

## CORMAC MCCARTHY'S GROTESQUE ALLEGORY IN *BLOOD MERIDIAN*<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** *Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian (1985) is one of the major literary works of the twentieth-century. It is an opaque text whose interpretation poses great challenges to the critic. McCarthy deploys a complex narrative strategy which revisits the literary tradition, both American and European, in a collage of genres and modes, from the Puritan sermon to the picaresque, in which the grotesque plays a central role. One of the most controversial aspects of the novel is its religious scope, and criticism seems to be divided between those who find in the novel a theological dimension and those who reject such approach, on the grounds that the nihilist discourse is incompatible with any religious message. This essay argues that McCarthy has consciously constructed, or rather deconstructed, an allegorical narrative whose ultimate aim is to subvert the allegory, with its pattern of temptation-resistance and eventual salvation, into a story of irremediable failure.*

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) recreates a universe governed by the violence of chaos, a world still on the make, emerging from the collision of the primeval elements: water (or its absence), earth, air, and fire. The landscape is wilderness or desert, and humans play a secondary role in the great farcical (tragic) comedy of life. Man is just another creature striving for survival, a humble member of the bestiary that populates the novel. In the waterless wastelands of the Southwest the only liquid that abounds is blood, blood that mixes with dust, making the clay out of which the new human being is modelled. This novel seems to take humankind

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back to the Middle Ages (and even earlier, to prehistoric times, that is, to a pre-civilized world), in what represents an explicit indication of the grotesque vocation of the text, since medieval art is a supreme example of the mode. Moreover, *Blood Meridian* uses narrative forms that were dominant in medieval and renaissance literature, such as the epic narrative, the sermon, the parable, the moral tale and the spiritual (auto) biography, and central to the discussion in this essay, the allegorical journey. Also, it shares some features with the picaresque tradition. And of course, it includes many of the generic elements of the Western. In this respect, the text is a true hybrid of genres and languages. Besides English and Spanish, references abound, for example, to Latin, as well as to other “barbarous” and “extinct” languages that greatly contribute to the polyphonic orchestration of the text.<sup>2</sup>

*Blood Meridian* is a subverted or carnivalized bildungsroman with picaresque and allegorical undertones. In this sense, the kid’s life can be read as an extended religious pilgrimage, a dimension of the novel that has not been studied sufficiently, despite the many elements in the text that support such reading. The kid is a displaced Southerner (as the novel is in a sense a transplantation of the Southern literary tradition), who grows into maturity along the road, a subversion of the Huck Finn archetype, for he is a rogue or *pícaro* whose only means for survival is not wit but violence. His experience is articulated explicitly in religious terms, to the extent that the text turns into an allegory in which the kid becomes a modern Everyman, though of a peculiar nature. Some critics have pointed out McCarthy’s tendency to the allegory. Thus, for example, Vereen Bell (2002: 39) states: “McCarthy’s narratives always seem to verge upon, without ever moving wholly into, allegory: everything is potentially meaningful (even puking)”. Criticism seems to be divided between those who find in the novel a theological dimension and those who reject such approach, on the grounds that the nihilist discourse is incompatible with any religious message.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the ultimate

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2. Dana Philips (1996: 451) points out the wealth of discursive referents that are encompassed in the novel: “With imperturbable calm, it speaks the words of the nineteenth and twentieth-century narratives and the masterworks it rewrites (Melville, but Dostoevski, Conrad, Hemingway, and Faulkner, too), as well as the words of natural history and material history. [...] It speaks “Mexican.” It draws upon the occult and other esoteric matters. It conflates the Old Testament with the Western. It does all this as if these texts, discourses, foreign tongues, disciplines, scriptures, and literatures all formed a single language. Which they do, at least in this book”.

3. See E. T. Arnold (1999: 66, footnotes 2 and 3) for various critics who align themselves in either of the two schools. Elsewhere, Arnold (1994: 15) comments about McCarthy’s concerns with theological issues: “Starting with *Blood Meridian* (and including his play *The Stonemason*), McCarthy’s writings have become increasingly solemn, his style more stately, his concerns more overtly theological. The world is a wild place in McCarthy’s fiction, and its God a wild and often savage and mostly unknowable God, but a God whose presence constantly beckons”.

message may be, McCarthy gives in this novel enough textual indicators to suggest, or at least allow for, a reading in such terms, even though the conclusion might not lead to what readers would expect from an allegorical narrative. As opposed to Bell's appreciation, I think in *Blood Meridian* McCarthy *does* move wholly into allegory, albeit unconventional, and so I aim to argue in this essay.

