Things in *Blood Meridian*

A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Look

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1. Introduction

Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* evokes an austere space along the Texas-Mexico border in the wake of the American-Mexican war. Merely paraphrased, the text unspools in a spree of swashbuckling and gun-smoke, working as a kind of strange bildungsroman that loosely follows an adolescent’s coming-of-age. The narrative is temporally linear but does not revolve around a single agent, nor is it driven by a clear, causal plot. While the first few chapters of the novel do seem centered on the kid, the narration eventually withdraws to encompass a world entire which so happens to contain in its immediacy a free-wheeling band of scalp-hunters. This group of increasingly haggard filibusters which the narrative gaze follows seems caught up in a drama of incessant violence outside the bounds of discernable design where things and acts *whoosh* up out of a nothingness and recede again into the dust of the panhandle without the explanation, motivation, or ceremony often found in the traditional Western. They just ride on, in-the-world but not in stark opposition to the litter of phenomena about them. Richard Slotkin, writing of the dime variety Western in *Gunfighter Nation*, stresses that the genre typically “follows a clear narrative line and centers on the adventures of a single heroic character” (141). In opposition to this singular, heroically motivated agent, in *Blood Meridian* we have a motley band whose members do not even possess qualities that would suggest “the discovery of the wheel” (McCarthy 232); a band whose actions vaguely allude to and comment on the national thrust westward, but locally do not seem driven by the greater mythologies of their day or even by a personal, material greed. In fact, autonomy in general seems naïve when applied to the text, and as Vereen Bell states in “The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy”, we must “surrender all Cartesian predispositions and rediscover some more primal state of consciousness” (31) to enter the world which the text brings forth.
And it is precisely this lack of subjective focus that has encouraged an interpretive discourse which seems roughly split in half: either the text revels in an unabashed nihilism where all that is holy or meaningful has seemingly fled, or it is a gnostic vision of ahistorical, omnipresent violence, likewise suggesting a world abandoned by a higher god or principle.

This paper would argue that the underlying metaphysic of the novel is of neither pole, but because of the erosion of a tangible subject-object dichotomy, the text brings forth the phenomena of its world into a “clearing” by way of a poetic mode which is faithful to the essence of the thing-in-itself rather than focused and synthesized by an agent (character). Against a backdrop of extreme violence, depravity, and senselessness, there lurks a positivity wrought by the neutral space given to things and their executions. By way of hermeneutic phenomenology indebted to the thought of Martin Heidegger and later taken up by scholars such as Graham Harman and expanded into an object-oriented ontology, this paper will look to see if the narrative instead stalls the very headlong flight into nihilism or divine determinism it is often accused of. This will be accomplished by taking a closer look at the way things are given an abode, come-forth, and presence in the near desolation which this band of filibusters hump through.

As Heidegger wrote of the poet’s occupation during the darkening of the world’s night: “But the song still remains which names the land over which it sings” (Poetry, Language, Thought 95).
2. Background Research

As it pertains to the critical discourse surrounding *Blood Meridian*, a focus on the vivid portrayal of violence found in the text runs par course. It seems that no commentary of note is able to escape this sometimes eye-popping aspect, regardless of their respective avenues on way to deeper gleanings of the text. There are an assortment of academic articles which combine intimate readings of the text with an array of disciplinary scopes such as ecology and its pastoral or anti-pastoral underpinnings, history, aesthetics, and metaphysics. But nearly all seem to address, ultimately, the bloodshed which is the most immediately engaging, and possibly most superficial aspect of the narrative. While this is not in itself an error in interpretation as it concerns the text, the scramble to somehow make sense of the rampant bloodshed carried out by the Glanton gang and other denizens of the novel’s pages has led many commentators to correlate the incessant violence with the worldview or philosophical doctrine of the author himself. Leo Daugherty, in his essay “Gravers False and True”, an otherwise engaging and well-argued text, attempts to make the claim that McCarthy “goes so far as to make of himself a presence” and is “doing his part to help his god out- to make the sun come up for the tribe” (170). The god in question here being the one “true” god of the gnostic convention, who takes no part in the designs of this apparently forsaken and fallen world, thus making McCarthy into a kind of divine agent in his stead. Likewise, as the novel unfolds in a historical epoch where in the darkening of the world “the spiritual decline of the earth has progressed so far that people are in danger of losing their last spiritual strength” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 29), other commentators have noted that McCarthy’s vision is a profoundly nihilistic one. Bell argues that “this is McCarthy’s metaphysic: none, in effect; no first principles, no foundational truth” (32). While both themes can potentially be found running their course throughout the text to some degree, it
would not do to deem the book as lacking foundational truths because of its subversion of Cartesian dichotomies and willed human agency or totally beholden to the doctrine of a baroque, fringe religion. Nor would it be wise to position McCarthy as a “presence” in the text. Quite simply, there is no textual evidence to support such a claim, and as this paper will argue in the following sections, the narrative-voice is particularly elusive, seemingly removed from the drama of its pages.

It is important to now stress that the error in branding the work as one nihilistic is partly due to the way the word itself has fallen into misuse and furthers a misunderstanding of what the term really signifies or expresses. When we think of what it means for something to be “nihilistic”, it often simply connotes a falling away from religion, or the death of God and the rise of atheism. Is God dead in Blood Meridian? It would sometimes seem that way, with the kind of spiritual vacancy found in such passages as “the altars had been hauled down and the tabernacle looted and the great sleeping God of the Mexicans routed from his golden cup” while the devout peasants “lay in a great pool of their communal blood” (McCarthy 63).

Blood Meridian certainly does take place in a time when the Gods have fled the earth, as faith seems to have no weight or significance in face of the value-laden violence carried out by revolver and hatchet. But if we pry the term “nihilism” a bit more, it does connote the flight of the gods, but it also connotes the flight of all things great and significant. With the evaporation of great things in the way of events, heroes, and the Gods, there is nothing for which human beings to take a stand on or to be called towards authentically. Without this kind of illuminating pillar of shared social significance, there occurs the inevitable turn toward the individual, aesthetic experience. As Dreyfus argues in the essay “Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics,” this occurs “when everything that is material and social has become completely flat and drab, people retreat into their private experiences as the only remaining place to find significance” (292). If we stop and consider for a moment the claim
that was made in the introduction of this paper, namely that *Blood Meridian* is not a text that concerns individual experience, but one which subverts the aesthetic in favor of a phenomenal world, can it rightly be called a nihilistic text? This paper would argue that while the text does address nihilism in some capacity, it is not its underlying metaphysic. Understood this way, while the events of the text unravel in an epoch of value-positing, in the midst of this the narrator is seeing in a way that is quite the contrary. Despite what has been written, this seeing or naming function of the text seems central to a deeper interpretation of it. In the face of this, the graphic violence that is often the focus seems to lose its significance and merit for further discussion.

In “Striking the Fire out of the Rock: Gnostic Theology in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” Petra Mundik advances a similar interpretation to that of Daugherty’s, claiming “*Blood Meridian* is absolutely replete with Gnostic symbols and concepts” (74). Unlike Daugherty, Mundik’s argument hinges less on direct references which would point towards Gnosticism, such as the inscription on the Judge’s pistol and the multiple uses of the word *Anareta* throughout the text, which “was believed in the Renaissance to be the planet which destroys life” (Daugherty 163) and instead explores the malevolent designs of the very land itself and how its characters cannot find refuge from its inherent evil day or night. In this case, it is as though the anti-pastoralism of the novel, or simply when nature is not apprehended aesthetically and synthesized by a mortal agent, suggests a silence which is automatically registered as something sinister rather than simply indifferent. But this kind of reading is still stuck in the dualistic tendencies of modern seeing: man vs. nature, or subject vs. object. Mundik argues that the landscape “can thus be read as Gnostic portrayals of a nightmarish, Anaretic world” (74). But to read the landscape of *Blood Meridian* as one that is purely malevolent is a somewhat dogmatic approach that tends to belittle the philosophical complexity of the narrative, and as Dana Phillips rightly argues in a comparison between
McCarthy and fellow southerner Flannery O'Connor: “McCarthy's fiction resembles O'Connor's in its violence, but he entirely lacks O'Connor's penchant for theology and the jury-rigged, symbolic plot resolutions that make theology seem plausible. In McCarthy's work, violence tends to be just that; it is not a sign or symbol of something else” (435). Also, while the text reads like a contorted fever-dream, where the mountains “on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear” (McCarthy 49), it also gives sustenance in other contexts, such as when during the kid’s parched march through the desert after his regiment has been splintered by Comanche, the earth and sky yield its bounty to him: “the seep lay high up among the ledges, vadose water dripping down the slick black rock” and “they leaned by turns with pursed lips to the stone like devouts at a shrine” (60). As such, one would err in branding the world of Blood Meridian as wholly indebted to a theological dogma.

In “The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy”, Bell similarly wrestles with trying to make sense of the nearly unspeakable violence displayed in the work, though does not attribute any of its manifestations to the divine, but rather to the nothingness and lack of order that presides over an earth from which all gods have seemingly vanished. Examining some of McCarthy’s earlier Appalachian works, Bell makes the observation that the necrophilia committed by Lester Ballard in the short novel Child of God is “not motivated by anything we can speak of; he lives beyond the pale both socially and psychoanalytically” (34). This illustrates that without the Husserlian distinction as intentional subjects projecting aspects onto objects, which will be expanded on in the next section of this paper, McCarthy’s characters seem adrift in a world that has no palpable anthropocentric grounding. When delving into the bumpkin calamities found in McCarthy’s second novel, Outer Dark, Bell goes to lengths to show how very frail faith, or any conception of goodness, can be when projected onto a world that is essentially without meaning: “in that opposing narrative an evil
surrealism prevails, the dark inversion of Rinthy’s simpleminded, maternalistic grace. Farmers and townspeople are gratuitously murdered, found hung from trees; corpses are dug up fresh from their graves and robbed of their clothes” (35). In this sense, Bell seeks to establish a dialectic that operates within McCarthy’s fiction: the opposed desires of its individual peoples against the indifference of the world they inhabit and cope with. Bell concludes that only “an illusory transcendence gets one through to the next place in one’s life where something bizarre or exhilarating or moving obscurely waits” (41). But, if we consider the application of this dialectic to the text of Blood Meridian, it would be a difficult one, since the desire or “grace” of character is almost nonexistent. We could possibly relate this kind of opposition to the textual enterprise of the Judge, with his Cartesian categorization of the phenomena about the trail, but the heart of the text, which is not character, but world, would seem to reject this kind of dialectic approach.

