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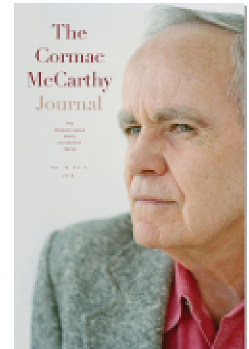

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High Road to Hell

Milton, Blake, McCarthy

Mark Steven

ABSTRACT: This article demonstrates that the poetry of William Blake irradiates Cormac McCarthy's 1985 novel, *Blood Meridian*, where it occupies one side of a dialectical relationship with the work of another poet, John Milton. The essay's argument is that the poetic works of Milton and Blake strain against one another from within McCarthy's prose to determinately shape how we read the novel. It seeks to show how an understanding of why certain literary influences are enunciated will contribute to our knowledge of the book's relationship to its thematic content and historical referents. KEYWORDS: Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, William Blake, John Milton, capitalism

In Chapter 11 of *Blood Meridian*, Judge Holden delivers a campfire sermon on the Anasazi, an ancient indigenous people that occupied what centuries later would become the American Southwest. "The old ones," he calls them. "They quit these parts, routed by drought or disease or by wandering bands of marauders, quit these parts ages since and of them there is no memory" (146). Long vanished, the Anasazi abide only in superstitious tales and fossilized construction. "They are rumors and ghosts in this land and they are much revered," says Holden. "The tools, the art, the building: these things stand in judgement on the latter races" (146). Holden's parable thus pits mysticism against materialism, contrasting the veneration of spirits to the architecture of an empire. "Here are the dead fathers," we are told. "Their spirit is entombed in the stone. It lies upon the land with the same weight and the same ubiquity" (146). What we are reading in the interplay between these two visions of the past, one immaterially metaphysical and the other carved from stone, are two of the dominant ways for interpreting Holden and the novel he inhabits. In 2002, for instance, David Holloway argued for the imperative of dialectically "transcoding" McCarthy criticism, where despite their significant insights the established positions "have tended to repress the importance of a more universal set of material issues and object social relations, within which both the novels and the readings of the novels have been formed, and to which each must ultimately refer in some covert or unspoken way" (5).[1] I argue

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that this interpretive transcoding is already being staged within the novel itself, in the stylistically determining relationship between two of McCarthy's literary antecedents, John Milton and William Blake, with the former representing theological spirit and the latter material history.

To demonstrate that the Miltonic parallels in *Blood Meridian* are in fact mediated through the work of Blake will contribute to our understanding of how McCarthy's book maintains a critical relationship with its literary inheritance, with its own theological mysticisms, and with its historical circumstances. The well-worn truism about Milton is that his depiction of Satan is, because of its theological abstractions and its burnished style, an aesthetic glorification of Evil. In the first half of this essay, I want to show how that interpretation maps onto McCarthy criticism, and especially with regard to the character of Holden who in many ways duplicates the Miltonic Satan. Blake developed literary history's best-known rendition of that charge against Milton, doing so at the beginning of a long poem named after the senior poet, which sought to refashion Miltonic style in the service of anti-capitalist critique. To be sure, Blake's approach to Milton is itself one of transcoding, affirming Milton's aesthetic achievement but simultaneously re-inscribing it within the matrix of industrial capitalism. The essay's second half shows that Blake's appropriation of Milton influences McCarthy's depiction of the marketization of the American Southwest, as well as McCarthy's presentation of the variously bloody depredations involved therein. I argue that *Blood Meridian* is self-aware and sharply critical of its own realization as specifically American literature, and that this parallels the way Blake was sensitive to what it meant to write English literature at the turn of the nineteenth century and having inherited the legacy of Milton. Like Blake more so than Milton, McCarthy constructs an aesthetic armature that responds not only to the timeless questions of metaphysical good and evil but also and even primarily to the political imperatives of material history. My objective here is to demonstrate that the literary inheritance from Milton and Blake serves two clear functions: it offers historical motivation for McCarthy's style, reframing that style as a response to capitalist accumulation, and it thereby gives us a lens for understanding both Holden and McCarthy's novel that looks beyond theological symbolism and into the material exigencies of economic history.