The kid's migration takes him from the "flat and pastoral landscape" (McCarthy 1985: 4) of the South to a gothic and nightmarish territory which increasingly becomes more and more grotesque, a surreal frontier land where he undergoes a true metamorphosis. This displacement from the South to the Southwest is quite relevant to the novel and to McCarthy's poetics. It signals the symbolic passage of the Southern literary tradition to the new American South, as the Southwest will be after the 1848 signature of the Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty, which provides the historical background of *Blood Meridian*. The son of a drunkard schoolteacher, the kid is however completely illiterate, in what represents a step back in civilization and a preparation for a new kind of literacy. As in the canonical allegory, the protagonist's name becomes a representation of a whole human class, a type (or archetype) that stands for a category of being, much like Everyman, or Christian, or closer to our times, Young Goodman Brown. He is the vehicle for the *exemplum* that the subsequent narrative conveys, as the narrator makes clear in the opening lines of the novel: "See the child. He is pale and thin. He wears a thin and ragged linen shirt" (3). Like the archetypal pilgrim, at the age of fourteen the kid leaves behind the world that he has known since his birth, and sets out on a journey that will lead into "terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (4). On the boat that will take him to Texas after recovering from the shot he has received on the back, the kid is already identified by the narrator as a "pilgrim among others" (5). And once on shore, he faces his first temptation from "whores [who] call at him from the dark like souls in want" (5). Throughout the novel the reader is confronted with numerous pilgrims of different guises, so much so that the text is turned into a modern pilgrimage narrative highly evocative of such medieval works as *The Canterbury Tales*, even if with a much bleaker tone.

Early in his journey, which will last for 30 years, the boy undergoes a "baptismal experience" that prepares him for his long pilgrimage: "he waded out into the river like some wholly wretched baptismal candidate" (27). This baptism will indeed take place, but years later, when the kid is about to be hanged and a Catholic father administers him the ritual cleansing of the soul: "A Spanish priest had come to baptize him and had flung water at him through the bars like a priest casting out spirits" (308). In this sense, the kid's lifelong experience can be read as a preparation

for that final baptism which turns him into a Christian, even if involuntarily. Ever after, the kid will carry along a Bible, “[a] book [...] no word of which he could read,” that he finds at the mining camps. His physical appearance has been transformed too, and is even mistaken for a preacher by the populace (312), in a passage with strong echoes from Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* (1952), for the kid, like Hazel Motes in that novel, is confused with a religious minister, in still another intertextual complicity in a book that abounds in them. That McCarthy belongs in O’Connor’s school has often been argued by criticism, and in a way the kid becomes Hazel’s counterpart, their journeys acquiring striking resemblances, especially in their penchant for violence and their incapacity to establish lasting bonds, affective or otherwise, with other human beings. Both McCarthy and O’Connor articulate their fictional world through an aesthetics of the grotesque with an undeniable religious import, and the fictional universe they both recreate in these texts is populated by similar deformed beings who inhabit a world of platonic shadows. Perhaps, the presence of “blood” in both titles is not sheer coincidence after all. Tim Parrish (2002: 65) has convincingly argued that both O’Connor and McCarthy belong to the “essential American soul” pointed out by D. H. Lawrence’s famous statement, which qualifies that soul as “hard, isolate, stoic and a killer”. For Parrish (2002: 67), “murder is an American expression of the sacred” and thus hints at a lineage between Hazel Motes and the kid, without developing the argument. I would argue that both characters bear as close a relationship as the kid does with Huckleberry Finn, another lineage that Parrish, like many other exegetes of *Blood Meridian*, does not fail to establish. Both Motes and the kid emerge as unconscious representatives of the “new prophet” whose gospel of violence and individualism articulates the new scriptures by which society is to make sense of life and the world.