There is one feature that both schools of criticism tend to agree upon, and that is the lack of a distinct subject-object orientation found in the novel, though this lack is essentially what has caused the wildly differing interpretations. In “The Very Life of Darkness”, an essay collected in the anthology Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy, evades reading the text as either a nihilistic yarn or one divinely determined. Steven Shaviro attempts to address the depravity that abounds and seems to rear its head on nearly every page of the text, stressing that “the radical epistemology of Blood Meridian subverts all dualisms 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” (150). With this assertion, Shaviro means to make plain that as a reader we cannot escape into the subjectivism that reigns in most literature, where the intentional will of man can shape or change the climate or predicament at hand, but rather we are thrown into a world where “man
and rock are endowed with unguessed kinships” (McCarthy 35), and as such, subject to the immanence of the landscape and world itself.

But, Shaviro’s interpretation seems itself still lodged in the subjective, ego-centric logic that dominates modern seeing, as Mundik’s essay was. Note that Shaviro claims: “We are exiles within the unlimited phenomenality of the world,” suggesting that in some way human being stands apart from the world, or that as isolated subjects we are homeless in a world of material objects. This kind of thinking would seem to run contrary to the thoroughly involved state the characters of the novel find themselves in. This paper will argue that we are not exiles in a phenomenological world, but simply another thing participating in the referential network that is “world”.

Later in the essay, Shaviro goes on to examine the precedence of the thingly character of the novel’s landscape. He chalks the effect of the landscape up to the style which McCarthy employs to write his world of materiality, arguing that “still more important, I think, is the way in which the language of Blood Meridian caresses the harsh desert landscape,” and later on the page: “McCarthy’s writing is so closely intertwined with the surfaces of the earth and the depths of the cosmos that it cannot be disentangled from them” (153).

Shaviro is undoubtedly on to something in his appraisal of the relationship between language and things in Blood Meridian, in the sense that McCarthy’s vision seems to address the world of his novel in a nonrepresentational, descriptive way. He later states that “Blood Meridian refuses to acknowledge any gap or opposition between words and things” (154), an error that this paper hopes to later make more apparent. If anything, I will argue, McCarthy acknowledges the dark, subterranean regions of things which disappear and belie all attempts at plastic representation, and as Harman argues in Tool-Being, “the world of tools is an invisible realm from which the visible structure of the universe emerges” (24), and later,
when applied to the ghastly pulp of H.P. Lovecraft, Harman observes that “real objects are locked in an impossible tension with the crippled descriptive powers of language” (*Weird Realism* 27).

As can already be garnered by the review of this commentary, the landscape and the things that compose it play an important role in all readings of the text. Whether it be the camp who sides with the text being a nihilistically vacant one, or those who tally up its metaphysic as one derived from a divine source, or those who simply note the lack of an autonomous subject, the landscape and the things themselves have a certain active, involved presence. This has caused George Guillemin to read *Blood Meridian* under the lens of ecopastoralism, given the “textual prominence of wilderness” (73). Citing David Holloway, Guillemin stresses the relevance of nature itself in the novel, a kind of seeing that is optically neutral, rather than nature being the plaything of mortal senses and projected aspects. Holloway states that “optical democracy might be thought of as a series of prose forms which diminish language as an agency of human condition, binding McCarthy’s aesthetic ever more tightly to a phenomenal world” (76). Considering this, it would make sense to classify *Blood Meridian* as being anti-pastoral, given the traditional modes of portraying the pastoral in literature. In traditional works of the pastoral, nature is often represented in an idyllic, romanticized way; a kind of response to the progressive urbanization of the world, a mode linked intimately with the picaresque tradition. Developing and pushing a sentiment that may be found in his earlier Southern novels, in *Blood Meridian* the landscape is not presented in anthropocentric terms. As Guillemin rightly notes, “nowhere in McCarthy’s work is the resistance of wilderness to the logocentric encoding of nature as a cultural artifact more patent, more successful” (79) as it is in *Blood Meridian*. This is not due to the indifference and godlessness that the text poses, as a nihilistic reading of the text would advocate, but the space in which McCarthy gives *things* to shine forth and reveal themselves, notably in his
epic similes which establish what we will later explain as a phenomenological gap. In Blood Meridian, things (landscape, equipment, dwellings) do not squat blandly to be given meaning by subjects, but rather act to establish a mutually defined plane of Being, a referential whole. Because of this leveling of the subjective experience, the pastoral is turned on its head and made strange. Put plainly, the setting of Blood Meridian is not symbolic, but turned out as the very thing itself.

Taken in its entirety, the commentary surrounding Blood Meridian is initially bewildering, given its polarized interpretations. But what does emerge from nearly all of the academic discourse is that there is something remarkable in the relation between mortals and the stuff around them. There is something initially disconcerting about this relationship, something peculiar that is not common to the form of the novel, and certainly not common to the anthropocentric escapades found in dime Westerns or even to Southern Gothicism. Dana Phillips states that what is usually the case with the traditional Western is that “men are men and the landscape as something else” (443), a dichotomy that is obliterated in Blood Meridian. But where previous studies have fallen short, is in their reluctance or mere glossing over of what things actually do in the novel. Rather than trying to pin McCarthy’s vision down to one that is either nihilistic or determined by a higher power, it may be more advantageous to look intimately at the way McCarthy is seeing things and lighting up a space which Heidegger describes as a kind of abode “within which Being itself might again be able to take man, with respect to his essence, into a primal relationship” (The Question Concerning Technology 55).
3. Theory

In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger begins his account of the ontological tradition by asserting that “in Greek, away over something, over beyond is *meta*. Philosophical questioning about beings as such is *meta ta phusika*; it questions on beyond beings, it is metaphysics” (18). He goes on to formulate and pose the question that is central to his career-spanning endeavor: “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” (19). If we consider the root-meaning of the word *metaphysics*, is not this paper’s own questioning about the beings found in *Blood Meridian* of a metaphysical sort? If we acknowledge the contention between the invisible aspects of things and their ready surface profiles which the poetic mode attempts to sally-forth and hold, it would seem we are casting our thought in a similar direction, into the “over beyond”, a sort of vacuum-space which an exhaustive list of physical qualities can never penetrate nor make wholly intelligible. Heidegger later claims that “talking about Nothing remains forever an abomination and an absurdity for science. But aside from the philosopher, the poet can also talk about Nothing” (28). Is McCarthy talking about Nothing in *Blood Meridian*? What does it mean to talk about Nothing?

To answer these questions, we must first illustrate the way in which Heidegger’s thought departs from the Western tradition of metaphysics. Through this, we will see upon what basis he is able to sternly reckon the real, true function of poetry as one not indebted to aesthetic experience, but rather a participatory act in establishing an “open place in the midst of beings, the clearing,” in which things momentarily reveal themselves but “is never a rigid stage with a permanently raised curtain on which the play of beings runs its course” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 52).

The subject-object dichotomy which dominates the modern mode of seeing is commonly understood to have found its prominent articulation in the meditations of Rene
Descartes, though Heidegger would argue that “the tradition began in ancient Greece finds what may be its ultimate expression in Husserl’s phenomenology” (Hall 122). Tracing what he would consider the decay of Western thought, insofar as it pertains to the questioning of Being, Heidegger claims that “in the age of the first and definitive unfolding of Western philosophy among the Greeks, when questioning about beings as such as a whole received its true inception, beings were called *phusis*” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 14) but “let it be mentioned just in passing that already within Greek philosophy a narrowing of the word set in (17). Heidegger goes on to lament that the word *phusis* loses its power when translated, as we use the Latin word *natura* to represent the process “to be born”, eschewing the true meaning and power of the word in its original form. Heidegger hastens to explain that “this translation of Greek into Roman was not an arbitrary and innocuous process but was the first stage in the isolation and alienation of the originary essence of Greek philosophy” (14). When Heidegger claims that this changing of the word was not arbitrary, he means that it is in relation and accordance to the historical sending of Being that it gradually changes, representing the shift in metaphysical grounding.

If the word *phusis* is so vital in the questioning of Being, what exactly was its original meaning that has succumbed to such decrepit lows through the course of thinking? “*Phusis is the event of standing forth, arising from the concealed and thus enabling the concealed to take its stand for the first time*” (*Introduction to Metaphysics* 16). Such a conception of beings would seem to acknowledge, through the arising from the concealed, the Nothing upon which things make their stand. This clearly differs from the modern understanding of *phusis* as nature, taken as we represent, weigh, and thus *see* things according to their material, rationally apprehended values. As alluded to, *natura* found full expression in the detached, calculated observation that Descartes advocated in *Meditations*, as Dreyfus makes plain in
*Being-in-the-World*: “in Descartes’s ontology the ultimate building blocks of the universe are the elements of nature (*naturae simplices*) understood by natural science” (108).

Heidegger, in developing his method of inquiry, sought to break from this tradition of the isolated subject contemplating objects. “Heidegger developed his *hermeneutic* phenomenology in opposition to Husserl’s *transcendental* phenomenology” (*Being-in-the-World* 2). Transcendental phenomenology was squarely in the tradition of Descartes’ subject-object dichotomy, a tradition of “disinterested inquiry that culminates in Husserl” (46). Like Descartes, Husserl’s interest was indebted to the cognitive: “acts of perception or observation and their relation to beliefs about the world” (Hall 124). In this kind of “disinterested inquiry”, the subject (human being) would appraise an object based on a set of apprehended physical properties upon which to cast desire, or bracket with some aspect. It is worth stressing that this claim of “disinterest” can occur under the most scrutinizing and intense of gazes and study, but it is only meant that it is disinterested due to its break from our everyday engagement with the things about us. When we step back from our involvement with the world, we stand in disinterested opposition to it. Perhaps it would be better to say simply “detached”, i.e. the world becomes “picture” before us.