Blood Meridian narrates the exploits of a runaway referred to only as "the kid," an adolescent who inhabits the fiercely contested borderlands between the United States and Mexico during the late 1840s and 1850s. After joining a band of incompetent and ill-armed U.S. Army irregulars, many of whom are soon massacred by Comanche warriors, the kid is recruited for a mercenary scalp-hunting operation, led by the historical figure John Joel Glanton and supported by the almost inhuman Judge Holden. Many of the book's readers will sense

that, among many other things, Holden embodies the literary-historical rebirth of the Miltonic Satan. That sense finds textual ballast in the correspondence between an episode from Chapter 10 of *Blood Meridian*, when Holden teaches the Glanton gang to manufacture gunpowder, and Book 6 of *Paradise Lost*, in which Satan has the Rebel Angels exhume "their engines and their balls / Of missive ruin," so as to partake in "warr and mutual slaughter" with the heavens (256). In Milton's poem, the legions of hell

turned
Wide the Celestial soil, and saw beneath
Th' originals of Nature in their crude
Conception; sulphurous and nitrous foam
They found, they mingled, and with subtle art,
Concocted and adusted they reduced
To blackest grain . . . (256)

In McCarthy's prose, Holden leads the gang to a volcanic caldera where they too mine the brimstone. "We chipped it loose and chopped it fine with our knives till we had about two pounds of it and then the judge took the wallets and went to a cupped place in the rock and dumped out the charcoal and the nitre and stirred them about with his hand and poured the sulphur in" (131). There are clearly lexical and thematic agreements between these two episodes, in which both characters concoct their explosive ordnance from sulphuric and nitrous filtrates, from blackened charcoal, transvaluing nature through a kind of artisanal labor. McCarthy and Milton are using if not the very same then at least remarkably similar recipes for improvised gunpowder. There is an equally clear overlap in what this labor occasions, in that both Holden and Satan share a predilection for sermonizing. For both figures, gunpowder is not just a concrete necessity of modern warfare. It also provides an instance for catalytic oration—for what Milton calls "missive ruin." But just as remarkable as these readily observable stylistic similarities are the specific literary-historical implications of McCarthy's inheritance from Milton. In this case, stylistic legacy carries an aesthetic ideology.

If Holden does in fact reincarnate the Miltonic Satan, *Blood Meridian* will be open to charges otherwise directed at Milton: to questions of theodicy and to the accusation of heroic evil, or more prosaically, the glorification of violence. This requires some explanation with reference to Milton before we can see how that poet's sense of evil pertains to McCarthy. Recall that Milton's intention for *Paradise Lost* was to "assert Eternal Providence" and thereby "justify the ways of

God to men," and that, if he was unsuccessful in either assertion or justification, it is likely because he presented Satan as a more engaging character than God (121). In that reading, the poem's Manichaean worldview epitomizes what Terry Eagleton thinks of as "one particularly dubious myth about evil," namely "that there is a kind of down-at-heel heroism about it," which manifests here not only in the apparent underdog courage of Satan but also in the formalization of his character through poetic language (57).[2] Christopher Ricks' 1963 book on Milton's Grand Style remains one of the best studies on the strictly linguistic features of *Paradise Lost*. In it, Ricks argues that the sheer complexity of Satan forces Milton into his finest acts of poetic distillation. "Hell is more memorable than Heaven," Ricks argues, "because Hell resists directness" (149). In *Paradise Lost*, demonic content demands a more complex rhetoric than is required for goodness. It generates a poetic voice that is simultaneously allusive and detailed, which attempts to catalogue the apparently unrepresentable though dense figuration and thereby lends stylistic power not to good but instead to evil. While the presentation of Heaven and God utilizes a more direct language, based on declarative statement and the unity of metaphor, Hell and Satan require a pulsating proliferation of approximating figures, most often similes, combined together into epic catalogues:

> A multitude, like which the populous North
> Poured never from her frozen loins, to pass
> Rhene or the Danaw, when her barbarous sons
> Came like a Deluge on the South, and spread
> Beneath Gibraltar to the Libyan sands. (130)

A simile embedded within another simile; a oxymoron presented wholly in negative; an extended sexual metaphor; multiple geographic allusions: this is the dense figuration we encounter all throughout Books 1 and 2 of *Paradise Lost*, where style differentiates between good and evil.

The stylistic divergence between good and evil becomes clear in the presentation of Eden before and after the arrival of Satan. The garden's sensuous details are presented not with the kind of simile we encounter throughout descriptions of the Rebel Angels but, rather, with precise metaphors and superlatives whose unavoidable hyperbole abstracts from the materiality of the things they describe:

> . . . in this pleasant soil
> His far more pleasant Garden God ordained;
> Out of the fertile ground he caused to grow

> All trees of noblest kind for sight, smell, taste;
> And all amid them stood the Tree of Life,
> High eminent, blooming ambrosial fruit
> Of vegetable gold; and next to life
> Our Death the Tree of Knowledge grew fast by,
> Knowledge of Good bought dear by knowing ill. (197)

