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Literary Criticism

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The Formalism of *Blood Meridian*

Blood Meridian is a western novel written by Cormac McCarthy that takes place in 1800's America and Mexico. The novel follows the life of "The Kid", who leaves his childhood home in Tennessee at the age of 14, never to return. "At fourteen he runs away [. . .] He wanders west as far as Memphis, a solitary migrant upon the flat and pastoral landscape" (3-4). He meanders south through the country, eventually arriving in Texas where he is recruited into the Army. The cavalry ventures into Mexico and momentarily becomes slaughtered by a horde of Comanche. The Kid survives the ordeal and after wandering around in the desert for awhile boards a passing wagon and later awakens in a village. Posthaste he is seized by a unit of Federales, "The kid was standing by the cart pissing when the soldiers rode into the yard" (69), taken to Chihuahua and thrown in prison. He is released from prison to abet a gang of scalphunters, who have been contracted by the Mexican government to kill and scalp indians. Henceforth the novel follows their undertaking. This undertaking, as Ken Hanssen illuminates in "Men are made of the dust of the Earth", is based on accounts of first-hand observers traveling the Southwest in the mid-1800's (183). The wild west is at its height, and the book embodies that. It revolves around violence, and the blood and carnage never stop running throughout the entirety of the book. The book is like a sponge in that the work is filled with the blood of history, and through the turning of each page the blood seeps out continually.

Likewise, McCarthy's prose is a kind of literary violence that reflects the subject material. It is a special kind of language that deviates from the norm of other writers and from everyday writing. McCarthy has taken a hatchet to these norms and crafted his own syntax which establishes itself through the minimal use of punctuation. Made possible through his deep understanding of the English language and the comprehension of the standards, McCarthy is able to write in the way that he does. After all, how something is written is just as important as what is written, like Michael Ryan explains in his chapter on formalism in "An Introduction to Criticism", and sometimes 'the how' is more important 'the what' (5). *Blood Meridian* would not be the work that it is if it were not for the way that the story is told. The narration's form nearly becomes its meaning. Through "writing verse in ways that shatter the reigning sense of rationality and logic" (Ryan, 160.), McCarthy makes the narrator very much alive, but simultaneously makes him a specter due to the heavy use of objective third person. Mark Cunningham characterizes this dichotomy in his piece on "The Art of Reading Cormac McCarthy" as "deploy[ing] the author's stylistic maximalism and paradoxical philosophy to devastating effect" (3). In *Blood Meridian*, the writer's form is at its forefront and at its height. The content of the work goes hand in hand with its form. Which is to say, McCarthy's linguistic violence embodies the thematic violence. The scripture's unparalleled description, parataxis and lack of punctuation, lyrical quality of violence, and the forgoing of explication for relentless immediacy and evocation accomplishes this, making the story made for the form.

The Russian Formalists, a group of formalist critics which Ryan mainly discusses in his chapter on "Formalism" but also references at the end of his chapter on "Cultural Studies", "noted that language routinizes our thinking. The simple repetition of verbal formulae limits the

range of our thoughts [. . .] They felt language and thought were intimately related" (160). They wanted to disturb the standard syntax of the day; to induce a degree of shock. In *Blood Meridian*, the reader is at first certainly shocked. The language is English (with bits of Spanish), but its arraignment makes it read like English from a foreign country with its own system; a music the reader has never heard before.

> See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire. Outside lie dark turned fields with rags of snow and darker woods beyond that harbor yet a few last wolves. His folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water but in truth his father has been a schoolmaster. He lies in drink, he quotes from poets whose names are now lost. The boy crouches by the fire and watches him. (McCarthy, 3)

The syntax forces the reader to readjust the bearings that he uses to read. The syntax demands attention because it cannot be assimilated blindly. It requires time and by that exposure. The more the prose is read the easier it is to understand. Try to breeze through Shakespeare and it will not work. The reader has to adjust himself to the structure and the same must be done here.