Let us take for an example a simple glass used for drinking. In the Cartesian tradition, we would first perceive the glass from differing perspectives, after which we would synthesize the perspectives onto the object which we bracket and call a “glass”, and then finally, based on our reckoning of its physical properties, i.e. its material, weight, and structure, we would assign to it the function of something to drink from. But Heidegger would say that this kind of contemplation, though certainly possible, presupposes the more primordial mode of Being and our relation to things. Heidegger illustrates that we “never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things; rather we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-motored plane, we hear
the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. Much closer to us than all of sensations are the things themselves” (Poetry, Language, Thought 25). And as Dreyfus similarly argues in the Heideggerian spirit, “we ordinarily manipulate tools that already have a meaning in a world that is organized in terms of purposes” (Being-in-the-World 47) and “in opposition to the tradition, Heidegger wants to show that we are not normally thematically conscious of our ongoing everyday activity, and that where thematic self-referential consciousness does arise, it presupposes a nonthematic, non-self-referential mode of awareness” (58). Put plainly, in our everyday dealings, we are not meaning-endowing subjects appraising and projecting aspects onto meaningless lumps of matter, but navigate and cope with our worlds in a kind of non-reflective, thoroughly involved state. Returning to the example of the drinking-glass, let us think of ourselves in the banal practice of pouring a glass of water upon getting up in the morning. We do not approach the cabinet and observe the glass in a detached, calculated manner, but rather we may reach for the glass without even thinking of the present situation or considering the glass at all. We could be thinking about a party from the night before, or perhaps engrossed in mental preparation for an important presentation to be given later that day. We may run cold water from the spigot and fill the glass to the brim without even considering the material components of the glass. In the pouring and subsequent drinking of the water, the glass itself would recede in the practice of our pouring and drinking. We do this because of a skilled coping with our immediate worlds which we have practiced our entire lives, every-day.

Likewise, the glass engages me as a glass to drink from. But this kind of engagement is not determined by a desirous subject projecting meaning onto the object which then becomes a glass to be used for drinking. The shared background practices which we are engaged in determine what action is appropriate with respects to this glass-thing. A skeptic of Heidegger could rightly say “I can make that glass serve a myriad of purposes. Its function is
enthralled to my consciousness, my ego. I can contemplate its form, its materials, and so assign it a use. I could rightly use it for peeing in, rather than drinking from.” To this, Heidegger would probably say: sure you could. But the main point here is that this kind of contrary use-reversal would be a *breakdown* in our everyday, unconscious, and primordial way of coping with our worlds. The cup would then become a bare thing, able to be made light of, to be used as an ashtray. This idea of the subject-object dichotomy as one that presupposes the involved, practical aspect of everyday coping is central to Heidegger’s metaphysic. As Dorothea Frede posits, “the question that fascinated him throughout his long philosophic life can be stated simply: what is the meaning of being?” (42), it follows that to approach this question by aloofly contemplating an object, as the Cartesian tradition predicates, is already a step too late in the game. To get at the *glassness* of the glass, it would never do to form a comprehensive list of its properties determined in disengaged study.

This kind of breakdown in our everyday dealings with things can also occur when a tool simply malfunctions or stops working entirely. Dreyfus observes this temporary breakdown as going from absorbed coping to deliberate coping or pure deliberation. He writes “temporary breakdown, where something blocks ongoing activity, necessitates a shift into a mode in which what was previous transparent (our unobstructed drinking from the glass) becomes manifest (the handle breaks and we spill some water on ourselves)” (*Being-in-the-World* 72). In this case, the detached contemplation of Cartesian logic thrusts itself to the fore. But again, this is when a hiccup occurs in our usual way of dealing with the world about us, a state that presupposes our usual, active coping.

With this understanding of the tool/broken-tool opposition in mind, we can turn to the work of Graham Harman, who pushes this ontology to a more extreme. In *Tool-Being*, Harman asserts that “the theory of equipment contains the whole of the Heideggerian philosophy, fully encompassing all of its key insights as well as the most promising paths that
lead beyond them” (15). What is most vital in Harman’s take is that he is able to apply Heidegger’s tool ontology outside of Dasein, or human-involvement. Developing what he calls an object oriented ontology (OOO), he stresses that “the crucial insight has nothing to do with the human handling of tools; instead, the transformation takes places on the side of the tools” (20). And this is especially illuminating for our cause, for when we eventually turn to look at the phenomena found in Blood Meridian with an emphasis on the non-anthropocentrism at work in the text, our inquiry will be helped by Harman’s object ontology, whereby he states “Heidegger’s tool-analysis has nothing to do with any kind of “pragmatism,” or indeed with any theory of human action at all. Instead, the philosophy of Heidegger forces us to develop a ruthless inquiry into the structure of objects themselves” (15).

Harman’s investigation into the Being of tools (tools should be read as all things - pebbles, blenders, and baseball-caps) takes up this paper’s position previously taken about the subterranean, inaccessible realities of things. Harman argues “a tool exists in the manner of enacting itself; only derivatively can it be discussed or otherwise mulled over. Try as hard as we might to capture the hidden execution of equipment, we will always lag behind. There is no gaze capable of seizing it” (22). What is paramount, and most original in Harman’s critique of Heidegger, is that a thing is not simply composed of two separate halves: the tool and broken-tool. Speaking of a hammer, he insists “the hammer has a tool-being quite apart from its manifest visibility, and even quite apart from its brutal casual interactions” (22). This runs contrary to what some Heideggerean scholars propose. Peter-Paul Verbeek, using a hammer as an example as well, states that “in his analysis of equipment Heidegger is not referring to its role in experience but rather in praxis-Heidegger investigates what it practically makes possible, withdrawing in the process” (124) When speaking of the ready-to-hand qualities of an object, it is often about human-being encountering that object,
whereupon practices are made possible and worlds are disclosed. While these two aspects (took/broken-tool) of an object are to be found, Harman makes plain that “this amounts to saying that tool-being becomes real only by way of an external relation” (285) and beyond this stark dualism is “their bottomless surplus, their potentiality for coming to light in any number of possible ways beyond their current forms of presence” (291). If one is to follow suit and drive a “ruthless inquiry” into things, it allows for the thinking of things outside the realm of human pragmatism or even praxis. It is useful to now think back to the example involving a glass and its relative invisibility when used in everyday involvement. While in this disappearance the form-matter structure that dominates representation loses precedence, it is also not simply about the human practices (drinking) that the glass-thing makes possible.

Just as a single human-being could never be captured in the details of their present-to-hand features, so too is the tool, or even mere object, outside of such a categorization. David Couzens Hoy, in “Heidegger and the Hermeneutic Turn”, reminds us that “Heidegger thus draws a distinction between “factuality” and “facticity.” Factuality has to do with nonhuman things, discrete facts about which could be entered in a list. Trying to draw up such a list for any particular instance of Dasein would always fall short of characterizing that Dasein” (179) Harman would most likely argue that simple things, i.e. computer chips, could never have their Being wrangled down by a list of “facts” either, nor can a mere thing be pinned down by explaining the human-centric practices the thing makes possible. It is also not valid to argue that because of Dasein being thrown here, and finds itself in a context of concrete possibilities, human being is somehow privileged to these boundless dimensions of Being. The sewage-pipe is also brought-forth into a world of possibilities and reference. If the silent labor of the sewage pipe was to go awry: it bursts, a foul liquid gushes out and clogs a line which causes further small and large disasters, terminating into the Nothing, this event could occur miles away from any conscious Dasein. If it is said that humans contain multitudes, so
does each thing harbor a wealth of riches. If Dasein is given any preference, it is when they arrive on the scene to find the disaster and thus bring individual entities out of its contextual whole. It is as Harman argues early on in Tool-Being: “it would seem none of these objects can be individuals without the presence of a human being to identify them as such” (33).

But what does all of this have to do with the function of poetry that Heidegger spoke of in Introduction to Metaphysics? And how does it all relate to the way McCarthy is seeing in Blood Meridian? It was important that we traced Heidegger’s upheaval of the tradition because it establishes his thought as it pertains to aesthetics, a position that will predominantly color our lens employed when looking at Blood Meridian. To begin, Heidegger would consider the idea of viewing art aesthetically to be in a position that is already lodged in the modern mode of seeing: that is, a subject coolly appraising an object. In the same way that the critical, detached examination of a hammer or glass would not yield up its essence, so would the aloof examination of a work of art not yield up its essence. An aesthetic relation to a work of art, as is the basis of the modern experience, is according to Heidegger “the display of the beautiful in the sense of the pleasant, the agreeable” (Introduction to Metaphysics 140). This is why Heidegger is able to half-jokingly say that “for us today, art belongs in the domain of the pastry chef” (140).

The point is, by relating to art as a subject in the presence of a beautiful object, an object that is somehow able to yield a kind of spiritual booty to the subject in the process of it being viewed, art has lost its central occupation: the lighting of a ‘clearing’ in which things are able to presence as singular entities while not wholly ripped out of the referential whole.

In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger is after the originary function of the art work. He begins by making clear that a work of art is a thing as well, and so possesses the allusive thingly character that Harman seeks to address in his object-ontology. It is in place of Nothing, but it is not a mere thing, nor is it equipment. The work of art is brought about by
human design, but does not fill an equipmental, pragmatic role. But what role does it play? And how does this relate to the execution of poetry and its speaking of Nothing? Heidegger argues that “the nature of art would then be this: the truth of beings setting itself to work” (Poetry, Language, Thought 35). We mentioned before that the essences of beings could never be wholly represented; their volumes never to be pinned down no matter the absolute correctness of their descriptions. This is where the work, or for our sake, poetics, comes to attain its importance: in aletheia, the Greek word for the unconcealedness of an entities’ being. Alas, this is not a clear-cut process, and as Heidegger famously posits, in this work the artist tangles with truth by way of a play between world and earth which are “always intrinsically and essentially in conflict” (54), i.e. between worldly intelligibility and the thing’s earthly concealedness. Heidegger assaults the notion of viewing art as an aesthetic object, stating “the work is not a piece of equipment that is fitted out in addition with an aesthetic value that adheres to it. The work is no more anything of the kind than the bare thing is a piece of equipment that merely lacks the specific equipmental characteristics of usefulness and being made” (38).