Though these lines appeal to the senses—"sight, smell, taste"—there are no worldly comparisons here to ground that superlative, "noblest kind" in the realm of human or historical experience, save for the strangely alchemical and perhaps even monetizing metaphor of "vegetable gold."[3] Without sensuous materiality, God's creation is bound to be somewhat less appealingly complicated or sympathetically experiential than the malevolent force that not only corrupts it, but whose corrupting malevolence usurps the rhetorical abstraction upon which God's claims to goodness seem to be predicated. Indeed, the gesture that inaugurates humankind's fall from grace holds to a newfound appreciation of that very sensuousness, which is conveyed to Eve as temptation in Satan's masterful rhetoric. "Fixed on the Fruit she gazed, which to behold / Might tempt alone, and in her ears the sound / Yet rung of his persuasive words" (322). When engaged in illicit consumption, enjoying the fruit "wholly on her taste," the style shifts conspicuously. Here Eve's experience warrants sensual comparison, which is made animate by simile: "And heightened as with wine, jocund and boon, / Thus to her self she pleasingly began." While accounting for Satan's temptation of Eve, which mobilizes rhetoric as its own kind of "missive ruin," Milton's style surrenders to that same temptation, presenting the corruption of good in more sympathetic language (because it is experientially familiar) than that which was used for the depiction of good's apparent quintessence. This rhetorical drive is what makes the Miltonic Satan so damnably irresistible.

It has been argued that the aesthetic ideology of McCarthy's novel is compromised for similar reasons: that it too succumbs to the rhetorical charms of the Satanic Holden. James Wood puts it forcefully: "The inflamed rhetoric of 'Blood Meridian' is problematic," he writes, "because it reduces the gap between the diction of the murderous judge and the diction of the narration itself: both speak with mythic afflatus." The first time Holden is addressed by another character, he is referred to as Satan, precisely when or even because he is engaged in an act of rhetorical persuasion, instigating mob violence against Reverend Green. "This is him," we are told. "The devil. Here he stands" (7).[4] And, later in the book, we are told that Holden's rhetorical gift is contiguous

with the language of versification: that he knows the Greek poets and that he declaims "in the old epic mode." (118) But, more than Holden's speech, it is the descriptions of his character that are distinctly and stylistically epic, and epic in a particular way. Take, for instance, the first occasion in which Holden is seen to front a band of mercenaries, into which the kid will soon be conscripted:

> and they saw one day a pack of viciouslooking humans mounted on unshod indian ponies riding half drunk through the streets, bearded, barbarous, clad in the skins of animals stitched up with thews and armed with weapons of every description, revolvers of enormous weight and bowieknives the size of claymores and short twobarreled rifles with bores you could stick your thumbs in and the trappings of their horses fashioned out of human skin and their bridles woven up from human hair and decorated with human teeth and the riders wearing scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears and the horses rawlooking and wild in the eye and their teeth bared like feral dogs and riding also in the company a number of halfnaked savages reeling in the saddle, dangerous, filthy, brutal, the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh. (78)

Though perhaps less astonishing than the critically venerated passage on the "legion of horribles," this is one of numerous sentences written in the book's elevated style: a sprawling parataxis, reminiscent of both the Old Testament and the ancient epic-prose that combines emphatically visual equivocations, such as "viciouslooking" and "rawlooking," into a simile that simultaneously stresses the grotesque particulars of this catalogue as well as its irresolvable otherworldliness. "Foremost among them," reads the following sentence, "outsized and childlike with his naked face, rode the judge" (79). The prose style with which Holden's leadership of the gang is first described, in that long sentence focalized to the kid's perspective, harmonizes the book's omniscient narration with the speech of its chief antagonist. What we are reading in both is "the old epic mode," and, moreover, it is a performance of that mode using the formal devices favored by Milton, echoing the catalogues in Books 1 and 2 of *Paradise Lost*.

Here the book itself appears to be narrated in the voice of its own Satan, or its style seems to endorse the ontological core of Holden's worldview. "The truth about the world," Holden argues, "is that anything is possible" (245). This

statement is followed by a bombastic display of oratorical force, a catalogue of figures whose heteroclite incompatibility goes to prove the claim they are marshaled to support, and to amaze the listener in doing so: "Had you not seen it all from birth and thereby bled it of its strangeness it would appear to you for what it is, a hat trick in a medicine show, a fevered dream, a trance bepopulate with chimeras having neither analogue nor precedent, an itinerant carnival, a migratory tentshow whose ultimate destination after many a pitch in many a muddied field is unspeakable and calamitous beyond reckoning" (245). Not one but the combination of these figures might serve as an appropriate synopsis of *Blood Meridian*, a book whose narrative involves all of these events. But perhaps more importantly this statement reads like a declaration of aesthetic intent, followed by a summary of the book's own narrative and a performative rehearsal of its style.[5] It announces a style whose epic and biblical impulse, manifest in a predilection for the catalogue and a taste for rich figuration, will produce sentences that sanction Holden's projected "truth" of this utterly strange "world."

