “landscape of the West is as much a projection of our most deepseated fears as it is a reflection of our ideals” (Folsom 39, 40). Quoting Walt Kelly’s Pogo, Folsom adds that it is “a place where ‘we have met the enemy and they is us’” (40).

What we face, then, in the Frontier Gothic is the enemy within ourselves or as D.H. Lawrence says “the grinning, unappeased aboriginal demons [and] ghosts” which “persecute the white men” and have a “powerful disintegrative influence upon the white psyche” (56). The Gothic novel, and especially the Frontier Gothic, is a means of confronting our demons and rewriting our origin myth. As Mark Busby writes, there are “two sides of the American myth: the hope and promise of the dream of regeneration on the American frontier and the recognition that the dream has often been violent and destructive, that it appears as a ‘lie of the mind’ continuing to entrap and destroy” (92). One way to escape that destruction and come to terms with our darker past is to rewrite our country’s myths to include *all* of the aspects of our origins as a country. In *Blood Meridian*, Cormac McCarthy does just that. He seems to have realized that, as Fiedler notes, “behind the Gothic lies a theory of history, a particular sense of the past” (136), a history and past that need to be retold as a counternarrative to allow for a healthy equilibrium of human and literary experience.

If Sara L. Spurgeon is correct in saying that the “still-unresolved conflicts and tensions inherent in the history of conquest and colonization in the Americas keep traditional myths alive and demand their metamorphosis in response to the realities of life in an increasingly globalized world” (5), how does McCarthy employ the Gothic in *Blood Meridian* to achieve that metamorphosis? The metamorphosis is already reflected in the protagonist’s fairly simple story: a fourteen year-old boy named “the kid” runs away from his home in Tennessee with an alcoholic father who used to be a schoolteacher but fails to teach his son how to read or write (McCarthy 3). The kid’s mother died when he was born in 1833 and his only family besides his father, who “lies in drink” and “quotes from poets whose names are now lost,” is “a sister in this world that he will not see again.” Pale and unwashed, neglected and illiterate, a pariah in his own family, there already broods in the kid “a taste for mindless violence.” After a detour to New Orleans, the kid falls in with filibusters, who, with the tacit support of the governor of California according to Captain White, are attempting to provoke another war with Mexico and thereby acquire even more Mexican territory for the U.S. After their entire troop is wiped out, the kid joins Captain Glanton’s gang, a band of scalphunters hired by the governor of the Mexican state of Sonora to kill as many Apaches as possible. As they are paid by the scalp, they lose all sense of humanity and employ especially cruel tactics, not differentiating between tribes or between Native American and Mexican, and not even caring whether the victim is still alive. After the decimation of the Glanton gang by the Yuma, the kid, now called “the man,” works in and around California for several years before presumably being killed by a former comrade, Judge Holden.

The story line has similarities with the quest motif of many Gothic novels, in which the protagonist sets out on a journey and experiences various forms of evil on the way. Although the kid is looking for an outlet for his anger and finds it in the violent actions of the gangs, one gets the notion that he is both part of and yet outside the

violence. One could envision the kid as leading a double life, for there are instances that call for unanimity in which the kid is the lone exception. The kid's occasional dissociation from the evil reflects a Gothic, or Manichean, double consciousness within all of us. In one instance the kid refuses to kill the judge even for his own protection (285 ff); in another, he risks being murdered when he painfully extracts an arrow from the leg of a comrade (162). The most striking incident, however, occurs after the kid has arrived in California and has escaped a prison sentence by confessing all his deeds and being baptized. His attempt to help an old woman in the mountains is coupled with his personal confession to her:

He spoke to her in a low voice. He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place, some party of her countrypeople who would welcome her and that she should join them for he could not leave her in this place or she would surely die. (315)

Perhaps it is the sight of another massacre, with pilgrims' bodies mutilated and strewn among the landscape despite his refusal to partake, that makes him care about the woman; perhaps it is his disengagement from the gang that allows him to be compassionate toward a Mexican. Whatever it is, his change of heart seems in vain; the old woman turns out to be "just a dried shell and she had been dead in that place for years" (315). This disconcerting twist in the narrative does not distract from the possibility for his metamorphosis, however. The kid's open resistance to give in to complete evil persists throughout the narrative, suggesting not only a Gothic duality within humans but also hope for redemption. This duality and potential for metamorphosis is further reflected in the novel's setting on the Southwestern frontier and McCarthy's use of language. A closer look at the setting and narrative reveals how McCarthy's writing fosters the dichotomy of Gothic attraction and repulsion that keeps the reader wanting to continue reading a text in which the main theme is violence.