What makes the assimilation of the unusual grammatical movement possible though is McCarthy's understanding of the standard syntax. If he did not understand its basic conventions then he would be unable to alter them. An unconventional building will not stand unless the architect understands the rules of basic architecture. Successfully breaking them means that he successfully understands them. McCarthy can write in the way that he does because he understands the basics, which allows him to prioritize rhythmic and dramatic flow over grammatical convention. This is turn notes Bernard Schopen in "They Rode On", "demands that

it be read in literary—that is, formal—terms" (179), which has the intended outcome of thinking about the subject material in a different way. Written conventionally, the reader would assimilate the material normally like water, but non-conventionally the language style is processed uniquely and requires the reader to think differently about the material.

Because of the idiosyncratic style and because of the historical basis for the novel—linking he story to reality, the violence is given a lyrical quality and does not exist for its own sake. While the violence builds upon itself in endless ruin, it hardly becomes unpalatable. This has to do with use of third person objective, creating a psychic distance as Andy Kissane points out in "The Gun Went Off", between the reader, the narrator, and the event (5).

> Everywhere there were horses down and men scrambling and he saw a man who sat charging his rifle while blood ran from his ears and he saw men with revolvers disassembled trying to fit the spare loaded cylinders they carried and he saw men kneeling who tilted and clasped their shadows on the ground and he saw men lanced and caught up by the hair and scalped standing and he saw the horses of war trample down the fallen and a little white-faced pony with one clouded eye leaned out of the murk and snapped at him like a dog and was gone. Among the wounded some seemed dumb and without understanding and some were pale through the masks of dust and some had found themselves or tottered brokenly onto the spears of the savages. (McCarthy, 53)

This passage, taken from the Army's battle with the Comanche, avoids individual focalization of either group, presenting the battle from an all-seeing eye that documents the event rather than having a narrator give testimony and pass judgment. The reader is not alienated from the subject material because the narrator is an aloof figure whom Kissane says "does not adjudicate or

editorialize, does not judge any individual or event [and so] writes a novel that is both incessantly violent and incessantly readable" (5-6). This lack of interiority denies the violence precedence, treating it as just a part of the story rather than a surprising event. And since the blood seamlessly runs, the violence cannot become a climatic event as tension does not build for the sake of disaster. As McCarthy states in the beginning of the novel the violence is mindless—that is to say it is what it is and it exists because it does; of the Kid he says, "He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence" (3). Which is to say that it is natural, not gratuitous. Gratuity requires a mind that intentionally chooses to not think of the consequence of the action, mindlessness on the other hand carries out actions without regard to a single processed thought because the mind is absent.

The long passage from page 53 also elucidates McCarthy's use of parataxis which Ryan defines in his formalism chapter: "the main elements [in writing] are placed in a sequence of simple phrases linked together by the conjunction *and* (or variations such as but)", a contrast to the modern prevalence of hypotaxis in which "relations are specified as subordinate clauses joined by temporal or relational links such as *when*, *although*, *after*, etc.", in order to provide interest and variety (Ryan, 4). McCarthy, as evident in the passage, favors 'and', and in fact 'and' reigns in the novel. This preferment for parataxis gives the violence its lyrical quality. Hypotaxis would cut the passage into fragments, forcing the reader to abruptly pause and be a chained to punctuation breaks instead of reading in a flow. Imagine if the passage was instead written like this.