The episode of the Bible is crucial in the overall allegorical pattern in *Blood Meridian*. At this point, the kid becomes the impersonation, or better, the subverted or mirror-image of Mary Rowlandson during her captivity among the Indians in the New England wilderness. This intertextual link sheds a very illuminating light on *Blood Meridian*, since through it McCarthy’s novel incorporates itself in what is probably the oldest narrative tradition in the American colonies, that of the Puritan captivity narrative. In one of the most intriguing passages in Rowlandson’s account, the heroine comes into the possession of a Bible in a very unlikely way, since it is given to her by an Indian, or so she wants the reader to believe. Whatever the circumstances, the fact is that ever since, the female captive, already defined in the narrative as the archetypal Christian facing the dangers of the diabolical wilderness, possesses the Book which will help her to survive her trial and chastisement. Her experience of loss and penance suddenly acquires meaning, and the Bible will be the instrument to read her sufferings as a trial necessary for her ultimate redemption.

For the kid, on the other hand, the Bible will be apparently useless, insofar as he is unable to read from it, which does not prevent, however, his carrying it along everywhere he goes, like an amulet whose significance and power is barely grasped by the youngster. Again, this is part of the subversive strategy designed by McCarthy in his formulation of what I would term as “grotesque allegory” (or, alternatively, “allegory of the grotesque”), in which none of the sufferings, trials and chastisements experienced by the protagonist seems however to grant him salvation. I will return to this later.

The allegorical pattern of the narrative is articulated upon different encounters with diverse characters and situations, and each of these acquires a religious dimension in the overall pattern of the text. Like Christian, or Everyman, the kid sets out on a journey whose final destination is, however, unknown. And this is precisely one of the most subversive elements of the novel. The canonical allegory requires a progress from sin and temptation to redemption and sanctity. In the case of the kid, we do not learn what his final destination is, or even if he is alive or dead at the end of the narrative. We know for certain, however, that he finally falls prey to Judge Holden, in one of the most enigmatic closings of contemporary fiction.

The kid's first encounter with Judge Holden, a character with an overtly demoniac nature, takes place during a religious revival in which a reverend Green (and the allegorical undertones of his name should not be missed) is falsely accused of being a pederast by Holden, while we later learn that the judge is the true pervert who feels a morbid attraction for children. Within the allegorical economy of the text, this passage represents the first encounter of the youngster with the incarnation of evil, as Judge Holden proves to be. Ever after, the kid's life will be determined by the judge, that omnipresent being that turns up at every step in his pilgrimage, like a ludicrous demon always observant of the kid's progress.

In the early stages of his pilgrimage, before being recruited by captain White (again, a character that bears a name with obvious allegorical connotations), the kid is alone in his journey, turned into a “raggedyman wandered from some garden where he'd used to frighten birds” (15), who has to beg and steal for survival. Through this image, which identifies the young boy with a scarecrow, the narrator establishes the grotesque nature of the character, a creature that resembles in a comic and yet painful way a human being, and consequently his sufferings and predicaments are not to be taken too seriously by us readers, for we cannot truly identify him as one of us. As if guided by a superior will, the kid finds himself in the company of a hermit, an “old anchorite” who shares his humble food with him and lectures on the nature of evil, the first instance of what will become one of the central themes in the novel:

You can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature that can do anything. Make a machine. And a machine to make the machine. And evil that can run itself for a thousand years, no need to tend it. Do you believe that?

I don't know.

Believe that. (19)

This anchorite is the first of a long list of catechists and prophets that the kid meets along his pilgrimage. The fact that the anchorite comes from Mississippi, where he was “a slaver”, helps to reinforce the vision of the Southwest as the continuation of the South, being like the kid a transplanted Southerner now exiled in the newly annexed territories, where he penances for his past sins.

The kid's next destination, or station, to use the conventional term in allegorical discourse, is the town of Bexar (nowadays San Antonio), a site of historical relevance (el Alamo, etc.) which for the kid will represent a turning point in his journey. The first thing the kid sees in this town is a phantasmagorical funeral procession (one of the many that appear in the novel) in which the living and the dead have the same appearance, an anticipation of the kind of life the boy will lead. After breaking a bottle on the head of a barman, the kid seeks refuge in the ruins of a church, as he will often do throughout the journey, where the faded frescoes are desecrated by the excrements of various animals. The old Spanish mission has become a dilapidated ruin that symbolizes the decay of the Catholic faith that once inspired the colonization of the Southwest, now fouled and profaned by the creed of Manifest Destiny. In Bexar the kid joins Captain White's doomed gang, and they ride to their next stop, Laredito, on their way to Mexico. In the twilight, this town is full of bats, an animal of demoniac undertones that is frequently found in the novel, and the air smells of burning charcoal. In a forgery, a man is beating metal. This vision is directly related to the nightmarish dream the kid will have about the judge while imprisoned in the San Diego jail, a scene that I will refer to in more detail later. Once established the allegorical dimension of the text, we can easily identify Laredito as the entrance to the underworld, or hell. It is here where an anonymous Mennonite foretells the kid and his companions a prophecy that will be soon verified by events: “The wrath of God lies sleeping. It was hid a million years before men were and only men have the power to wake it. Hell aint half full. Hear me. Ye carry war of a madman's making onto a foreign land. Ye'll wake more than the dogs” (40). From Laredito onwards, the journey enters a deadly territory where bones and carcasses abound, a surreal landscape that increasingly becomes more and more symbolic: “This looks like the high road to hell, said a man from the ranks” (45). It is a territory where men turn into a “ghost army [...] like shades of