Blood Meridian is interspersed with descriptions of nature within which one can hardly distinguish between the beautiful and the sublime and in which Kant's distinction of "quality" and "quantity" is blurred. Kant's definition of the beautiful, as postulated in 1790, refers to something "having [definite] boundaries," whereas the sublime is related to "a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* is represented" (82). Since the boundlessness of the landscape in *Blood Meridian* is both enticing and impossible to comprehend, it accounts for the sense of attraction and repulsion in the reader. Kant's main differentiation, though, relies on the inherent "life force" that is either a continuous flow (beautiful) or a momentarily halted and then gushing outpour (sublime). The sublime, according to Kant, "contains not so much a positive pleasure as [rather] admiration and respect" (83). A line such as "dark falls here like a thunderclap and a cold wind sets the weeds to gnashing" seems sublime due to its underlying threat of danger. The threat evokes both respect and admiration, but when we read next that the "night sky lies so sprent with stars that there is scarcely space of black at all and they fall all night in bitter arcs and it is so that their numbers are no less" (McCarthy 15), the

language itself is so beautiful that the sublime goes almost unnoticed.⁵ The pleasing astonishment of a sky full of stars is what Joseph Addison calls “Greatness...[or] the Largeness of a whole View” (540). However, the stars’ “bitter arcs” suggest something troubling. Not only is the whole novel set in the “vast uncultivated desert” with “huge heaps of mountains, high rocks and precipices” that Addison, like Kant after him, identifies with greatness or the sublime, but its scattered descriptions suggesting death and fear invoke “ideas of pain and danger,” a notion that Edmund Burke added to the definition of the sublime in 1757 (86). This idea of danger is more clearly apparent in passages such as this one: “In two days they began to come upon bones and cast-off apparel. They saw halfburied skeletons of mules with the bones so white and polished they seemed incandescent even in that blazing heat and they saw panniers and packsaddles and the bones of men and they saw a mule entire, the dried and blackened carcass hard as iron” (McCarthy 46).

These remains of death within a vast and hostile countryside fit Burke’s definition of the sublime as “rugged,” “dark and gloomy,” and “founded on pain,” but are interspersed within passages of beautiful language resulting in what Burke explains is a mixing of the sublime with the beautiful: “In the infinite variety of natural combinations we must expect to find the qualities of things the most remote imaginable from each other united in the same object” (157). Another example of this intricate mixture is in the following description of a snake bitten horse, whose

eyes bulged out of the shapeless head in a horror of agony and it tottered moaning toward 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. (McCarthy 115)

In this passage, and much more so in other, more gruesome ones, we get close to Burke’s extended definition of the sublime as evoking pain, danger, and terror. He says: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (86). Sources of terror abound in *Blood Meridian*, ranging from “a bush that was hung with dead babies” (57) to vivid descriptions of massacred men with “strange menstrual wounds between their legs and no man’s parts for these had been cut away and hung dark and strange from out of their grinning mouths” (153) and pilgrims that “were scattered about below him in a stone coulee dead in their blood” (314). Kant, and later Jean-François Lyotard, elaborates on the strong emotions of the mind, explaining that the mind’s agitation derives from the “quickly alternating attraction toward, and repulsion from, the same object” (97). He continues: “The mind feels itself *moved* in the representation of the sublime in nature,” because we cannot comprehend but have to intuit the excessive (sublime) thing, before we perceive the thing as “an abyss in which it [the imagination] fears to lose itself” (97). Lyotard says further that “because of this transitory anguish, the sublime emotion is not

like play” and adds that in “it the imagination is seriously occupied” (68). Intuiting the excessive, sublime, even dangerous thing within the beautifully lyrical text of *Blood Meridian* is what causes the Gothic effect of engaging the reader’s unconscious and thus threatening the reader’s aesthetic distance, which allows for the terror or horror to take effect.