This interpretation, which begins to harmonize the book's outward form with Holden's philosophy and to show that it might revel stylistically in the bloodshed it chronicles, should recall not only a criticism frequently leveled at Milton, but also and more directly a familiar line from Blake. "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell," claimed Blake, "is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (71). Without necessarily endorsing that understanding of Milton, we might be tempted to advance the parallel argument that McCarthy, like Milton, unknowingly set out to ride with the Satanic Holden. That is what James Wood suggests in observing the collapse of distance between Holden's rhetoric and the book's omniscient narration. Or, in Peter Josyph's direct statement: "If, as Blake said, Milton was better at writing the Devil because his Devil was more to his liking than his God, McCarthy must have recognized that to show us a kingdom of darkness by shining upon it the light of his brilliant prose was a fitting, perhaps a necessary, challenge for his development as a writer." (67) My sense, however, is that Blake's charge against Milton is just as prominent in *Blood Meridian* as the Miltonic allusions and their potential for stylistic endorsements of evil—and that its presence supplies the book with a materialist critique of capitalism that is historically related but textually irreducible to Miltonic theodicy. In other words, while I want us to take seriously McCarthy's evident debt to Milton, I also want to show that McCarthy's prose resonates with Blake's critical revision of Miltonic verse just as much as it does with Milton's stylistic valorization of Satan. Neither Milton nor Blake discounts the other: as we

shall see, both are crucial antecedents to McCarthy's style, not least because the historical terrain mapped by McCarthy (in what we will see is a truly Blakean method) is itself materially determined by the theological systems expressed by Milton.

We begin establishing the lineage through Milton, Blake, and McCarthy by way of the titular image of a "blood meridian," with which we can develop some mutual affinities between the three. Proceeding after that is an account of Blake's historicized appropriation of Milton and of its determining presence within *Blood Meridian*. Beyond the familiar etymology—"meridian" denotes not only celestial and diurnal phenomena but also, according to the OED, it is "a proper name for: the Devil"—there are more specific reasons for its use by our three writers.[6] For instance, when the Glanton party is described as "the harried afterguard of some ruined army retreating across the meridians of chaos and old night" (163), we should hear a Miltonic echo in the collocation of "meridian" with "chaos," considering Milton's affection for these two words, both of which are integral to the celestial opera of *Paradise Lost*.[7] Likewise, if Milton can lay exclusive claim to just one word in the English language, surely that word is "Pandemonium," which in *Paradise Lost* names the High Capital of Hell. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy uses this word conspicuously in the final sentence of Chapter 12, casting it as the very "evening redness in the west" to which the book's subtitle refers:

> They rode out on the north road as would parties bound for El Paso but before they were even quite out of sight of the city they had turned their tragic mounts to the west and they rode infatuate and half fond toward the red demise of that day, toward the evening lands and the distant pandemonium of the sun. (185)

That McCarthy's meridian is so emphatically sanguinary and a defining feature of his imagined Southwest also evokes Blake's embellishments on Miltonic astronomy, in that Blake refers to the meridian sun as a "disk of blood," and as the gore-soaked avatar of a uniquely American sublime: "As human blood shooting its veins all round the orbed heaven / Red rose the clouds from the Atlantic in vast wheels of blood" (88). Of course, these are only stylistic resonances, but they nevertheless invite conjecture on McCarthy's relation to a lineage including both Milton and Blake. However, there is another astronomical consistency shared by all three writers that will help amplify the echoes between them: their mythic paragons of metaphysical stability all arrive on earth by way of stellular

airspace. For Blake and McCarthy, those entities are also embodiments of a literary tradition inaugurated by Milton. This should become clear enough if we look sequentially at some of the relevant episodes from all three writers.

In *Paradise Lost*, Satan plummets to earth as a fallen star:

> upon the firm opacous globe
> Of this round world, whose first convex divides
> The luminous inferior orbs, enclos'd
> From Chaos and th' inroad of Darkness old,
> Satan alighted walks: a globe far off
> It seemed, now seems a boundless continent
> Dark, waste, and wild, under the frown of Night
> Starless exposed, and ever-threat'ning storms
> Of Chaos blust'ring round, inclement sky;
> Save on that side which from the wall of Heav'n
> Though distant far some small reflection gains
> Of glimmering air less vexed with tempest loud:
> Here walked the Fiend at large in spacious field. (1810–82)

Satan's descent into the human landscape blazes its passage through a chaos separating that untarnished earth from metaphysical realms of good and evil, and which thus isolates the "Globe" from Heaven and Hell. Here the earth's curvature projects something like an ozone layer, that ontologically apportioning "convex," on whose far side is celestial tempest and infinite chaos: it is that through which Satan now passes. The journey should therefore be from the realms of uninhabitable abstraction into the material exigencies of that "far off" landmass, down upon which these skies gaze. And yet, as we have seen, the earth to which Satan descends is that of prelapsarian myth and of either a prehistoric or an ahistorical metaphysics.