The notion of truth arising out of the strife between “world” and “earth” will be central in our examination of Blood Meridian. When Harman claimed Heidegger’s tool-analysis could be applied to his entire philosophy, he was correct, at least insofar as the reading of “The Origin of the Work of Art” is concerned. If we think more soberly about the idea of the ready-to-hand and the present-to-hand, the same mode of thinking could likewise be applied to the idea of a strife between “earth” and “world” in a work of art, in this case the text. The “earth” is simply the ready-to-hand aspect of an object; its meshed, worldly function which is the subterranean, non-representable aspect of the thing. The “world” in this case is the present-to-hand; the formal, material, and thus representable thing that makes its way from the referential entire by way of language’s naming function. When the poet evokes an
image, it sets both of these things at a constant tension and chafing. In the middle of this tension, what Heidegger calls a “clearing” is established, wherein things are given space to presence.

It will be this notion of the strife between world and earth that produce the phenomenological gaps that take place in Blood Meridian that will serve as the basis for the hermeneutic inquiry posed in this paper. When asked what was meant by the poet wrangling with the idea of Nothing, we can again look at the example of the unbroken tool, the “occurent” as it is sometimes translated. To think towards Nothing does not mean to cast our thought in a negative sense; to exhaust our realities until not even black space remains but all is a terrible “whiteness”. It will be useful now to consider what Harman expresses in Tool-Being, namely that Heidegger’s philosophy, if taken strictly, “grants such overwhelming dominance to the network over the individual object” and that “in spite of this, experience obviously testifies that there are individual entities” (81). Interestingly, Harman does not even get wholly away from Dasein here, since our experience of encountering the world is what springs-forth individual beings from their referential slumber. But, if we take seriously all that has been said in this section about worldly involvement and the way things do show up as separate entities in spite of this primordial mode of being, it would only be fair to say that things show up individually in cases of some equipmental breakdown. The very Nothing that was mentioned in the beginning of this section could be read as the vast referential network that is “world”, the mystery outside of knowing, out of which singular entities do emerge, at least in the “clearing” that human beings open up due to our awareness of is. Out of this contextual Nothing, as will occur in the pages of Blood Meridian, a clearing is wrought so that individual entities can come to presence, while at the same time in sway of the contextual background of “earth”. Such a seeing is a kind sheltering, it creates an abode for which the thing can presence, while the detached observation found in the Cartesian logic
would seem to *rip* the thing out of this vast referential nothingness and leave it bare.
4. Analysis

The Kid and World

Seeing is an important element in the reading of Blood Meridian. The text has often been praised for the dead-to-rights accuracy with particular regards to the period correctness of artifacts and topographies. While this kind of historical accuracy is certainly to be found and perhaps praised, there is also an element, the aforementioned phenomenological “gap”, which is produced in the tones of displaced wonder which the narrator employs. This gap occurs between the means of representation the voice has at its disposal, and the thing it struggles to bring forth from the opaque whole. The narration employed is one omniscient, but as Dana Phillips points out, “there seems to be no knower providing us with the knowledge it imparts” (443). As such, the narrator seems to hover somewhere outside the sphere of drama, seemingly objective and not privy to the consciousness of the text’s characters, “continually outside itself, in intimate contact with the world in a powerfully nonrepresentational way” (Shaviro, 153); a kind of “ungodly” god-like position that Phillips concludes “is cosmic without being metaphysical, as if the sentence had been written by a transparent eyeball that has learned how not to be Emersonian” (447). As this narrative-gaze follows our band’s trek through a terrain “electric and wild” (McCarthy 49), it is if at times the very land speaks itself, or it is if the land is encountered by some entity for the first time rather than being aestheticized blandly by the mortals who cleave its gorges and ford its rivers. In this way, the landscape and the things composing it do not allude to or become symbolic of something else, and as Gullimen posits, the land rears in “sheer materiality” (81), though even this is often underscored by the text tipping its hat to the shadowy essence which seems somewhere between our intelligible world and the vast referential Nothing.
When the world “worlds” in Blood Meridian, the mortal is not the pole around which it revolves, but rather each thing is executing its Being on another that is the referential, tool-system world. With this in mind, we can think of the filibusters as being beheld by what is, rather than the traditional position of the world being beheld and given significance and meaning by the human subject. This sense of being in a world comprised of things is evident from the very first page. And as judge Holden will later lecture ambiguously, God “speaks in the stones and trees, the bones of things” (122).

In Blood Meridian, there is a clear shift in the method of narration beginning roughly at chapter-four. This first section of the novel is largely concerned with the doings and travels of the kid, who may or may not be the central protagonist of the tale, but certainly seems that way at the onset. When located on the familiar turfs of Tennessee, New Orleans, and Texas, the phenomena of the narrative do not seem charged with the same kind of subterranean force that we discover when we cross the border into the shimmering reaches of Mexico. In this first section, similes are used less often and when employed are less epic or startling in nature, poetics are generally at a more minimal, and at times, especially the first chapter, the text does not even read like a realistic novel. In “Genre and Geographies of Violence,” Kollin claims that:

Beginning the text with a description of the kid's exploits, McCarthy's narrator adopts the singsong voice of children's literature. Using stilted sentence structure and little or no analysis of character or events, the narrative, in its school primer form, appears emptied of any sophistication or worldliness. The voice of wonder with its innocence, however, is soon stripped of artlessness as we watch the kid move further and further away from this simplicity; extended
for several pages, the voice finally serves as little more than a parody of
America's youthful promise. (72)

While it can be conceded that the beginning of the text adopts something more “sing-song” in its approach, the text certainly does not become stripped of wonder; in fact, there seems to be an increase in wonder in the presence of things and happenings the further into the narrative we venture. The familiar becomes unfamiliar, and in this unfamiliarity things are brought forth in a mode more poetic, where the struggle between “world” and “earth” is made visible.

As such, the things of Blood Meridian are not brought forth as intensely in this initial part of the novel, and it is not as often that we encounter the phenomenological gap that will become more prevalent in the latter parts of the text. But what is important about these initial chapters, keeping with the particular pursuits of this paper, is as Kollin says, there is “little or no analysis of character or events,” so that already we see a lack of distinction or importance placed upon the character and their usually autonomous motivations. It is in this lack of distinction that some have been able to label the metaphysic of the novel as nihilistic; though, wouldn’t this run contrary to the definition of the nihilistic turn expounded upon in the second section of this paper? As argued, it is the very flight into the individual experience or isolated ego that was a symptom of nihilism, a mode of experience nearly void in this text. Blood Meridian reads more in line with the epics of old, with possibly even less discernable motivation than that found in Beowulf, though certainly no less lacking in fundamental “truths”.

While the narration does seem more centered initially, the development of the tale is not born of any palpable desires or aims cast from this center. It is rather as if the child is
thrown into his journey through the southern states and eventually into the “howling wilderness” of yon desert.

With the very opening sentence, the narrator commands us to “[s]ee the child” (3). This is then followed by the lines “[h]e is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt” and “[h]e stokes the scullery fire. Outside lie dark turned fields with rags of snow and darker woods beyond that harbor yet a few last wolves” (3). So, after telling us to see the character, the narrator only makes known the conditions and things of his immediate world-sphere. There is nothing in the way of physical attributes, and when on the next page it is only fleetingly mentioned that “he is not big but he has big wrists, big hands. His shoulders are set close. The child’s face is curiously untouched behind the scars, the eyes oddly innocent” (4), we are still left with only a vague impression or outline of an arch-type rather than a distinct individual shown in physical or emotional nuance. But we are still asked immediately to “see the child”. What is there to see? A rough outline, a brief sketch that merely hints at his physicality and even less so at the composition of his mind; he could be any of the innumerable poverty-stricken children of that historical place. But, if we look at what else we are given to “see”, we see the constitution of the child take shape in the form of what Heidegger in Being and Time calls “the public we-world, or one’s ‘own’ closest (domestic) environment” (95): the child emerging in his multitudes and singularity out of the darkness as the “freezing kitchenhouse in the predawn dark” did emerge for this child in his youth. To look at, or see the kid, we are asked to see him in his disclosed, immediate, material world, not as an isolated subject with a constellation of projected beliefs and desires.

When Vereen Bell stated that McCarthy’s metaphysic was simply “none” and “fundamentally without truth,” we can see here how such conjectures could erringly be made, as it seems like there is a nothingness presiding over the destiny of the child and who he is
and bound for. But, this position can only be rightly attained if we ignore the role in which
the world-producing aspect of things play in the unspooling of the yarn.

Steven Shaviro insists that “Blood Meridian is not a salvation narrative; we can be
rescued neither by faith nor by works nor by grace” and “it is useless to look for ulterior,
redeemptive meanings, useless even to posit the irredeemable gratuitousness of our
abandonment in the form of some existential category such as Heideggerian “thrownness”
(Geworfenheit)” (148). While Shaviro may be correct in asserting that the work is not a
salvation narrative, is it really wise to throw away the concept of “thrownness” when reading
the novel? We certainly don’t want to look for “redemption” through the concept of
“thrownness,” as we would already be lodged in reading the text aesthetically, i.e. for the
emotional and moral benefit of the reader, a tradition that this paper attempts to get around in
its inquiry. But if we are to pursue our case hermeneutically, “thrownness” may be the very
place to start. Shaviro goes on to claim that “[w]e have not fallen here or been “thrown” here,
for we have always been here, and always will be” (148). This paper would argue that this is
simply a misreading of what Heidegger meant by being “thrown” into human-being or
existence. In Being and Time, human being, or Dasein, often functions as a verb rather than a
noun-phrase or collective. We are not born into a state of human being, but acquire the ability
to human being in the immediate social and material components of our worlds. The kid, this
particular Dasein, has not “always been here” but was born, or rather thrown into a historical
world-space of things and background practices which will inform him and his particular way
of Daseining throughout the novel.