Kant explains that because the sublime consists of terrible things which occupy the mind to such an extent that strong emotions become involved, due to the mind’s inability to comprehend the “boundlessness” of those things (Kant 41), we are simultaneously attracted and repulsed by the sublime. This paradox, Kant says, lies in our frustrated comprehension and our delight in the human activity of attempting to understand, although “true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the [subject] judging, not in the natural Object [sic]” (95). Comparing it to a mental sensation that exceeds our natural senses, Kant thus offers an explanation for why not all readers are similarly affected by sublime or Gothic writing. However, this inevitable paradox of the sublime is a fascinating quality of Gothic narratives and explains their potential for metamorphosis. Consequently, the distinction between the Gothic elements of terror and horror in *Blood Meridian* is less relevant than the effect of the sublime on the reader in general.⁶ Both the horror and terror in the novel threaten the reader’s aesthetic distance (Heller 186) by contributing to the sublime seesaw of emotions. The intermingling of scenes of genocide, indiscriminate killing, and mutilation with the beauty of *Blood Meridian*’s language creates a well wrought narrative that provides what Longinus calls “much food for reflection” (139). It is, perhaps, Longinus’ definition of the sublime that best exemplifies the effect and importance of *Blood Meridian* as a Gothic novel. Longinus, in the first century, argued that sublimity “is difficult or rather impossible to resist, and makes a strong and ineffaceable impression on the memory.” Genuine sublimity, he wrote, affords “grandeur [that] produces ecstasy rather than persuasion in the hearer; and the combination of wonder and astonishment always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant” (138). Instead of striving for persuasion, then, *Blood Meridian* provides what Bourassa calls the nonhuman element in literature, which is what makes a good work of literature truly great; but more importantly, the sublime is arresting and conducive to the metamorphosis of humanity through historical reflection—a reflection that blurs and challenges the clear demarcation of the mythologized Manichean roles of good Anglo cowboys fighting evil Indians and Mexicans.

Therefore, as a mythoclastic counternarrative, the Gothic *Blood Meridian* deals with historical atrocities whose implications remain incomprehensible and frightening. That fear derives mainly from Judge Holden, whose paradoxical character signifies the duality of mankind as well as of civilization in general by serving as a satanic figure. Throughout the novel, the judge’s creation of evil is juxtaposed with his seemingly benign physicality: “An enormous man dressed in an oilcloth slicker had entered the tent and removed his hat. He was bald as a stone and he had no trace of beard and he had no brows to his eyes nor lashes to them. He was close on to seven feet in height. . . . His face was serene and strangely childlike. His hands were small” (McCarthy 6). Though depicted as a man with a baby-smooth hairless, giant, white body, the judge is evil incarnate who commits atrocities and spews prophecies that leave little hope for humanity.

He first appears at a tent revival in Nagadoches and disingenuously accuses the reverend of child molestation and bestiality, which leads to the reverend's persecution by a mob that indiscriminately chooses to believe the judge without seeking proof to convict the reverend. People's credulity seems to be prompted by the judge's childlike appearance that, save for his height, recalls a sense of innocence that is furthered by his whiteness and his tendency to stand naked in communion with nature: "Someone had reported the Judge naked atop the walls, immense and pale in the revelations of lightning, striding the perimeter up there and declaiming in the old epic mode" (118). Curiously enough, however, a scene depicting the judge as a god-like infant is inevitably followed by the discovery of either a child missing or a child killed. At one point he allows a "halfbreed boy" to tag along with the gang, but the next morning the boy is found "lying face down naked in one of the cubicles" with his neck broken (118). Later, after a massacre of an Indian campsite, the judge saves a little Apache boy, whom the gang feeds and covers with a blanket, but "in the morning the judge was dandling it on his knee while the men saddled their horses. Toadvine saw him with the 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" (164). This notion of the judge as murderer and sodomite sits uneasily with his depiction as the embodiment of righteous and unblemished civilization: he owns a rifle "with an inscription from the classics" (125), gives addresses that are "like a sermon" (129), saves a group of men pursued by Indians through his knowledge of nature's resources to create gunpowder (131), records and sketches the artifacts of nature and civilization in his book (139), and lectures frequently. Whatever the knowledge of "this man of learning" (116), though, the Manichean duality of civilization that the judge embodies is not lost on the reader.

The menace of the judge is further epitomized by his evangelizing the gang members into "proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools" (116) and his claim that nothing can exist without his consent. Frequently, he is referred to as a "great pale deity" (92) or called the devil: "The judge. Give the devil his due" (125). As if unbalanced in his duality, he "appeared to be a lunatic and then not" (127). Sometimes his comrades revere him by telling stories that contain prodigious two-word sentences such as "The judge." (128). At other times they contemplate the evil he exudes musing that he has "been sent among us for a curse" (131) and "so like an icon was he in his sitting that they grew cautious and spoke with circumspection among themselves as if they would not waken something that had better been left sleeping" (147).