In Blake's *Milton* poem, we encounter a similar descent, but this time it deliberately articulates itself within literary tradition, invoking the older poet, Milton, by name and alongside the classical muses, before allowing Milton himself to follow Satan's meteoric route back to earth:

> Onwards his Shadow kept its course among the Spectres, call'd
> Satan, but swift as lightning passing them, startled the shades
> Of Hell beheld him in a trail of light as of a comet
> That travels into Chaos: so Milton went guarded within. (163)

Blake's Milton falls to earth just as Milton's Satan did before him, but what is different is that Blake's poem is keenly aware of its status as literature within a literary tradition, and that as literature it must inhabit history.[8] Whereas Milton's Satan arrives in the mythic Garden of Eden, Blake's Milton arrives in the real world of English history, which, for Blake, has followed Milton's naïve championing of evil into the industrial production of its own Hell. In Blake's account, from the poem's Preface, he claims to reanimate Milton and return him to England so as to channel that poet's rhetorical gift in rousing up the "Young men of the New Age" against a multitude of stupefied "Hirelings" who, laboring under Milton's misleading influence, "would if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal war" (147). Blake's affirmation here is essentially theological, but his version of goodness sharpens the theological doctrine into something more socialist or at least anti-capitalist. His charge is directed at "Fools" that aim "to depress your powers by the prices they pretend to give for contemptible works or the expensive advertising boast that they make such works," against which he recommends his readers "believe Christ & his Apostles that there is a Class of Men whose whole delight is in Destroying" (147). Blake wants to reconcile historical contingency with Miltonic theodicy, opposing capitalist corruption with divine good. Here the augmentation of Miltonic tradition is ultimately a matter of political economy.

Following Blake, McCarthy's book opens with what might be read as a similar invocation of the poetic muse by way of the kid's father, whom we are told "quotes from poets whose names are now lost" (3). And, as with Blake's poem, that invocation also calls forth an astral downpour: "Night of your birth. Thirty-three. The Leonids they were called. God how the stars did fall. I looked for blackness, holes in the heavens" (3). Though the poets remain nameless, the combination of their anonymous quotation with the father's search "for blackness," for "holes in the heavens," recalls the Miltonic "inroad of Darkness old" as well as Blake's recasting of that "inroad" as a "comet" through "chaos." And when, in the following passage, we are informed that the kid "can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence," we are given our first encounter with the book's superabundance of what Blake would describe as a mentally depressed though corporally animate barbarity (3). Within a completely different setting from Blake, and approximately half a century later, the kid acts as an expression of the very consciousness against which that poet wanted to direct his literary energies. It is, however, to another Romantic poet that the opening passage dedicates its clearest literary allusion. "All history present in that visage," we are told, "the child the father of the man" (3). This sentence alludes to a hopeful lyric by William Wordsworth, in which the speaker delights at the vision of a rainbow

as an expression of God's covenant with humankind. While Wordsworth's poem typifies a Romantic fetish for childish innocence, connecting it with the promise of a caring God, in McCarthy's revision that innocence has been supplanted by the presence of "history," manifesting in the kid's violent predisposition.[9]

Through its allusions to astronomy, the opening of *Blood Meridian* signals a kinship to Blake's poem about Milton and, for this reason, it suggests something important about the book's extraterrestrial forces as they prepare to make landfall. The subsequent manifestations of Hell, of evil, are not just symbolic eruptions of metaphysical consistency. Instead, they are the inheritance of a literary tradition and, if they are also mediated through Blake, we should expect their repurposing along historical lines. It is worth remembering here that if Milton really is "of the Devil's party," this is primarily "because he was a true Poet," and that if he really was a "true Poet," it must be in Blake's sense of literary vocation, wherein the poet's task is to use poetic craft to restore the "fallen light" of human vision. From that perspective, the purpose of a truly sublime account of evil, the likes of which only a Milton could enunciate, is to mobilize literary force against the "corporeal" violence that dominates a world in which the "mental" has been depressed by metaphysical abstractions, and to do so by re-grounding good and evil within its historical landscape.

One of the principal differences between Milton and Blake is that the Blakean hell is not an abstract metaphysical force but, rather, a theistic product of material history taken root in a very specific landscape. Blake's poem about Milton seeks to localize the older poet's metaphysics by seizing the abstract universalism of warring gods and devils and resituating it on English soil at the turn of the nineteenth century. To look at the poem's opening verse, we can see clearly that Blake's version of the Miltonic Hell is a byproduct of England's transition from a semi-feudal and agrarian economy into that of large-scale industry:

And did those feet in ancient time,
Walk upon England's mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On England's pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic mills? (147)