If we skip back to the very first paragraph, we notice the “turned fields” seem every
bit a part of this being as are any particulars of his visage or inner-self. Heidegger is adamant
that human-being must take a stand on itself and must be understood “in what it does, uses,
expects, avoids – in the environmentally available with which it is primarily concerned”
Simmons 29

If taking into account the stark and meagre space with which the child copes and dwells before running off, it is easy to imagine the kind of world that was disclosed by the things about him: one barren, ragged, and seemingly godless, an environment that produces a subject which “can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence” (3). The narrator, from the very outset, makes clear that material context is paramount, while individual desire always presupposes and is predicated on this context. And as Dreyfus points out in Being-in-the-World, “human beings are never directly in the world; we are always in the world by way of being in some specific circumstances” (163). This is why, after asked to “see the child”, we are shown the things about him: the fields, wolves, a drunken father, lingering snow; individual entities uncovered from the murk by man’s self-interpreting disclosure. Mundik argues in the essay “Striking the Fire out of the Rock: Gnostic Theology in Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian” that “bloodlust lies at the very core of human nature; it is something that comes from within, not without” (76), a very curious interpretation of the text, since we are given absolutely nothing to suggest that the violence brooding in the kid is anything but contextual. The inner-nature of the kid is never given precedence in the text. The narrator refrains from asserting that there is anything natural about human-being, be it qualities good or terrible.

It is a “world” which he abandons at the ripe age of fourteen. We are told that he simply “runs away” (4). There is no causal explanation for his flight, no inner convictions expounded upon that we can go by as a reader. And to boot, his destination is not even vaguely considered or alluded to. He “wanders west as far as Memphis, a solitary migrant upon that flat and pastoral landscape” (4). In his wandering, it is more so the landscape itself acting and shaping his route and eventual destination, rather than ego-born mental projections or desires, if desire he has any. He is hedged and prodded along by the phenomena of his world, by “blacks in the fields, lank and stooped” and “a lone dark husbandman pursuing
mule and harrow down the rainblown bottomland toward night” (4). And it is critical to note that these things seeming to whoosh up on the peripheral of his journey are not as if apprehended and considered by the kid in the aesthetic mode, but seem to presence for what they are without anything in the way of subjective appraisal. The focal-point of the text seems to reside somewhere between character and narrator, so that it is neither close nor totally aloof. Shaviro notices a similar design occurring in the novel:

McCarthy’s narrative follows the progress of the kid, and to a lesser extent of other of Glanton’s men; but it is never written from their points of view. The prose enacts not a symbolization or a hermeneutics but an erotics of landscape, moving easily between the degree zero of “desert absolute” (295) and the specific articulations of water, mud, sand, sky and mountains. It leaps from the concrete to the abstract and back again, often in the space of a single sentence.

(154)

It is interesting to see here, perhaps without himself having realized it, Shaviro is noting the same referential network-structure that forms the basis of Harman’s tool-ontology. Shaviro mentions the “desert absolute” which is the desert in its opaque totality; the oneness of the world before Dasein names individual entities into being. Now, consider the claim that Guillemin puts forth in “Optical Democracy” that “Blood Meridian undertakes to imagine nature in its sheer materiality, beyond anthropocentric terms” (81). Are things really brought forth in sheer materiality in Blood Meridian? Though this at first seems like admirable praise, it is essentially what this paper has argued against. The poet is the mortal when encountering beings, brings them out of their hiding while giving them an abode to presence as a thing, not merely an object of circumspection with no regard to its referential context. A text can never
entirely get away from being anthropocentric, as writing in the way of “sheer materiality” would entail the world in its blank, “absolute” ready-to-handedness, where no individual entities could even show up. The “work”, the narrative in this case, is a human effort, and the author himself is neither in nor outside of it completely.

Having recovered from a gunshot wound suffered in a brawl, the kid “leaves in the night and sleeps on the riverbank until he can find a boat that will take him on. The boat is going to Texas” (4). Here we witness the same lack of intentionality; and furthermore, the sense of being bandied about seemingly at random by things and the possibilities which they disclose. The riverbank and the river, the boat and its hooting, disclose a particular world or potentiality, making the practices of repose and the destruction of great distances possible. It so happens that the boat is going to Texas, and so carries him on the first leg of his doomed pilgrimage, hardly one of his own making.

After working in a saw-mill and a diphtheria pest-house, he travels by mule to the town of Nacogdoches. There the kid comes upon a traveling preacher who holds sermons inside a “ratty canvas tent” where “the heady reek of the wet and bathless” congregate. Let us consider the tent-thing here as something that gathers, a “Lichtung”, which if translated directly means a “clearing in a forest”. Heidegger reminds us that a “[g]athering or assembly, by an ancient word of our language, is called “thing”” (Poetry, Language, Thought 151). Clearly this hastily erected tent, this thing squatting on the edge of town creates and marks off a space wherein certain acts are made intelligible while gathering and binding the event to come. This location that the tent allows to come forth is not already there hiding in the weeds for the sake of human ceremony, but is disclosed by the erection of this tent-chapel. Heidegger, casting his thought similarly but using a bridge as his example, stresses “(t)he location is not already there before the bridge is. Before the bridge stands there are of course
many spots along the stream that can be occupied by something. One of them proves to be a location, and does so because of the bridge (152).

As such, the space in which these reeking townsfolk congregate is brought about by the tent itself and the site which it establishes. The text then allows for this site to presence, gather, and produce a network of meaning, so seeming the very shaper of the ensuing ruckus.

It is here that we first become acquainted with the judge, who “stood smoking a cigar even in this nomadic house of God and he seemed to have removed his hat only to chase the rain from it” (6). In the mere street or meadow such a gesture would not carry any weight or connotation, but because of the space and world which the tent discloses and stays, the act of putting his hat back on after chasing the rain from it makes him nearly the devil incarnate. The tent works in the text on the level of equipmental execution lurking beyond any evaluation of its present-to-handedness. To what end does its Being terminate? It is surely not in the values which can be apprehended: the colors, textures, and measurements, though they are part of the thing as well. But if one is to think of the ready-to-handedness of the thing as solely the producer of human practices, it would only be to think the thing in some pragmatic, anthropocentric fashion. The tent is in contact with the earth; it warms in the light of the sun. But it is only an isolated thing when named into being by Dasein.

The Judge goes on to incite the crowd against the preacher, claiming that he violated a young girl “actually clothed in the livery of his God”. In the resulting uproar the entire tent collapses, and does become something more like a mere object when in its breakdown falls “like a huge and wounded medusa”, a simile that produces what Harman calls the phenomenological gap in writing, a kind of revealing-sway between the network (earth) and the individual object (world).
Strife – Crossing the Border

Later in the novel, when Glanton’s heterogeneous band is sitting around the evening campfire, a Tennessean named Webster says in response to the Judge’s sketches and subsequent oration: “Well you’ve been a draftsman somewhere and them pictures is like enough the things themselves. But no man can put all the world in a book. No more than everything drawed in a book is so” (147). The judge would almost surely have it so, what with all of his faithful renderings of the flora, fauna, and artifacts along their trek, but if we are to continue in pursuit of our main inquiry, it is obvious that there is a tension between “the things themselves” in this book and what the narrator is able to render in its omniscient study. This becomes increasingly apparent as the gaze follows the fortunes of the kid across the border and into the wilder regions of Mexico where the workings of the land seem to defy direct, stock representation.

A certain Captain White sells the idea of national vengeance to the kid, lamenting that “[w]e fought for it. Lost friends and brothers down there. And then by God if we didn’t give it back” and imploring earnestly of the kid “I don’t think you’re the sort of chap to abandon a land that Americans fought and died for” (37). The kid does not seem either impressed or otherwise concerned with White’s lamely moralized reasons for their impending sojourn into that other land, but rather seems to have no direction or abstract intentions of his own, asking only “What about a saddle?” (37). It is on this very doomed journey into the northern territories of that benighted republic that the phenomena about the filibusters comes forth in what Heidegger calls a “single, manifold revealing” (The Question Concerning Technology 34). This “revealing” is the very space straddled by the tool and broken-tool that was mentioned earlier, where representation of the intelligible vies with the allusive, inexhaustible earthly essence of the thing. And this is essentially where truth is lit up, contrary to the past commentary that has posited that Blood Meridian lacks a fundamental truth or even lacks a
metaphysic entirely. But as this paper argues, the very heart of the text centers on this process of revealing, “yielding to the holding-sway and the safekeeping of truth” (34).

It is also important to make clear that the color of the way things are represented in this part of the text does not pertain to correctness. The original and often striking similes which the narrator produces are not for the effect of conveying a thing in its minute exactness, but rather the general essence or spirit of the thing. Heidegger stresses a similar sentiment in his analysis of Van Goh’s painting of a pair of peasant-shoes: “the work, therefore, is not the reproduction of some particular entity that happens to be present at any given time; it is, on the contrary, the reproduction of the thing’s general essence” (Poetry, Language, Thought 36). Just as Heidegger does not think an oil painting of a pair of shoes “draws a likeness of something actual and transposes it into a product of the artistic,” so too does this paper not propose the poetry at stake provides an exact or more precise representation. In a description of running horses such as “in the twilight he trotted far out on the plain where the tall shapes of horses skated over the chaparral on spider legs” (McCarthy 167), it is not after a sterling reproduction of the thing on hand, but an impression of the entity caught up in the referential lattice that is Being.