> Everywhere there were horses down and men scrambling[.] [First] he saw a man who sat charging his rifle while blood ran from his ears[.] [Then] he saw men with revolvers

> disassembled trying to fit the spare loaded cylinders they carried [as] ~~he saw men~~ kneeling [men] ~~who~~ tilted and clasped their shadows on the ground. He saw men lanced [amid others] ~~and~~ caught up by the hair and scalped standing[.] [Eventually] ~~he saw~~ the horses of war trampl[ed] down the fallen while ~~this was happening~~ a little white-faced pony with one clouded eye leaned out of the murk. ~~and snapped at him like a dog~~ [Like a dog the pony snapped at him,] [then] ~~and~~ was gone. Among the wounded[,] some seemed dumb and without understanding[.] [S]ome were pale through the masks of dust[,] ~~and~~ [while] some had found themselves ~~or~~ [amid those] tottered brokenly onto the spears of the savages. (53)

The addition of periods, commas, temporal and relational words butchers the dramatic rhythm of the passage. They divest the verse out of melody and into hard structure, forcing the reader into a hard state. No longer is there the pattern of a new form, but a return to the routinized language thinking. "Previously the pattern contribute[d] to the reader's sense that the text is a whole, an interrelated action, and that the narrator is not just telling a story but is constructing it through a careful organization of its elements" (Schopen, 189). Now, sans the locution repetition of 'and', with the addition of linked phrases and sentences, the passage does not evoke the same imagery and feeling in the mind of the reader. The form has not penetrated consciousness, so the content loses its power.

Truly the writing is also filmic in its use of description. In contrast to the removal of the author with the third person objective, we, the reader, are placed 'at the scene of the crime', or 'in the midst of battle'. Phillip Snyder analogizes the experience in "Disappearance", "Like phototechnology, McCarthy's prose can give us an illusory sense of experience, [. . .] minimizing

the foreignness of what it would be like to actually be there or to originate from there" (129). Undoubtedly McCarthy's prose description is beyond any that I have ever read. Really it seems beyond human, as if there was not an observer and the landscape itself is the descriptor; again, another paradox.

> When they rode out in the morning it was still dark. Lighting stood in ragged chains far to the south, silent, the staccato mountains bespoken blue and barren out of the void. Day broke upon a smoking reach of desert darkly clouded where the riders could count five separate storms spaced upon the shores of the round earth. They were riding in pure sand and the horses labored so hugely that the men were obliged to dismount and lead them, toiling up steep eskers where the wind blew the white pumice from the crests like the spume from sea swells and the sand was scalloped and fraily shaped and nothing else was there save random polished bones. (175)

The Southwest and Mexico are given this type of evocation through the entirety of the novel. Never have I felt in reading literature that I could know a place, not merely a visage of the place but the actual place, but in *Meridian* I do. Through the use of simile, "where the wind blew the white pumice from the crests like the spume from sea swells", and the use of words that demand thought, "lighting stood in ragged chains", the feeling is achieved. The reader cannot simply breeze through the description, it demands contemplation. Resultantly it brings the reader into a higher state of consciousness in his relationship with the settings. The requisite of thought magnifies the evocation. First he is puzzled, but then the image elaborates in his mind. The descriptor is seen and heard but not understood until it is mulled over with consideration to its object.

Furthermore, as Hanssen notes, “description even takes the place of reflection” (182). Carnage is not analyzed or pondered. It occurs, it ends, and it continues. Landscape narration substitutes the expected forthcoming contemplation of slaughter. With relentless immediacy the kid journeys on from the cavalry massacre. “He made his way among the pale and the dismembered, among the sprawled and legflung horses, and he took a reckoning by the stars and set off south afoot. The night wore a thousand shapes out there in the bush and he kept his eyes to the ground ahead. Starlight and waning moon made a faint shadow of his wanderings on the dark of the desert [. . .]” (55). The kid has moved on. He survived the massacre, awakens, and travels on into the night. The black of night has swallowed the scene and denied it contemplation. The storm began, the storm occurred, and the storm ended. As the environment is of violent nature in itself: storms, floods, desiccation, heatwaves—and since we do not ponder the morality of these events, McCarthy has us questioning whether to treat human events to the same accord. Kissane remarks, “the violence simply exists in human society, as it does in nature. McCarthy's objective narration serves to treat the natural world with the same emphasis as the human world” (5). Scenery and acts of nature do not override human action and human action does not have precedence over them. Digressing from the endeavors of the scalp hunters into scenic description decentralizes humanity to the greater world. The landscape is the before and the after; it precedes a human life and then succeeds it.