These two quatrains seek to square Milton's narrative of the fall with England's passage through economic and industrial modernity—to think of our ultimate damnation as the advancement of capitalism. Eden's prelapsarian arcadia, what Milton called the "pleasant soile," is transposed onto "England's mountains green" and the "pleasant pastures" of an agrarian economy. By contrast, the post-lapsarian world of the fall is that of capitalist modernity and its first industrial revolution: a landscape blighted with "dark Satanic mills" collectively vomiting industrial smog upon "clouded hills." David. V. Erdman accounts for the poem's geographical metonymy this way, casting it as central to a vision of warfare that would undoubtedly have interested the creator of Holden: "London was not a mill or factory city, though there was some small scale recasting and reforging of northern iron. But it was a war arsenal and the hub of the machinery of war, and Blake uses the symbol in that sense" (396). Technological advancement as circumscribed by capital is, for Blake, the historical realization of Milton's metaphysical evil. It actualizes precisely that mindless violence against which he aspires to direct literary power. In Blake's view, evil is synonymous with capitalism.

McCarthy presents us with something very similar, transplanting the Miltonic hell onto the American frontier while emphasizing that landscape's economic peculiarity. While Blake adapts Milton for a modernity that post-dates and superannuates the metaphysics of *Paradise Lost*, McCarthy consciously engineers his own adaptation for a comparably historical repurposing. The nature of this repurposing is suggested in expriest Ben Tobin's mediation on the badlands' lava fields. "Where for aught any man knows lies the locality of hell," he intones. (130) And later: "But someplace in the scheme of things this world must touch the other" (130). This too might be an accurate description of the world depicted in *Blood Meridian*, a fictional universe comprising two otherwise asymptotic strata that, at certain moments, are given to intersect: on one level, a transhistorical or metaphysical conception of Hell, whose evil is a matter for scripture; and, on the other, a geophysical realization of hellishness, the kind that shreds horses hooves and makes travel excruciating. Allowing for the convergence of those two worlds, grounding theism within a material landscape, was Blake's revision to Milton's theodicy and the means by which he sought to amend it. Blake contended that the theological influence of Milton had material implications, and only by acknowledging the materiality of that influence, its decussation with capital, could the poet serve as corrective. In that regard, and while it is Tobin who narrates Holden's sermon on the volcanic crater and the subsequent manufacture of gunpowder, we might read the expriest as a Blakean figure, successfully fathoming Miltonic evil from within the book's historically peculiar time and place.

Whereas Blake's England is deformed by early industrial capitalism, McCarthy's frontier is carved up by the manifold agents of primitive accumulation, that forceful expropriation of labor and resources from precapitalist spaces. For Karl Marx, primitive accumulation is the passage of historical birthing through which "capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt" (926).[10] That ultimately Hobbesian conception is what we encounter in grisly form with the book's principal currency, the scalp, which fuses the military predicate of American expansionism with the mechanisms of financial circulation. John Sepich describes historically the incentive for scalping as a kind of paid labor. "A group of fifty Indian hunters," he says, "paid two hundred dollars a scalp would have to bring only four scalps a month into Chihuahua City in order to exceed the army's rate of pay, and for work not much more hazardous than the army's" (7). Indeed, it is in Chihuahua that the kid first learns of Glanton's scalp-hunting operation, marketed here as a business venture with government backing. "His name is Glanton," says Toadvine, the kid's travelling companion. "He's got a contract with Trias. They're to pay him a hundred dollars a head for scalps and a thousand for Gómez's head" (79). Much later, when Glanton orders the scalping of a woman, he refers to it as taking a "receipt," and later still, when the gang rides back into town, they are met with their reward: "There were one hundred and twenty-eight scalps and eight heads and the governor's lieutenant and his retinue came down into the courtyard to welcome them and admire their work. They were promised full payment in gold . . ." (167). This kind of payment, we are then shown, underwrites much of the frontier economy. It gives reason for merchants to pedal their wares and services, who upon the gang's reemergence from the wilds turn out in droves: "crying out the names of celebrated patrons upon whom they had attended, and all of these entrepreneurs assuring the company of credit on the most generous terms" (168).

If scalps are the principal currency, then one of the more prevalent commodities in this economy is slave-picked cotton. From the book's fourth paragraph, in which we encounter bondservants "in the fields, lank and stooped, their fingers spiderlike among the bolls of cotton" (4), the consumption of cotton is associated with economically instrumental bloodshed. And, in Miltonic or Blakean fashion, it also marks the corruption of what might have been an Eden. "A shadowed agony in the garden," reads the following sentence (4). Now look closely at this description of Holden, from Chapter 11, in which that economy and its landscape combine with an undeniable allusion to Blake:

> A lobeshaped moon rose over the black shapes of the mountains dimming out the eastern stars and along the nearby ridge the white blooms

of flowering yuccas moved in the wind and 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. Farther along the ridge and slightly elevated on a ledge of sandstone squatted the judge, pale and naked. He raised his hand and the bats flared in confusion and then he lowered it and sat as before and soon they were feeding again. (148)