During their march through the desert they are one night beset by great electrical storms which constantly rage and boom on the peripheral of the text’s seeing. The wheels of their supply-wagons “rolled among the shapes of the riders in gleaming hoops that veered and wheeled woundedly and vaguely navigational like slender astrolabes and the polished shoes of the horses kept hasping up like a myriad of eyes winking across the desert floor” (49). This image of the wheels in their practice sets up the essence of the thing in several ways. If we think back to the idea Harman posited of the ready-to-hand entity’s “irreducibly veiled activity” (Tool-Being 22), for example the withdrawn nature of the cup when it is used in everyday involvement, the cart in its teetering trudge through the wastes would seem to
logically defy pictorial representation, as its state of being would simply be in the invisible hump and fulfillment of its subterranean tool-quality. Writing of specific events, Harman argues “[a]s an instantaneous and unitary event, the contexture has no parts: being should have no beings. But in spite of this, experience obviously testifies that there are individual entities” (Tool-Being 81) Note that Harman still concedes, despite all his efforts at a ruthless inquiry into things outside the human-sphere, that Dasein must enter the scene for individual entities to show up, human experience attesting to this. This ontological dilemma is the very essence that the poet attempts to bring out through the potentially suggestive quality of language: the ungraspable vacuum nature of its ready-to-hand (contextual network) in contention with its sensible and explorable profile (individual entities). It is because of the indirect quality of the text that this is able to occur.

First, it appeals to the “world” divide of the being(s) brought forth by illustrating the “visibly fragmented landscape of specific objects” (Harman, Tool-Being 89). This divide contains the intelligible contours of the thing, i.e. the sensually apprehended and therefore representable. But instead of a detailed and faithful list of sensory data in the way of shape, size and colors, it is the synthesized thing closest to the world of the filibuster that is evoked in the text. The iron tires which have rolled themselves bald in the grit of the sand are seen by the narrator as “gleaming hoops” in the play of storm-light. Here, the suggestion as to the form and color of a thing shines forth, but in the very same sentence butts up against the invisible, “earth” aspect of the object where the simile “like slender astrolabes” resorts in a comparison to another thing: the ambiguous gleam of a solid gold astrolabe lopping.

Thinking back to what was quoted earlier from Poetry, Language, Thought, where Heidegger argues we never fall entirely away from the things immediate, i.e. the low belch of an exhaust is not a rapid series of reports by way of differing octaves but is distinctly the Camaro and not
the Ford truck, the text in turn expresses a similar sentiment in its efforts to bring forth what is. For all of its lofty description, it never gets away from the things themselves.

In this lopping lies the “concealed power of the tool-system”: the object not apprehended in detached observation but suggested in its very practice and unnoted efforts, but also the suggestion of its universal “tool-being”, where the thing itself never terminates but rifles off into a referential relation with the world. As such, the text suspends the image of the laboring carts between, when taken independently, two inadequate pieces of description. It is a kind of teetering on the divide.

But consider the space, or “clearing,” that is produced between these two clauses. If we look back at the way Heidegger claimed truth was wrought in the work of art, it is precisely between these two inadequacies that truth is given an abode in which to presence, albeit momentarily and never whole. The “present-to-hand” qualities are wrought in the materialistic description of this lifted passage: the blue of moon-light; the iron, gleaming hoop-shapes the wheels make in the night; the metal shoes of the horses – the individual entities that emerge from the Nothing in light of Dasein’s witness. Heidegger writes that “a being can be concealed, too, only within the sphere of what is lighted. Each being we encounter and which encounters us keeps to this curious opposition of presence in that it always withholds itself at the same time in a concealedness” (Poetry, Language, Thought 52). These qualities that do presence in the text always seem belied with some negative quality of the unfathomable something, the concealedness which evokes the thing’s vacuum-space that is the withholding Heidegger speaks of. The wheels “roll woundedly” amid the company, and the iron shoes not mere metal-things but “winking” like eyes in their labor. In this last simile the contention between the two divides of the being are set at strife, but as Heidegger says, it is not a relationship of violence, but rather the fruitful struggle between the tool and broken-tool that produces the space of truth in the work, as to create “is to cause something to
emerge as a thing that has been brought forth. The work’s becoming a work is a way in which truth becomes and happens” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 58). To “cause something to emerge as a thing” first requires a shelter, a shelter which the space in poetry erects.

During the same episode, the storm causes the distant ranges of mountains to become momentarily visible out of an alleged nothingness, but even here, the narrator struggles to convey with accuracy the mountain-Being of the mountains:

> All night sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunderheads, making a bluish day of the distant desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear. The thunder moved up from the southwest and lightning lit the desert all about them, blue and barren, great clanging reaches ordered out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land that come the day would leave them neither trace nor smoke nor ruin more than any troubling dream. (49)

There is something hunkering here that seems to allude even the most evocative of narrators. This hunkering, almost ghastly quality of the land itself has given rise to the sort of commentary found in Mundik’s essay, where she claims “McCarthy uses the desolate, hostile landscapes of Blood Meridian to question the nature of the God that created such places” (74).

Here, again, we have the tension between the representable, graspable thing(s) and the allusive, virtual invisibility of their numerous tool-executions. The desert and the mountains skirting the expanse is first brought forth in their rationally apprehended properties; the *midnight* thunderheads, *bluish* day, and the skyline *stark* and *black*. But beyond these
material reckonings the narrator seems slightly at a loss as to how to represent this happening, producing the simile “like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear”. Here, we see textual representation struggling to sally-forth the very essence of the thing under scrutiny, so instead compares the landscape with another thing so vague that it can only be summed up as a thing of “some other order” and its “true” features to not be of the bare stone of its physical profile, but a kind of lurking, terrible quality in their very essence that can only be summed up in the abstraction “fear”. But, if we consider what Mundik claims is the function of landscape in the text, that it portrays the quality of an “entire manifest cosmos [that] was created by a hostile (or at best, ignorant) force of darkness and is thus a hideous aberration” (73), it would seem we are stuck in the mode of viewing the land as traditionally pastoral. That is, a land that is not a “force of darkness”, but is some good haven in which human being can renew itself in. As Guillemin asserts in “Optical Democracy”, the book is invested with an “anti-anthropocentric pastoralism” (74). The landscape here, though contrived in frightening overtones, does not speak of an evil, but a neutrality or indifference that is brought forth in the omniscient, displaced wonder of the narrative-voice.

The kid’s regiment is eventually splintered by the “fabled horde” (54) of the Comanche, and he being one of few survivors, makes his way through the wastes in sign of life and refreshment. He is eventually captured by a local militia and put in fetters, to be taken in and out of a series of holdings. The kid and his fellow lot of prisoners are eventually taken to the city of Chihuahua and after being paraded about for the citizenry, they are again given to the confines of a cell, this one danker than the last:

When their eyes lost their blindness they could make out figures crouched along the wall. Stirrings in beds of hay like nesting mice disturbed. A light snoring.
Outside the rattle of a cart and the dull clop of hooves in the street and through
the stones a dim clank of hammers from a smith’s shop in another part of the
dungeon. (77)

In this passage, the cell or dungeon is brought fourth not by the minute description of
its present-to-hand aspects, i.e. its spatial qualities or materials, but rather in its world-
producing executions: the dungeon in its dungeoning produces the scene to come. Also, it is
of note that the sounds are not presented as bare, abstract acoustics, but the sounds are the
labors of the very things themselves; the rattle of the cart and the clop of hooves, the things
connected to the prison in its referential state of being. When we consider the things brought
forth here by way of sound, we can see how these elements are working off and referring to
one another to form a network. They do not stand as independent, subjectively appraised and
assigned vibrations, but rather reveal the whole of the world-space produced by their invisible
labors. If the text was to work to bring each separate thing to the fore, it would result in the
outmost of abstractions, as the unitary effect of their workings would be smothered by the
presupposition of the detached gaze.

The kid escapes the chains under a sworn resolve to join Glanton’s commissioned
gang, where after the narrative gaze is once again in the open, expansive nothingness of the
desert. On the march, this unit is described as “a thing surmised from the blackness by the
creak of leather and the chink of metal” (157) and later, under a “gibbous moon”, the narrator
claims "for although each man among them was discrete unto himself, conjoined they made a
thing that had not been before and in that communal soul were wastes hardly reckonable
more than those whited regions on old maps where monsters do live" (158).

This is a case when the narrator directly acknowledges the Nothingness of the
referential “we-world” which the band traverses. This “blackness” is not meant merely as the
night about them, the absence of the sun or moon-beam, but the very “impenetrable surface” that is the network of reference Harman writes of. The individual entities emerge out of this contextual oneness by way of Dasein’s making a clearing, in this case the poet who brings forth the saddles and metal-clasp while still allowing them to presence in their unnoticed labors.

The above are two instances when the group of riders are likened a unified “thing”, a word deployed in a way that seems far from arbitrary. It is as though the narrator is fully aware of this band’s referential state of being and acknowledges that while the world is comprised of countless separate entities, the world, or the universe in its entirety, is in fact one big thing that is only later broken up and categorized as being made up of singular beings. For in their march they come to possess a tool-quality that marries referentially with the things around them: the pebble, the mesquite bush, the sun and moon in their polar-axis. In the first quote, it is notable that the form of the riders is not brought out of the murk by way of tedious, individual description that would seem only a shadow of their “tool” executions, but again, as we saw with the dungeon-being, the band is brought out to make a stand by the sounds of their efforts and unconscious doings. In this case, the form wrought is somewhere between the sensual (world) and its ungraspable cellar-depths (earth), which “is essentially self-secluding. To set forth the earth means to bring it into the Open as the self-secluding” (Poetry, Language, Thought 46). The “clink” of the metal refers to the recognizable acoustics of the unconscious labor of the gear and horse, individual things working off one another to produce ‘the thing’. The phenomenological gap is again on display here, as the sensual (chink of metal) is offset by suggesting the things in their silent repose.