The figure of the judge in *Blood Meridian* signifies the Gothic duality of mankind as well as the American Dream that underlies the genocide committed in the name of bringing civilization to North America during the westward expansion. As Mogen, Sanders, and Karpinski claim, "American Frontier Gothic literature derives from this conflict between the inscribed history of civilization and the history of the other [sic]" (17) and the judge, as a conflicted or dual figure himself, embodies both. He seems to justify America's conquest of the West when he says that "all progressions from a higher to a lower order are marked by ruins and mystery and a residue of nameless rage" (146). The judge's logic in explaining the origins of warfare is frightening. He reasons that "before man was, war waited for him" (248). To him, war "is the testing of one's will" and "the ultimate game" (249). By saying "war is god" (249), the judge assumes war to be inevitable and infinite—the natural drive to fight for superiority, to rule over the other.

That the novel ends with the judge dancing on a stage seems a dreadful portent: “He never sleeps. He says that he will never die” (335). However, reading *Blood Meridian* as Gothic confronts us with this dread in order that we not only fear evil but mitigate it by facing our duality and acknowledging and revising our vision of the past.

Another aspect of mankind’s dual nature *Blood Meridian* exposes is that along with the sublime landscape of the unchartered territory came the confrontation with native cultures, which the Puritans quickly demonized as the abject or evil Other, in contrast with their own righteous culture and beliefs.⁷ Borrowing from Carroll, David Mogen describes the Puritans’ initial reaction to the New World as one full of “apprehension and aspiration” (“Wilderness” 94). Their Promised Land was also the Biblical desert in which darkness threatened to “extinguish the precarious light of Christianity” and in which they had to fight the “agents of Satan himself, the ‘Black Man’” (94). Although the term “savage” had become a common label for Native Americans concurrent with the Puritan settlers’ early fear of them, the Anglo Americans in *Blood Meridian* refer to anybody other, including Native Americans, African Americans, and Mexicans, as “niggers.” This substitution of the earlier term lends the novel a distinctly racist twist that mirrors the growing disputes over the slavery question as well as the inherent racism within the United States, something that would later become a Gothic trope of its own.⁸ The settlers of the New World thus exhibited a Gothic duality in their ambition for conquest and their concurrent fear of the land and peoples they wished to usurp, but incongruities of behavior proper for the bearers of Christian Enlightenment and civilization were easily resolved: paid armies cleared their path of the demonized Indians or Mexicans. Yet a Gothic instability arises when the clear-cut boundaries of good and evil get blurred, and *Blood Meridian* portrays the gang the kid joins as committing atrocities that equal, if not exceed, those of the Native Americans. There are descriptions of deceit and massacres involving peaceful as well as adversarial Native American warriors, women, and children and extinguishing whole tribes because the “slaughter had become general” (McCarthy 155):

[T]he partisans nineteen in number bearing down upon the encampment where there lay sleeping upward of a thousand souls...[P]eople were running out under the horses” hooves and the horses were plunging and some of the men were moving on foot among the huts with torches and dragging the victims out, slathered and dripping with blood, hacking at the dying and decapitating those who knelt for mercy...[And] humans on fire came shrieking forth like berserkers...They moved among the dead harvesting the long black locks with their knives and leaving their victims rawskulled and strange in their bloody cauls...Men were wading about in the red waters hacking aimlessly at the dead and some lay coupled to the bludgeoned bodies of young women dead or dying on the beach. (155-57)

Even so, the gang members feel their behavior justified by their Christian ideology and condemn the “savages,” saying “Damn if they aint about a caution to the christians [sic]” (56). When they later see the head of their former captain pickled in a jar at a bazaar, they comment that “That’s the worst thing I ever seen in my life” (70). The goriness is terrible on either side; Apaches cut the soles off the feet of a living person

(77) and skin people, while the scalp hunters appear with “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” (78). Characteristic of both the Americans and the Mexicans is the unremitting reference to the justice of Christianity. The Mexicans also refer to the Native Americans as “barbaros” that need to be eliminated for their viciousness, claiming that Mexico has already lost too many lives: “The blood of a thousand Christs” (102). The Americans, though, even sell the scalps of Mexicans they encountered to the Mexicans they propose to protect from the ‘barbarians’ and they, unknowingly and ironically, hang “the scalps of the slain villagers...from the windows of the governor’s house” (185). This kind of irony permeates *Blood Meridian*, in which those who profess to be most civilized and Christian commit the most repellent crimes, thus reflecting early Puritan’s self-complicity and a Gothic blurring of boundaries.