figures erased upon a blackboard" (46). In this spiritual realm, "whose true geology was not stone but fear" (47), humans are deprived of their corporality, and become shadows of themselves. The clapping of thunder and the deafening lightning, like the vengeance of an angry God who has sent them to "some demon kingdom" (47), awakens in them the need for prayer. And rude and blasphemous as these men may be, the whole gang prays for salvation. The farther they go into the territory, the more deadly it looks: "death seemed to be the most prevalent feature of the landscape" (48). A territory that is only inhabited by half-wits and beasts, where the only remnants of a civilization now gone are the decaying villages and churches they find along the road.

The kid's first encounter with the Indians is one of the central scenes of the novel, since it is here where the grotesque is acknowledged as the architectural design of the text. This scene deserves close attention, for it is a turning point in the kid's pilgrimage, as well as the fulfilment of the prophecies foretold by the anchorite and the Mennonite. In the allegorical economy of the novel, this scene represents the kid's encounter with the hordes of evil, devastating and merciless. The Comanches are a "legion of horrors," "mongol hordes" howling in a "barbarous tongue" with faces "gaudy and grotesque" (52-53). The whole scene is a carnivalesque representation of "mounted clowns" and "funhouse figures" whose performance does not seek to elicit laughter but blood. In their vicious cruelty they do not hesitate even to sodomize their agonizing victims, an act that relates them to Judge Holden in a strange but meaningful way. The Indians also mutilate the corpses, turning their male victims into female cadavers, in a grotesque twist that vividly (and ironically) evokes Bakhtin's characterization of the grotesque body.<sup>4</sup> This early scene of genital mutilation anticipates another passage, in which the reader is confronted with the remains of a party of "pilgrims" who have suffered a brutal attack: "Some by their beards were men but yet wore strange menstrual wounds between their legs and no man's parts for these had been cut away and hung dark and strange from their grinning mouths" (153).

The miraculous salvation from this early encounter with doom signals another step in the kid's peculiar progress. Again a wanderer in the desert, the kid meets

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4. In his seminal study of Rabelais, Bakhtin characterizes the grotesque body as a body in which the "stress is laid on those parts [...] that are open to outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world [...] a body in which emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose" (Bakhtin 1984: 26).

Sproule, also a survivor from the massacre who is badly wounded, and they become companions in their exodus, pilgrims in the absurd landscape of dust and heat. The unnamed village they visit next is the kingdom of the buzzards, carrion birds that contemplate the wasted town from the roofs, “with their wings outstretched in attitudes of exhortation like *dark little bishops*” (59; emphasis mine). As in previous stages of his pilgrimage, the kid seeks refuge in a dilapidated church where there is a heap of half-rotten and mutilated bodies of Christians who uselessly sought protection “in this house of God against the heathen” now desecrated and looted. In their death, humans have become a single being sharing their “communal blood” (61), like a set of martyrs victim to the infidels.

Their next encounter is with a group of Mexican riders who behave strangely, some of them even hugging each other and weeping “shamelessly” like the Indians did when they first saw Cabeza de Vaca completely naked on the Texan shore after his shipwreck. And indeed, de Vaca stands as the kid’s ancestor, for he was the first “Christian pilgrim” in the wastelands of the Southwest. The Mexicans constitute a party of fools – “Loonies, said Sproule. They are loonies” (64) –, who however share their water with them, thus saving their lives. Again, the kid is rescued “miraculously” by anonymous assistants that provide him with nourishment along his pilgrimage, like angels sent by God to take care of the hero. Before departing, the kid is told a parable of biblical resonances that in a way describes the boy’s past and future experiences: “When the lamb is lost in the mountain [...] There is cry. Sometime come mother. Sometime the wolf” (65). In the darkness of the night, what comes after the lost lamb is a vampire bat which sucks Sproule’s blood like a creature from hell: “A wrinkled pug face, small and vicious, bare lips crimped in a horrible smile and teeth pale blue in the starlight” (66). One of the most disgusting scenes in the novel, this fiendish bat reinforces the demoniac nature of the territory.