Entering a squalid and near desolate pueblo, the gang parleys with a few men who:
had but two animals and one of these had been snakebit in the desert and this thing now stood in the compound with its head enormously swollen and grotesque like some fabled equine ideation out of an Attic tragedy. It had been bitten on the nose and its eyes bulged out of the shapeless head. (121)

Even when appraising something so immediately appalling as the above excerpt, the text is seeing in a phenomenological way, producing the being which is the ruined horse by way of thingly suggestion. The text is not after correctness here, or to be exact in what it conveys, but instead focuses on the essence the thing, that space somewhere between world and earth. The end of the last sentence quoted above cements this, wrangling with a thing so alien that it can only be said to be “shapeless”.

Mundik writes of the same scene in her essay, claiming that

Precisely because human suffering and cruelty is so palpable in Blood Meridian it is quite easy to miss the suffering and cruelty of animals, but nature itself is cruel, as McCarthy demonstrates with a grotesque description of a “snakebit” horse” and “The suffering of the horse is as senseless as the suffering of the victims of Glanton’s gang, and yet it is entirely natural. Blood Meridian establishes no dichotomous opposition between the natural and moral evil, suggesting that the condition of all life on earth is one of violence, suffering and brutality. (78)

But is this representation of the bitten horse one that suggests the condition of “all life on earth is one of violence, suffering and brutality?” It is a bitten horse, and by all traditional attitudes a horrible sight, but is it in any way allusive or allegorical? In this case, it would seem the violence is turned out as the very thing itself. It is an instance of the grotesque
among the multitude of phenomena that makes up the totality of the world-system, but is in relation to, and not symbolic of anything else. It is a ghastly horse, something that seems to defy stock representation in the fact that it can be dimly perceived as a “fabled equine ideation out of an Attic tragedy”.

What is paramount to take away from the above description in juxtaposition to those of the mountains or flora along the trail is that none have precedence over another, as far as poetics are concerned. The gruesome is brought out “beautifully,” as are the things we generally associate with such a term: mountains, lakes, trees, horses. When Mundik states that the novel “establishes no dichotomous opposition between the natural and moral evil,” she is right, but it never leads directly to gnostic thought, which would suggest that the world entire is evil. The evil in this scene is purely cosmetic, and the beauty lies in the happening of “truth” in the poetic sense. Heidegger writes that “truth is the unconcealedness of that which is as something that is. Truth is the truth of Being. Beauty does not occur alongside and apart from this truth. When truth sets itself into the work, it appears. Appearance-as this being of truth in the work and as work –is beauty” (Poetry, Language, Thought 79). From this somewhat cryptic passage we can deduce that beauty does not dwell in the aesthetic, but in the coming forth of a thing from the referential Nothing. The snake-bitten horse is “beautiful,” as is the mesa-flower or child-skull.

Towards the end of the novel, the kid finds himself in a kind of showdown with the judge out on the desert plane which the text calls forth as a “barren pitch” (301). The judge and his idiot companion here seem to shimmer along with the basking landscape, and for once the narrative-gaze is somewhat focused by the kid:

The shallow ridge along which the judge had advanced was empty and the two horses were coming toward him across the sand to the south. He cocked the
pistol and lay watching. They approached freely over the barren pitch, nudging the air with their heads, their tails whisking. Then he saw the idiot shambling along behind them like some dim neolithic herdsman. To his right he saw the judge appear from the dunes and reconnoitre and drop from sight again. (301)

In this passage, the narration is more stock omniscient than almost anywhere else in the novel. The kid sees, apprehends the two persons across the crosshairs of his pistol. They approach him, enlarging in his gaze. But even here, we never get away from things entirely. The distant figure of the shambling idiot, as with the mountain ranges, cannot be spoken forth entirely by the listing of their present-to-hand values, but would rather lose its thingly quality in the process of such an exhaustion. The text acknowledges the inevitable “earthly” concealment of beings here, as the thing is instead brought out through the comparison to another entity, and as Harman similarly says of Lovecraft’s object-ontology, achieves this by the “indirect character of literature” (Weird Realism 24). Looking more closely at the way the idiot is brought forth in the above passage, through the comparison to a “neolithic herdman,” the text seems to hint at the impression of the figure, “suggesting that this outline is something over and above a literal combination of these elements” (Harman, Weird Realism 24). As the general outline produced by Lovecraft with his description of Cthulhu is not unfaithful to the spirit of the thing, so does the text’s approach to representing this confrontation never fall away from the spirit of the thing, but instead stays close to it. The phenomenal world retains its primacy.

The Judge and Things

While the majority of the text thrives on bringing forth things and the subsequent struggle between which attributes can be adequately represented and their invisible contours and tool-
executions, the latter being invisible because “the tool-being of the ready-to-hand is not simply withdrawn from view “for the most part”, since by definition it is irreducible to anything that could ever be seen” (Harman, Tool-Being 24), the efforts of the Judge would initially seem to run parallel to what has been established thus far. As has been stressed throughout this paper, it is in this contentious relationship between the visible and the invisible that truth is erected, or at least an attempt at such an erection is made. But the judge has a different enterprise in mind, and what is not representable to the judge are those mysterious depths outside of human knowledge wherein lurks their potential to envelope us. Contrary to the position of wonder that the narrator adopts, the judge is bent on bringing the phenomena of the world before him in a calculative manner. As such, the Judge could be read as another archetype, in this case an archetype that possesses characteristics that would coronate him as the antithesis to the thoroughly absorbed voice of the narration. But still, to say that the Judge simply embodies the ultimate expression of the detached Cartesian logic would seem to undermine the nuances of his character. Joshua J. Masters argues in his essay “Witness to the Outermost Edges of the World” that the judge is “the boundary dweller, as a character unfettered by social structures and cultural mores, the judge’s power to interpret is absolute, for he allies himself with no outside authority save his own will and his own self-defined logos” (28). But, this stance is predicated on viewing the Judge as an isolated ego standing apart from his world and all the practices that fuel its historical intelligibility. This paper would argue that there is an authority presiding over the judge and informing his logos: the metaphysical ground of his age that determines the way in which things show up. The judge contains multitudes, and would seem to embody not simply the idea of an unwavering faith in the Cartesian subject-object distinction, but the rash of contradictions, digressions, and upheavals that is the turbulent nature of Western thought itself. To quote the narrator of Blood Meridian: “All history is present in that visage” (3).
Holding a lecture on geology to a small gathering of ruffians, “he sat in the compound
breaking ore samples with a hammer, the feldspar rich in red oxide of copper and native
nuggets whose organic lobations he purported to read news of the earth’s origins” and “a few
would quote him scripture to confound his ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos”
(122). Here we are witness to the kind of disinterested inquiry that the Cartesian tradition was
previously accused of. Heidegger insists, contrary to the subject-object musings of the Judge,
that:

if we attempt such a penetration by breaking open the rock, it still does not
display in its fragments anything inward that has been disclosed. The stone has
instantly withdrawn again into the same dull pressure and bulk of its fragments.
If we try to lay hold of the stone’s heaviness in another way, by placing the
stone on a balance, we merely bring the heaviness into the form of a calculated
weight. (45)

Instead of the everyday involvement that we are accustomed to in the text, where
things saunter in and without the human-sphere, here the judge in aloof observation revels in
a case of equipmental breakdown. And the squatters about him seem drawn-in and
hypnotized by his pouring out of rational knowledge, as they “soon reckoned him correct, this
man of learning, in all his speculations, and this the judge encouraged until they were right
proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools” (123). The
philosophical ambiguity of the judge can be read from this passage, as his earnestness
concerning his teachings is in the end undercut by his pronouncement that his listeners were
foolish for believing his reports. Of which position is he? At times, in spite of the wealth of
his knowledge, he seems to acknowledge the limits of his own rationality. Additionally, it is
curious to see here that the narrator exhibits a rare case of detached irony in the line “ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos,” suggesting the very futility of such a goal in the face of the unknowable nature of the world about.

When waxing on the differences between cultures who leave behind something permanent and those whose very histories seem to have dissolved with time, the judge makes the claim that “for whoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry. But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe” (152). In this instance, it would seem that the Judge is convinced that man’s supreme destiny is to stand out from the world, to mark it in some fashion, to alter its course. Heidegger addresses our modern tendency to stand apart or in front of the world, claiming that “the Open becomes an object, and is thus twisted around toward the human being” (Poetry, Language, Thought 108). This “Open” that Heidegger refers to was formerly addressed by the poet Rilke in a letter to a reader:

You must understand the concept of the “Open,” which I have tried to propose in the elegy, in such a way that the animal’s degree of consciousness sets it into the world without the animal’s placing the world over against itself at every moment (as we do); the animal is in the world; we stand before it by virtue of that peculiar turn and intensification which our consciousness has taken. [Rilke goes on.] By the “Open,” therefore, I do not mean sky, air, and space; they too, are “object” and thus “opaque” and closed to the man who observes and judges. The animal, the flower, presumably is all that, without accounting to itself, and therefore has before itself and above itself that indescribably open freedom. (105)
If we think about the Open in this sense, to be in the Open is simply to be in the world, thriving in an involved and unreflective state, not as subjects (humans) viewing objects (the world, things). Thinking back to what was said earlier in this paper that within Greek philosophy a narrowing of the word phusis set in and the mounting consensus that came to a head in the meditations of Descartes, it is evident that human being has fallen away from the Open by setting the world up as a picture before one’s self. In the above musings of the Judge on fallen civilizations, it would seem he reviles the notion of a people who lived as part of the world. Those who “joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures” are clearly of a lower order to the judge, as he states earlier in the paragraph that “in their crude huts they crouch in darkness and listen to the fear seeping out of the rock. All progressions from a higher to a lower order are marked by ruins and mystery” (152). But, in the words of the judge, to carve out a space, to alter the fabric of the world, attains for a people a higher standing. Again, the thoughts of the judge seem to mimic the modern mode where nature has come to be merely a standing-reserve, be it to be destroyed or preserved, but always as an object.