The reader’s task is neither to determine who committed the worst crimes nor who was more evil, but to “explore the nature of evil...[and the characters’] inner conflicts [that] split them in two” (MacAndrew 79). Especially with the character of the kid, who partakes in the atrocities yet remains the most human of them all, the “deepening confusion over moral absolutes” leads the reader to a “growing awareness of the depth and complexities of the human psyche,” as MacAndrew suggests. Louis S. Gross explains that it was Charles Brockden Brown who first made “metonymic use of the transformed or metamorphosed character as the locus of evil [which links him to] psychological Gothic” and adds that “If there is one central area of fear the Gothic novel exploits it is the fear of losing one’s sense of self as a human being in relation to the family, the state, and God” (8). It is the dissolution of the self that both protagonist and reader fear, but it is the recognition of human duality and acceptance of moral relativism which creates metamorphosis.

Accepting changes of our origin myth or alternative representations of history is a slow and difficult process. Like the Puritans, we fear the duality in human nature and reject its dark side, but the Gothic novel suggests that even though we fear the Other, the Other is often us. Spurgeon argues correctly when she says that McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* “interrogate[s] the consequences of our acceptance of archetypal Western hero myths” and rewrites them “to bridge the discontinuity...between the mythic past of the American West and its modern realities” (20). But *Blood Meridian* is not merely a Western novel rewriting the frontier myth. It is much more than that; it has metamorphosed into a piece of Frontier Gothic. That distinction is essential, because the novel relies on the tropes of the American Gothic not only to present an alternative historical past but also to induce an acceptance of that alternative history in the reader. By heavily loading the narrative with the beautiful and the gory, McCarthy creates the sublime dichotomy of attraction and repulsion that enthralls the reader of Gothic literature. The characters of the kid, symbolizing the duality in mankind, and the judge, symbolizing the duality within our historical perception and distribution of civilization, reveal what Gross calls “a fierce terrorism at the heart of America’s founding ideology” (36). Despite its disguise as a mythically informed Western, McCarthy’s Gothic counternarrative of genocidal conquest thus continues in the tradition of the American novel that Fiedler says is essentially Gothic. “Until the Gothic had been discovered,” Fiedler claims, “the serious American novel could not begin; and as long as that novel

lasts, the Gothic cannot die” (143). Just like the kid in *Blood Meridian*, America seems to be on a quest, because as long as we refuse to acknowledge the whole experience of mankind, ignore the “significance of the past, and refuse to accept the reality of those ghosts and devils that emerge from its gloomy depths or lurk in the human heart” (Ringe 176), Americans will not gain the knowledge that can only derive from complete acceptance of life’s “dark underside.” The moral ambiguity of the novel and the complexity of its leading characters—especially the kid and the judge—make us question how much we really know about reality and human motivation, about good and evil.

Notes

¹ Peter Kafer, in the introduction of his 2004 *Charles Brockden Brown's Revolution and the Birth of American Gothic*, relates an anecdote regarding the first Gothic and American novelist C.B. Brown's novel *Wieland* (written at age 27). "Sens[ing] the dark histories already weighing down on the American republic," according to Kafer, Brown sent Thomas Jefferson his novel to comment on the slave-owning President's closely kept secret of miscegenation (xxi).