Miraculously again, the castaways are met by a travelling family who take them to an unnamed town which seems to be a recreation of a grotesque painting by Hiëronymus Bosch or the elder Brueghels. Death and life cohabit in a festive atmosphere and everything appears as a great carnival: “There was a bazaar in progress. A traveling medicine show, a primitive circus [...] cages clogged with vipers, with great limegreen serpents or beaded lizards with their black mouths wet with venom” (69). There is even, like in the old post-medieval paintings, a “reedy old leper” selling medicines against worms, vendors of all kinds, and mendicants, and the whole scene is presided over by a human head preserved in a jar which happens to be captain White’s, “lately at war among the heathen” (70). The kid, as St. Peter did when Jesus was arrested, denies all connection with him:

"He ain't no kin to me" (70), but he is nonetheless imprisoned with the rest of the survivors from the party.

From this unknown town, the kid and his former companions are taken to Chihuahua; ragged and forlorn they look like "God's profoundest peons". After days of wandering through the wastelands of the desert, they finally get to the city, whose grotesque inhabitants seem once more to come from a Dutch painting. The jail in Chihuahua becomes a new circle of hell for the kid: a dark room full of half naked and ape-looking penitents of unknown sins. On the outside, a procession crosses the street "taking the host to some soul" composed of a banner, a coach with "an eye painted on the side" and a fat priest carrying an image. From the yard of the jail, the kid sees for the first time Glanton's gang, a party of Indian killers hired by the governor to fight the Apaches. The gang is a mixture of whites and Indians, a fearful party "like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh" (78). The most conspicuous figure in the party is the judge, whose reappearance signals a pivotal point in the kid's pilgrimage. Judge Holden is a character that has attracted extensive critical attention, and has been interpreted variously as the "best theorizer of violence and its best practitioner", who understands "war as characterizing the universe's amoral design" (Douglass 2003: 15); as the carrier of the canons of Western rationality (Shaviro 1999: 149), or as the "nightmarish embodiment of the myths of colonial expansion" (Masters 1998: 25). For Dan Moos (2002: 28), the judge represents "the ideological skeleton of a new imperialist scientific world order sprouting from Enlightenment rationality and the firm establishment of capitalist principles as transcendent in American and European cultures". Many critics coincide in identifying in the figure of Judge Holden traits of the devil,<sup>5</sup> and indeed there is enough textual evidence to support this interpretation. Like Satan, the judge possesses unlimited knowledge, is capable of speaking different languages and manages to turn Galton's gang into converts of the religion he preaches. All of them but the kid, who is now a member of the party, fall under the spell of Holden's sermons. Among the undifferentiated group only Tobin the ex-priest stands out, a character that reinforces the religious dimension of the text, becoming an interpreter of the events they are to experience, and especially the nature of Judge Holden.

In his speculations about the origin of the world, Judge Holden defies the biblical truths about the creation of the universe, and proposes a different ordering of the "ancient chaos". As opposed to the written word ("books lie"), Holden vindicates physical phenomena as the only source of knowledge about the earth,

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5. See, for example, E. T. Arnold (1999: 62).

which is also the language of God: “he speaks in stones and trees, the bone of things” (116). His discourse is so convincing that the audience becomes “proselytes of the new order” only to face Holden’s laughing at them for fools. When night falls, the judge rapes and kills mercilessly a “Mexican or halfbreed boy maybe twelve years old” and is then seen “naked atop the walls, immense and pale in the revelations of lightning, striding the perimeter there and declaiming in the old epic mode” (118). This scene, which is a clear anticipation of the end of the story, reveals the true nature of Holden, a man who despises human life, a survivor in the wastelands who preaches a gospel of horror and blood.