Later on the trail “he would dress expertly the colorful birds he’d shot, rubbing the skins with gun-powder and stuffing them with balls of dried grass and packing them away in his wallets. He pressed the leaves of trees and plants into his book and he stalked tiptoe the mountain butterflies” (206). The judge would go out of his way to make the things of his world stand neatly before him for calculated observation. Instead of dancing on the periphery of the yarn as beings usually do in the novel, not apprehended by the characters but brought forth and given space to “light-up” by the omniscient narration, the things that Holden collects seem their bland doppelgangers. By stuffing the birds that he finds so as to retain their form and rough semblance of animation, what do these things become? Certainly not the things themselves. They become things to be assessed by the manifold senses: colors, shapes,
dimensions and textures. It is curious to note the difference in the way that a bird or something of the like is depicted by the poetic view of the narrator: “in the night bats came from some nether part of the world to stand on leather wings like dark satanic hummingbirds and feed at the mouths of those flowers” (154). Here, the thing, the bat, is given space to come forth and stand in its relationship with the Open. It is not presented for us as a mental representation or intention accompanied by a set of attributes, but it is in their contextual practice, in their labor of extracting nectar “like dark satanic hummingbirds.”

Again holding an audience by the light of a campfire, the judge asserts:

> These anonymous creatures may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men’s knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth. (207)

This quote is stuffed with a fear of the mysterious, subterranean dimension of things outside of man’s possible knowing. It also harkens back to the previous quote about the forgotten civilizations, the lower orders ordained and “marked by mystery”. To the judge, what cannot be represented is somehow renegade to the rightful enterprise of man. Heidegger, again thinking in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, waxes “[m]an places before himself the world as the whole of everything objective, and he places himself before the world. Man sets up the world toward himself, and delivers Nature over to himself” (107). It is clear, though a character of considerable conflict, the judge tries wholeheartedly to hold onto and make legitimate this modern mode of “seeing” that Heidegger is speaking of. What cannot be brought to stand before him has the possibility to deceive and enslave, and furthermore, what
is not representable seems to hold not the saving-power but something mysterious that needs to be “routed” out.

The nightly campfire becomes the auditorium for Holden’s lectures. Later in the yarn, the Judge in his solitary wanderings finds the thigh-bone of what is apparently from some being who roamed these parts before the time of man:

At all desert watering places there are bones but the judge that evening carried to the fire one such as none there had ever seen before, a great femur from some beast long extinct that he’d found weathered out of a bluff and that he now sat measuring with the tailor’s tape he carried and sketching into his log. (263)

The judge, in the above passage, is again at work on the tedious recording and representation of a thing. He measures it to better place it in the pantheon of his unearthed finds and sketches it in his journal. After doing so, he lets fall the strange bone into the sand and says “[t]here is no mystery to it” and “[y]our heart’s desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery” (263). The judge in this case seems to talk in riddles, contradicting himself with the last uttered phrase. But what becomes clear is that the judge shies away from the mysterious, implacable Being of objects. What is “truth” to the judge is simply what can be reckoned rationally by the minds of men in their manifold physical properties. All else, the bottomless surplus of the thing which this paper advocates, is dashed in his detached reckonings. Still, as the text moves along, the judge is more and more in contention with his own learning.

The metaphysical ambiguity that the judge exhibits throughout the text is never more apparent than it is when he yet again lectures before a camp-fire which “sawed in the wind and the embers paled and deepened and paled and deepened like the bloodbeat of some living
thing” (255). Before the flame Judge Holden breaks into a discourse happening between the ex-priest Tobin and several other of the scalp-hunters whereupon one had asked the question “whether there were on Mars or some other planets in the void men or creatures like them” (256). Standing before the gathering half-naked the Judge cuts in and pronounces in his usual epic tone:

The universe is no narrow thing and the order within it is not constrained by any latitude in its conception to repeat what exists in one part or any other part. Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man’s mind can compass. (256)

When before the judge broke open a rock so as to “read news of the earth’s origins” seemed an earnest allusion to modern seeing, it now seems almost a parody in light of what the judge proposes. In what the judge now claims, there is an echo of Heidegger’s position taken in The Question Concerning Technology, wherein he suggests that the positivism attributed to modern science is but another mode of seeing grounded in the metaphysical ground of an age. Heidegger reckons the modern “experiment” a methodology “related to the verification of a law in the framework, and at the service, of an exact plan of nature” (122). Also, note that the judge now submits to the mystery and depth of the world about, suggesting that man’s preference for methodology and categorization is but an attempt to place order on a world that ultimately resounds in chaos, undercutting his previous study of the strange bone and proclaiming “there is no mystery to it.”
What is easily gleaned from the above passages is that the Judge is a difficult figure to classify, let alone attach any kind of philosophical dogma to. As mentioned earlier, it would be easy to label the judge another archetype among the cast of *Blood Meridian*, but he may very well be the most genuinely *human* of all the characters present, in spite of his viciousness. The character of the judge is marked by the very transgression and discord that is existence.
5. Conclusion

When read for the first time, *Blood Meridian* may leave one wondering what it is that makes this narrative so strange and initially confounding. Is it because it is so overly violent, as the majority of the chatter surrounding the novel dwells on? But even before writing this paper and thus thinking it over phenomenologically, violence did not seem to really *matter* in this book; it had no moral or ethical repercussion, yet in spite of this it did not smack of nihilism or indifference, but was charged with a kind of positivity even in the face of its astounding horrors. The text, if taken as a whole, does not *focus* on violence nor use it as a sort of grounding or allusive symbol, but rather brings violence out simply as another thing or happening on par with the everyday. The body-count never becomes the focus of the narrative, no more so than the rock, filibuster, or horse, or campfire does. The poetic abodes given to these things seem without hierarchy. Even in the very initial stages of thinking *Blood Meridian* theoretically, it seems to be the way in which the narrative “sees” that is the most unusual feature of the text.

As has been shown, because there is usually no focal agent in the narrative by the way of character or even a knowing narrator anchoring it, the text seems to harken back to older traditions of storytelling, or at the very least does something *weird* inside the confounds of the novel. Entertaining this notion, it quickly becomes apparent that it even departs strongly from the songs and epics of old, as there *is* no palpable grounding by way of a godhead, great hero or law: it really does wobble on the knife-edge of a nihilistic abyss. At first glance, how can one argue that it is not nihilistic? The gods have obviously fled. Law is dubious at best and sometimes altogether absent, and there seems no hero of a higher order than the likes of Glanton or some other member of his murderous gang.

*Blood Meridian* only works as a redeeming narrative if we consider the referential aspect of the world rendered by its object-ontology. It is precisely here, smack dab in the
middle of godlessness and lawlessness, wherein the power and primacy of the
phenomenological world is made apparent. Only an aesthetic reading of the novel could
claim that it is one without redemption or hope. It may not yield up to the reader some kind of
spiritual or emotional booty, nor is there any attainment of grace or fortune by its
protagonists, but it addresses “truth” in the way things are brought forth and given an abode
to presence, while not being entirely stripped from the referential whole. As Heidegger says
of Hölderlin’s poetry in our time of destitution:

There would indeed be no time then for an aesthetic flight to Hölderlin’s poetry.
There would then be no moment in which to make a contrived myth out of the
figure of the poet. There would then be no occasion to misuse his poetry as a
rich source for a philosophy. But there would be, and there is, the sole
necessity, by thinking our way soberly into what his poetry says, to come to
learn what is unspoken. (Poetry, Language, Thought 93)

Similarly, this paper has gone to lengths to not make a “contrived myth” of Cormac
McCarthy. And this “unspoken” aspect of the poetic is exactly what is claimed that the
object-ontology employed by the narrator of Blood Meridian gets at. It is the unspoken which
the “earth” shelters. It is the “earth” side of things which the poet lets speak through
indirection. The unspoken, the Nothing, is what grounds this novel’s metaphysic.

What is most interesting, and possibly at most stake as it concerns future readings and
interpretations of the text, is that it occurs in the form of a novel, not a poem or epic, and does
exhibit some of the form’s constituents. It would be outrageous to claim that Blood Meridian
is simply a long, extended prose-poem. While there is a poetic sensibility at work that I claim
grounds its metaphysic; the picaresque, pastoral, and politics of its day are also present. And
so is the rapid, sometimes flippant, and often funny dialogue that one would expect from a bona fide page-turner. The novel is almost like the character of the judge himself: full of contradiction, fallacy, comedy, and scrambled rhetoric. Taking this all into account, I would posit that the novel is one that seems to work against its own tradition, all the while touting none of post-modernism’s irony or distance, but is very serious and honest in its approach. It does not play tricks; it is not smoke and mirrors. In this way, perhaps it is even more striking that it is not just a novel, but is essentially a Western novel. When casting thought in a phenomenological nature, it would often seem this narrative could as well have taken place in the distant future, or perhaps a distant planet colonized by a group of androgynies. But because it is a Western, its fluidity is even more disconcerting. The object-ontology that this paper has argued is present in the novel would seem in stark opposition to the anthropocentric yarns typical of the Western, or even the picaresque tale which Guillemin claims Blood Meridian is derivative of (84).

But the main point that this paper has attempted to argue is that beyond generic conventions or aesthetics, there is an object-ontology in *Blood Meridian* that while addressing the Nothing outside of human knowing, it is essentially charged with a hopefulness that fends off any attempt to label it a narrative without an essential metaphysic, or truth. It is not a nihilistic text, though it addresses nihilistic tendencies. And it is certainly not one *altogether* violent in the gnostic mode, though it mentions and employs Gnostic symbols for the sake of effect.

This positivity that has been stressed is precisely in the essence of that which is the poetic, and in the novel, a poetic that brings forth individual entities from the referential whole (the unspoken) while still allowing for something of their referential-essence to play and shimmer. The text never gets wholly away from the things that constitute it, even in its most expansive of poetic flights, be they legions of Comanche who looked like “funhouse
figures” (56) arising from the clamor of battle or when a partly eaten mule is found to look “like something from a chromo of terrific war” (125). The text always remains close to the things themselves, and it is this intimacy with things that saves it from falling into that nihilistic abyss.
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