Similarly, McCarthy has decentralized himself as the writer throughout the book, contrasting the amount of attention he has given to the form. As the author he has simultaneously made himself very alive in the novel but has also relegated the author to the shadows. In a sense, the third person objective functions as an illusion for an effaced first person

narrator (Snyder, 132). Paying close attention to the second paragraph on the first page reveals all. In the passage the author uses first person singular: "I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens. The Dipper Stove" (3). Never again does he use this and consequently the reader buys into the third person objective because he failed to notice the indicator. In this example the illusion is hard to detect, but there are also the chapter headings. These represent the notion that Snyder borrows from the French, post-structuralist Jacques Derrida of language having a spectral quality or "a ghostly presence that actually marks absence" (129). Each chapter is without a title and marked instead by roman numerals, yet under the numerals are a series of phrases or words separated by lines. They are descriptors that tell the main events to occur in the chapter. For example, these are a few for chapter 21: "Desert Castaways - The backtrack - A hideout - The Wind takes a side" (295). The reader wonders who scribbled these under the numerals. Non-titled chapters certainly indicate an absence, but these sub-titles further the absence. They contrast the absence with a definitive of what will come to occur, making the reader wonder who it is that is not there, saying 'where is he'. The writer does not claim ownership to chapter titles as they are not named, so can he be trusted to delineate what is to come? I think not. The descriptors further the paradox of the narrator existing and not existing.

In the novel the plot always continues on. It is relentless. Whether it be through the use of 'and', the lack of reflection, and the phrase "they rode on" (or a variation). "That night they rode through [. . .] Amen, they said, and catching up their mounts they rode on" (47). "On the fifth of December they rode out north" (204). "They rose and went on" (295). "They got up and went on" (300). Hence it is impossible for the narrator to know all there is to know in a story so relentless. He is not always present. The chapter descriptors are accessories that serve to negate

this constant progression and preserve the illusion of the integrity of third person objective. Lee Mitchell comments in "A Book 'Made Out of Books'" that McCarthy had found out in one of his later characters that the intermediate of language is "an aberration by which we had come to lose the world" (265), and so the descriptors not only portray a lack of ownership, but are static aberrations to the unyielding plot. They are a mystery, existing by themselves. Moreover, the relentless immediacy and evocation conquer the need for explication so the descriptors substitute for analysis that would weaken the story. Analyzation would usurp the description and the immediacy of the prose that "continuously calls attention to itself" (Schopen 181). It would corrupt it and it would fail because the brutality of the violence eviscerates any analysis. With it, the world of *Blood Meridian* would be lost.

McCarthy has us perceiving a different world, one without interiority, where "meaning cannot emerge from within, from consciousness, only from without, from the landscape" (Hanssen, 182). The highest attention to detail is put on description, syntax, and in individual words. Doing so has the story "burst open within the reader like pellets of gas, seeming to imbue us with their haunting imagery" (Cunningham 6). The utmost control is put into the writing, ensuring that the reader is fully present in the entirety of the work. The prose is worked in all layers—from the paragraph, to the sentence, to the word. It is a controlled environment in which analysis is not completed for the reader; he has to do that for himself; he gets to do that for himself. Cunningham puts it best: "The lesser novelist, he seems to be reminding us, explains his story and analyzes his characters" (6). McCarthy does not tell the reader how to think, nor does he censure life. The historically-based prose is unrestrained in its evocations, "demand[ing] that we confront the world as it is" (Hanssen, 191). The variation

between the presence and absence of an author has McCarthy operating in two states of being, engaging the reader further into the story. The reader is unaccustomed to the unconventional form, and so the author's presence is inevitable. Yet the same time that he announces his presence, he fades himself into the background. By doing this, and by meshing the hand of the form with the hand of the content, thought flourishes, and a beautiful work of art is constructed for the reader.

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