If, as criticism recurrently observes, Judge Holden reminds us vividly of Melville’s Captain Ahab (for others, though, Glanton is the most Ahab-like character in the novel),<sup>6</sup> I would argue that, rather than of Ishmael, the kid is evocative of Melville’s Israel Potter, for like this latter, his wanderings and sacrifices, his cunning and his courage, do not grant him either success or, we can assume, redemption. Both texts represent the reversal of the “rags-to-riches” story, or the failure of the American Dream, and obviously, the failure of the allegory as a viable vehicle to account for man’s providential destiny, as articulated by Judeo-Christian belief. And this is perhaps the greatest vacuum in which the reader is left by these two novels. Israel Potter is a wanderer in “the wild wilderness of the world’s extremest hardships and ills” (Melville 1984: 432), but as opposed to his biblical counterparts, he will not find a promised land at the end of his journey, pretty much the same as the kid, whose wanderings in the deserts of the Southwest will not grant him the salvation (mundane or celestial) that the heroes of older allegories would find at the end of their travelling. And thus, McCarthy follows Melville in his disbelief in any kind of providential or grand narrative that can set an example for readers to follow. Simply, there is no divine or poetic justice to reward those who strive hard enough in this world, especially if they are “maimed” by a feeling of generosity or sympathy toward other fellow creatures.

Counterpart to Judge Holden, Tobin, the ex-priest, plays a fundamental role as the kid’s spiritual guide. Tobin reveals to the young boy the existence of God, and advises him about the obscure nature of Holden, a man who has been seen by everybody once before, since, like the devil, he seems to have the capacity of appearing before every man, in either a seductive or a threatening form. Tobin’s sermon to the kid is a counterbalance to the judge’s always seductive words:

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6. Steven Shaviro (1999: 150), for instance, refers to the Ahab-like quality of Glanton.

God speaks in the least of creatures [said Tobin].  
I aint heard no voice he [the kid] said.  
When it stops, said Tobin, you'll know you've heard it all your life.  
Is that right?  
Aye  
[...]  
At night, said Tobin, when the horses are grazing and the company is asleep,  
who hears them grazing?  
Don't nobody hear if they're asleep.  
Aye. And if they cease their grazing who is it that wakes?  
Every man.  
Aye, said the ex-priest. Every man. (124)

Holden soon becomes the real leader of the gang, with whom he has made some "terrible covenant" that involves "a secret commerce" (126). From an allegorical perspective, this covenant may be read as a Faustian alliance with Lucifer. And there are many traits of Holden's diabolic nature, to the extent that he performs the role of a true antichrist. Like Jesus Christ, the judge has twelve apostles, "twelve and the judge thirteen" (127), followers of his new faith. The judge climbs the mountain, like a perverse Moses, watches the bats, and carefully makes notes in his little book. When he returns, he leads the gang to a cave, which we can easily identify as the "mouth of hell" of traditional Christian imagery.<sup>7</sup> Before entering, the party leaves behind all their possessions: "We left all that we owned at the entrance of that cave and we filled our wallets and panniers and our mochilas with the cave dirt" (127). And it is here where the judge finds the nitre he needs to make powder. Like an alchemist, Holden will manage to provide the gang, after a meticulous process of preparation, with a powder of extraordinary power, an infernal substance for destruction and death. The judge delivers a speech, which "was like a sermon but it was no such sermon as any man of us had ever heard before" (129), and pronounces an oration whose purpose remains unknown for the ex-priest. After this ceremonial, the gang follows him "like the disciples of a new faith" (130), to be witness to a ritual of diabolic undertones, nitre

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7. In his thoroughly documented study, *The Iconography of the Mouth of Hell* (1995), Gary D. Schmidt traces the origins of the image to the tenth-century Monastic Reform in Britain, from where it soon spread throughout Europe. From its early medieval origins to its twentieth-century appearances (in for example Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find", which opens Schmidt's book), the essential meaning has remained unchanged: "To be swallowed by the gaping dark mouth is to be swallowed into death and hell" (Schmidt 1995: 14).

being mixed with sulphur and human urine, until a black and stinking dough is made by the judge, himself smeared by such substance, a true “devil’s batter” (132), while he laughs in full joy. After this black ritual the powder is ready and everyman receives his share “like communicants” (134).