Here we have travelled from the "dark Satanic mills" of England to hear out the "dark satanic hummingbirds" of the Southwestern borderlands. Holden appears as organically embedded in the scene itself, as though his very presence infuses the tableau: his "pale and naked" form is a reflection of the "lobeshaped moon" that illuminates the ridge. And, like the serpent in Milton's Garden, he directs the feeding, causing the bats to frenzy with the slightest movement of his hand. Edwin T. Arnold has been correct to point out that when, elsewhere in the book, Holden says, "The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I'd have them all in zoos," he is anachronistically echoing lines from Blake's introduction to the "Proverbs of Hell" (48).[11] Here the associations between birds and capture, bondage, imprisonment, or enslavement provide a crucial subtext, which works itself into the choice of imagery. While the "white blooms of flowering yuccas" recall the "blooming ambrosial fruit" from Milton's poem, the "hummingbirds" are avatars for the men and women "from some nether part of the world," whose shackled labor is to pick those blooms under threat of physical violence. In that way, these sentences recall the Edenic description from the book's opening pages, and thus reflect a properly Blakean image of mortified chattel labor.

While this discussion of the frontier economy seems to be drifting away from questions of good and evil, of God and Satan, it is precisely in the historical logic of primitive accumulation that we find an important motivation for the book's tortured relationship with theodicy, and so with its Miltonic and Blakean precursors.[12] Perhaps one of the key reasons why McCarthy's book echoes so much of Milton, Blake, and their respective theodicies is because the economy that defines its historical landscape is one that makes it impossible to "justify the ways of God to man," or to even write "in fetters" when conceiving of God, precisely because that economy had already subsumed God or good for its own "evil" operations. As Captain White puts it in Chapter 3, arguing on patriotic grounds for an illegal invasion of Mexico after the treaty that ended the Mexican-American War in 1848:

There is no government in Mexico. Hell, there's no God in Mexico. Never will be. We are dealing with a people manifestly incapable of governing themselves. And do you know what happens with people

> who cannot govern themselves? That's right. Others come in to govern for them. (34)

White's logic exemplifies the ideological conception and material process of primitive accumulation, the blood-fecund seeding of new capitalist enterprise. Scholars have argued that this historical content corresponds with the book's compositional context, with the imperialist warfare depicted here functioning as an allegorical invocation of America's crusade against the communists in Vietnam.[13] If it is not directly against this historical present then perhaps it is against the tradition of primitive accumulation more generally, as exemplified in the Southwest of the 1840s and 1850s, that McCarthy's book appears to be deploying its literary intelligence and doing so by participating in a tradition inhabited by Milton and Blake. As Holloway puts it with reference to his project of transcoding, what has been repressed in McCarthy criticism is "the expansion and systematic modification of the capitalist mode of production during the post-World War II era in which McCarthy thinks and writes his published work," and which I suggest motivates a return to the poetry of Milton and Blake. What the conjunction of those two poets provides is a literary optic through which evil is viewed as the material fact of capitalist accumulation and, simultaneously, as capitalism's hijacking of theological good: it is an evil embodied in the figure of Judge Holden.

There are, of course, numerous other literary antecedents in a book whose textual sources motivated its author to concede what he describes as the "ugly fact" of authorship: that "books are made out of books" (Woodward). While the precipitous multiplicity of those sources might be reason enough to leave unanswered the question of why a novelist is drawing not on prose fiction but poetic verse, a different though complementary argument could advance by charting McCarthy's numerous appropriations from Herman Melville, another novelist deeply indebted to the work of Milton and also a reader of Blake. Indeed, Captain Ahab famously precedes Judge Holden in giving new life to the Miltonic Satan and to enacting a similar historical grounding of the otherwise mythic figure.[14] Nevertheless, the goal here has been to demonstrate that if McCarthy adapted Milton the adaptation was not on Milton's own terms but on those set by Blake, according to which literature's ideological calling is less about affirming good or denouncing evil as it is about rousing cerebral energy through aesthetic force against purely corporal violence, and about doing so from within specific historical frames. The shared frame here is capitalism, whose awesome horrors are depicted both theologically and materially. This is at least one purpose fulfilled by

the English poets in the American novel, a specific, concrete reason for their conditioning presence. Blake and McCarthy both employ the Miltonic sign of malevolence—namely, Satan—and its associated forms to reflect upon the really existing evil of capital as infused by but irreducible to its theological prehistory.

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NOTES

1. I cite Holloway's book, despite its age, because it remains the best work of Marxist scholarship dedicated to Cormac McCarthy, and also because his project, articulated here (following Fredric Jameson) as one of transcoding, remains as relevant as ever. For instance, in Steven Frye's excellent chapter on *Blood Meridian* in the more recent *Cambridge Companion*, he points out what at first appears as the obverse side of things, when the historicists and the materialists overlook the symbolic and the theological. "These readings," argues Frye, "begin to imply a moral vision that might seem otherwise absent, but they are only partially sufficient because they tend to focus attention on the novel's social themes, without engaging the dense philosophical and religious portent forced on the reader in the figure of Judge Holden, the ex-priest Tobin, and the unnamed kid" (109). My sense is that a proper transcoding, still underway and following Holloway's lead, takes that "dense philosophical and religious portent" and integrates it dialectically with the "social themes." That is the kind of criticism I am aiming for here.