² David Holloway assigns the "historicizing tag" of "late modernist" to McCarthy's works, asserting that they are "characteristic of their historical moment of production" and as assuming "a subversive posture toward the qualities that define that moment," as Rick Wallach explains (Wallach xiii). This subversive posture does not only refer to the moment of production, but applies to the historical setting of *Blood Meridian* in particular. For Sara L. Spurgeon *Blood Meridian* is a postmodern frontier myth by a writer "who writes from the perspective most commonly associated with the histories, stories, and myths about American frontiers in the popular imagination," but who simultaneously "savagely subverts the very myths he evokes so lovingly" (17). As a narrative "of culture, history, and our collective dreams of the future" (4) dealing with the westward expansion into an unknown territory with unfamiliar peoples and cultures, the frontier myth as Frederick Jackson Turner coined it has changed over time, yet is still evident in our everyday culture. In *Blood Meridian*, Spurgeon claims, McCarthy "both reproduces and critiques imperial ideology, at once problematizing and romanticizing traditional tropes in a complexly postmodern vision of a future tied with bonds of blood to the legacy of the mythic past" (17). Expanding on Spurgeon's concept, John Cant sees McCarthy as a mythoclast while Kenneth Lincoln recognizes that in McCarthy's early fiction, including *Blood Meridian*, "Gothic horror gets no gorier" (18), but his superficial references to the Gothic stop where he calls Gothic a distortion, a "perversion of so-called normalcy" (21). Although not entirely incorrect, the term "perversion" carries a negative connotation that distracts from the real function of Gothic literature. He comes closer to its real meaning when he says that Judge Holden is a reminder that "the American west was at times a holocaust of Manifest Destiny and white supremacy" (87).

³ John Cant sees McCarthy as a mythoclast (a term coined by Matthew Guinn) who attacks the American pastoral (the Appalachian novels) and Western myth (the Border Trilogy and *Blood Meridian*) as embodying the destructive lies of American exceptionalism that McCarthy seeks to deconstruct.

⁴ In the *American Gothic*, Leslie Fiedler concludes, the "heathen wilderness" replaces the decaying monuments of Europe, and nature instead of society "becomes the symbol of evil" (160). The villain is no longer the aristocrat but the Indian savage and the American "novel of terror...[is] becoming a Calvinist exposé of natural human corruption rather than an enlightened attack on a debased ruling class or entrenched superstition."

⁵ David Holloway, in his discussion about placing McCarthy in a late Modernist tradition, nicely summarizes the notions of several critics who have written about language in

Blood Meridian. He concludes that “[Steven] Shaviro, [Vereen] Bell, and Dana Phillips are among the many commentators who have traced the primacy of language effects...in generating this vision of a world from which the very possibility of transcendence has been notionally erased” (13). Holloway agrees with those critics who say that McCarthy’s is “a kind of prose that collapses the distinction between human and “other” worlds” (Holloway 14). See David Holloway, *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002). See especially Vereen Bell, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988). Bell’s description of McCarthy’s use of language in *Blood Meridian* already suggests a Gothic duality at play in the book: “When similes proliferate as they do in *Blood Meridian*, crowding in upon one another or rhythmically recurring, the role of the double image that simile presents begins to take on significance in itself” (132).

⁶ Although most critics agree now that the distinction between terror and horror is tentative at best, Terry Heller claims that terror refers to the fear of harm to oneself, while horror is felt when anticipating / witnessing harm to others. Heller’s distinction, one and a half centuries after the one Ann Radcliffe discusses in “On the Sublime in Poetry” in 1826, would determine the effect of McCarthy’s narrative to relate to the feeling of horror, then, merely refining Radcliffe’s earlier distinction. She claims terror to refer to an “uncertainty and obscurity” concerning the “dreaded evil...expand[ing] the soul and awaken[ing] the faculties to a high degree of life,” whereas horror “contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates” these faculties (150). In *Blood Meridian*, horror would emerge from the reader’s witnessing the gory depictions of the Anglo-American cowboys and trappers fighting “evil” Indians and Mexicans as known from the classic frontier narratives, while terror would be the reader’s realizing his / her own nation’s complicity in these atrocities whose mythologized versions no longer cover the gruesome realities.

⁷ Jeannette Idiart and Jennifer Schulz give an example of Othering based on Charles Brockden Brown’s novel *Edgar Huntly* in which “the wilderness is a very real and physical threat...but it also functions as a metaphor for the “otherness”—the unassimilability—of Native Americans and immigrants. Where the former reflect the wilderness in which they live, the latter, in effect, carry a wilderness within, manifesting in superstition, disease and anarchy [sic].” See Jeannette Idiart and Jennifer Schulz, “American Gothic Landscapes: the New World to Vietnam,” in *Spectral Readings. Towards a Gothic Geography*, edited by Glennis Byron and David Punter (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 1999), 127-139. For the “abject” as a concept of the Other, see Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982).

⁸ For slavery as a distinct trope of the American Gothic see Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997).

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