In the aftermath of a deadly attack on the Gileños, the gang collects the scalps that are their receipt for payment and begin retreating from the Indians that pursue them. It is at this point when the kid shows for the first time sympathy toward another human being, and removes the arrow from Brown’s leg. An act of kindness which is however judged by the ex-priest as the act of a fool: “Fool, he said. God will not love ye forever” (162). In the economy of the allegory, this is a crucial step, since the kid is transformed and despite his former senseless violence he is now capable of performing an act of “goodness”, even if that represents a dangerous flaw in his personality. When they finally reach Chihuahua, they are welcomed as heroes returning from an epic war, and the city gets ready to celebrate their victory, the severed heads pinched on poles and the scalps strung in cords across the façade of the cathedral, “like decorations for some barbaric celebration” (168). They are invited for dinner by governor Angel Trias, a man “widely read in the classics and [...] a student of languages” like Judge Holden himself, with whom he soon falls into conversation in a tongue “none other in that room spoke at all” (169). The banquet, however, ends up in an orgy of alcohol and violence.

Tracked down by Elias’s Mexican army (and again, we find a name with powerful allegorical resonances), the gang is dissolved and the kid finds himself alone in the midst of a freezing snowstorm, a new trial that this subverted hero has to undergo in his peculiar pilgrimage. But once again, the kid is delivered “miraculously” of all danger, and like Moses (in a striking coincidence with Holden’s ascent to the mount), he finds a “lone tree burning in the desert” (215) which provides him with warmth and security, encircled by a whole bestiary of vipers and lizards and spiders, among many other creatures of the desert that watch the kid from outside the circle of light, like a horde of sins threatening the soul of a Christian. And like an Arthurian knight, the kid spends the night in vigil under the protection of a fire sent by God. The following day, he is delivered a horse by the same invisible hand that burnt the solitary tree in the desert, and the kid manages to ride it and escape that wasteland of cold and emptiness. The kid soon finds Walton’s party, now a bunch of wounded and demoralized warriors caught between Elias’s army and the Apaches.

After the Yuma attack on the band at the river ford they have taken control of, Glanton and most of his mercenaries are killed, and again the kid is saved

miraculously. The long episode that follows becomes a battle between the hero and Satan. Eventually the kid is reunited with Toadvine and the ex-priest, who will give a theological meaning to this battle. They soon see approaching in the distance the judge and the idiot he has adopted: "Those who travel in desert places do indeed meet with creatures surpassing all description" (282). The judge is unarmed, but loaded with a bag full of money, and he soon manages to buy the hat from Toadvine and insists on buying from the kid the only gun the group has for five hundred dollars. At this point, the ex-priest asks the kid to shoot at the judge: "Do it, lad, do it for the love of God. Do it or I swear your life is forfeit" (285). Yet the kid does not, in what can be read as another act of goodness. Leaving behind the judge, the imbecile, and Toadvine, the kid sets out, followed by Tobin, like "pilgrims" (287) in the emptiness of the desert. Eventually they come across Brown, who is in the possession of two horses, but he does not offer any help to them, and continues his way to meet the judge. Obviously, Holden will soon buy horses and guns from Brown, and he and the fool start chasing the kid and his companion. That the episode acquires a religious dimension is made explicit by Tobin, who fashions a cross with bones and holds "the thing before him like some mad dowser in the bleak of desert and calling out in a tongue both alien and extinct" (289-290). Unable to kill them, the judge tries to convince them of his good intentions, like a tempter enticing his victims, and his discourse sounds so convincing that the ex-priest asks the kid not to listen to him, afraid of the power of his words. They manage somehow to escape, and become once again "pilgrims [...] weak from their wounds" (293).

In San Diego, the kid is arrested and he feels an irrepressible need to speak "of things few men have seen in a lifetime", turning into a loquacious minister whose sermon is taken by his jailers as that of a lunatic, driven insane "by the acts of blood in which he had participated" (305). The kid's stay in the San Diego jail represents another crucial step in his pilgrimage. It is here where he receives the sacrament of baptism for which he has been preparing throughout his wanderings in the desert. And it is here where he sees the judge for the last time in many years, until the last encounter at the closing of the novel. Holden's visit in jail represents in the discourse of the allegory the devil's renewed attempt to entice his victim through threat and subsequently seduction. First, the judge forebodes the kid's earthly and eternal perdition: "But even though you carry the draft of your murder plan with you to the grave it will nonetheless be known in all its infamy to your Maker and as that is so shall it be made known to the least of men" (306). When the kid dismisses his words for he is the "one that's crazy", the judge changes his strategy into one of seduction: "Come up [...] Come up, for I've yet more to tell you [...] Don't be afraid [...] I'll speak softly. It's not for the world's