2. This (Blakean) perspective on Milton is not definitive, undergoing its best-known revision in the work of Stanley Fish, whose *Surprised by Sin* used *Paradise Lost* as an exemplary text through which develop reader-response theory. According to Fish's summary of his argument: "the poem's centre of reference is its reader who is also its subject," and (2) Milton's purpose is to educate the reader to awareness of his position and responsibilities as a fallen man, and to a sense of the distance which separates him from the innocence once his; (3) Milton's method is to re-create in the mind of the reader (which is, finally, the poem's scene) the drama of the Fall, to make him fall again exactly as Adam did and with Adam's troubled clarity, that is to say, 'not deceived'" (1).

3. The aesthetic success or failure of this phrase, "vegetable gold," has been a source of critical contestation. F. R. Leavis called it "verbal opulence" whereas Douglas Bush, on the other hand, says that it gives the fruit a "metallic hardness." For a useful summary of those evaluations and others, see John Leonard, 189–90.

4. Productively playful comparisons might be drawn elsewhere between Tobin's description of Holden's Satanic skillset and Mick Jagger's lyrical swagger in "Sympathy for the Devil," released in 1969 and enjoying airplay well into the 1970s.

5. Joshua Comyn uses these lines to advance a forceful hypothesis about Holden's narrative authority: "The fictional author of the novel is the judge, the man called Holden" (59). John Sepich also notes the synoptic quality of these lines.

6. McCarthy himself pursued the *OED* in devising his book's title, which directed him to another Romantic poet. Written on the back of a manila folder in the novel's manuscripts is the note: "SEE OED Meridian—Byron quoted (get full quote)," beneath which appears the book's full title: "Blood Meridian, or The Evening Redness In The West." The Byron poem to which this most likely refers is "Stanzas to the Po," which includes these two quatrains:

A stranger loves the lady of the land,
Born far beyond the mountains, but his blood
Is all meridian, as if never fanned
By the black wind that chills the polar flood.

My blood is all meridian; were it not,
I had not left my clime, nor should I be,
In spite of tortures, ne'er to be forgot,
A slave again of love, -at least of thee.

I owe this information to an unpublished graduate dissertation by Christopher Muse.

7. See, for instance, Book 4, when Satan is said to have "sat high in his Meridian Towre," and later in that book the emphasis of a "Meridian hour," and then, in Book 5, Eden's "meridian heat." There are numerous enunciations of Chaos throughout the poem, first as the substance from which Heaven and Hell first emerged, and then repeatedly as both a kind of metaphysical antimatter and a Satanic threat.

8. While Milton nominates the ancient poets by name, Homer and Virgil, he does so only as paratext to the poem's verse, which is written in prose and which only appeared in a reissue, whereas the poem's speaker appeals directly to the "Heav'nly Muse."

9. In my opinion the best account of this intertext, which also takes into consideration the Miltonic overlaps detailed in the present essay, is Amy Hungerford's terrific lecture for the Open Yale Course, "The American Novel since 1945."

10. In the same chapter, Marx also talks about scalping. "The British Parliament," writes Marx, "proclaimed bloodhounds and scalping as 'means that God and Nature had given into its hand'" (918).

11. The lines Arnold is thinking of here read "How do you know but ev'ry bird that cuts the airy way / Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?"

12. The book also forges a thematic association between scalping and the church. In one passage, a pile of scalps are stacked within a church (Chapter 5); in another, the scalpers are seen riding out from the standpoint of the church (Chapter 7); and, elsewhere, the scalped victims are said to "lay like mained and naked monks" (54). Sepich explores the intersection of religion and scalping, emphasizing that many scalp-hunters claimed to be fighting "the good fight," with God on their side (9).

13. For a detailed account of McCarthy's oeuvre against American nationalist ideology, see John Cant. On particular allegorical tropes, see Neil Campbell; see Mike Davis for a short piece on American atrocities in Vietnam, in which he argues that a "reincarnation of Glanton's scalping party was an elite 45-man unit of the 101 Airborne Division known as 'Tiger Force'" (98); but then see Jonathan Imber Shaw's 2008 essay, which relocates the sphere of reference from Vietnam to El Salvador.

14. For an excellent essay on the associations between McCarthy's prose and the prosody of verse, see Sean Pryor; for the influence of Melville on Milton, see Robin Grey and Douglas Robillard; and for McCarthy's Melville, see Cassie Polasek.

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