ear but for yours entirely. Let me see you. Don't you know that I'd loved you like a son?" (306). The kid, like the archetypal hero, resists his temptation: "I aint afraid of you" (307), until finally Judge Holden retreats and disappears, temporarily though, from the kid's life. In his dreams, however, he will have a delirious nightmare in which Judge Holden appears in the company of a blacksmith, clearly reminiscent of the one he saw when entering Laredo, an "exile from men's fires" who with hammer and die works in an eternal night to make false coinage, which is the currency "in the markets where men barter" (310). This hellish vision leads the kid to find the answer to the question that Tobin had posed earlier in the novel, "What is he a judge of?" [...] "Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end" (310).

Once released, the kid starts looking for Tobin, but the ex-priest has disappeared, his errand being accomplished. For the kid a new life begins, in which as I said before he is confused for a preacher, and hires himself to help a party of "pilgrims" to return to their homes through the wilderness. In a little cave he sees a very old woman covered with a shawl with the figures of "stars and quartermoons and other insignia of provenance unknown to him" (315), which is a quite obvious reference to the mantle of the Virgin of Guadalupe. And to this old woman he speaks in a low voice, as in a prayer, and tells her that "he was an American and that he had no family and that he had traveled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardship. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place" (315). The kid, who started his youth as a boy with a "senseless taste for violence" has turned into a generous and sympathetic creature who offers protection to the helpless. The old woman, however, is a corpse that has been dead in that cave for a very long time, becoming a grotesque virgin in a humble shrine, waiting for the kid and his confession all those years.

The kid's final meeting with Judge Holden takes place in the winter of eighteen seventy eight, when the kid is already a man of forty five. The reader does not know what his life has been like in those seventeen years, a gap he is asked to fill with the works of his imagination. The meeting takes place in Griffin, "the biggest town for sin in all Texas", the site for the final struggle between good and evil. Griffin is thus explicitly identified with the "City of Sin" which is the final destination of the hero, in an ironic reversal of *Pilgrim's Progress*, where Christian's final station is the Heavenly City. The kid enters a bar where "there was a mirror but it held only smoke and phantoms" (325). From a metafictional point of view, the narrator's observation of the mirror and its reflections becomes a metaphor for the novel itself, populated with creatures that are distorted reflections in a world of ghosts and shadows. And this is, precisely, one of the

essential drives of the grotesque, to recreate man as a deformed creature which is a reflection of an ideal model facing a concave mirror.

The ending is one of the most problematic elements of the novel. The kid meets the judge completely naked in the bathhouse, and Holden embraces him "against his immense and terrible flesh". That is the last thing we know of the kid. The narrator, so scrupulous until now in rendering every detail with a transcendent meaning, leaves the reader ignorant of the kid's final fate. We see the judge return to the dance floor and begin dancing fully naked among the prostitutes and gamblers. For most critics, the kid's final destiny is death (see for example Bell 1988: 134; Pilkington 1993: 317; Sepich 1993: 16; Bloom 2002: 3). For others, the kid does not die but is raped by the judge (see Shaw 1997 on the closure of the novel). Whatever his ultimate fate is, and that we shall never know, the novel has traced his life as a progression to maturity and goodness, making of him a true pilgrim whose life follows the archetypal allegory of man's existence as a continuous battle against evil. And yet, evil survives embodied in that being who, like Satan, will never die and will always find acolytes for his gospel of blood and war.

It should be clear by now that McCarthy has made conscious use of the allegory to shape the diegetic progress of *Blood Meridian*. Despite the claims of some critics to the contrary, the novel articulates a complex discussion of religion and theology. Shaviro (1999: 148) states that "*Blood Meridian* is not a salvation narrative: we can be rescued neither by faith nor by works nor by grace", and he is indeed right in his appreciation, even though he does not seem to be aware that that is precisely the novel's most subversive element, since it deploys all the ingredients of the canonical allegorical narrative or salvation story, turning it into a discourse of irremediable failure. McCarthy's Southwest is the dominion of blood, a world of shadows forever entrapped in a distorting mirror, a universe, in sum, abandoned by God to the chaos of death. And in these wastelands of the soul, only the Devil exerts absolute and everlasting power, let it be in the shape of human or demon.

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