

**Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*: The Desert (of the) Real  
and the Writing of the "Hallucinatory Void"**

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For us textual obsessives, especially those of us who return compulsively to the manic textuality of the likes of Cormac McCarthy, it's a heartening, if also sobering, realization to find our self-consciously ambivalent appraisals of literary ambivalence confirmed by the less textually, less literarily obsessed. It's like discovering that no amount of digging into the text will convert it into a pit-strewn, potholed textual desert, the text deserted for the non-textual real, emptied of its textuality in lieu of the reality that it stands in for, whether factual or fictional (or the fictionalized factuality of "historical" fiction such as McCarthy's novel). *À la* Derrida, this is the notoriously misinterpreted affirmation that "il n'y a pas de hors-texte"; *à la* McCarthy, this is the recognition of the "ugly fact" that "books are made out of books".<sup>1</sup> That catchphrase of textual implosion, the "desert of the real," beyond its Baudrillardian simulacra and Lacanian-Zizekian blackholes of representation,<sup>2</sup> is both echoed and ambivalently countered by the incessant textual replenishing that Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* projects onto what it calls the "hallucinatory void" (McCarthy 113). In this light, McCarthy's novel bears out in its literary geography—another clichéd metaphor, for no *real* geography is literary yet all *geography* is necessarily literate and textual—the less literary, unselfconsciously straightforward affirmation of, for example, Nick Middleton, geographer and science popularizer, in his *Deserts: A Very Short Introduction*: "no universally accepted definition of the term 'desert' exists" (2) and "there is no one desert climate" (9). While unexceptionally taking for granted that there are *real* deserts, these remarks indirectly attest to the—at least—representational and epistemological, if not ontological, validity of the notion of the desert of the real. This is a phrase which I read here a bit more optimistically as the avowal that the real, whether desert or any other space, is necessarily filled out by the cultural and textual processes that produce the places we inhabit and perceive. The desert *space* is undeniably *there* but that *there* is always experienced as "already imbued with cultural determinants" (Casey 30) that make of it an

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<sup>1</sup> McCarthy made this comment in a 1992 interview with Richard B. Woodward in *The New York Times*. In a selective embracing of intertextuality—he disparages Proust and Henry James as literature—McCarthy presents his rhetorical and novelistic credentials by stating that "the novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written."

<sup>2</sup> Baudrillard's oeuvre as a whole explores the nature of the hyperreal but see especially *Simulacra and Simulation*. Similarly, Žižek recurrently expounds the Lacanian notion of the Real and our limited access to reality via ideological fantasy and representation throughout his work. See his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* or Part I of *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*.

inhabitable or imaginable *place*. In the case of a fiction especially, those determinants are eminently textual.<sup>3</sup>

The desert seems one of those spaces where this process is most visible, both geologically and culturally: “deserts come with their geological fabric exposed” (Middleton 33). The real is there to be *seen*, evidently, but the real is seen—that is, *read*—as a text. One perceives its “fabric,” a made thing whose woof and warp, together with its rents and tears, require the re-weaving that is the process of reading and interpretation. Even the real’s resistance to reading, to textual reductionism (the reductive version of “il n’y a pas de hors-texte”), only becomes perceptible through the process of reading.<sup>4</sup> The *rents* of the real both impede and provoke this process. What Middleton proposes as a recognition of empirical diversity, therefore, also embraces epistemological and cultural uncertainty and thus questions the empiricist realism on which such studies ground themselves. This is confirmed by the geographer’s own acknowledgement of the desert’s current role as ecological touchstone, the desert as source of key elements of human civilization itself, and his reliance on inherently ideological pronouncements that run counter to the awareness of the desert as a human production, beyond and before its empirical *there-ness*. Thus, he concludes with a manifestly literary and humanly empty view of the desert

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<sup>3</sup> This distinction between *space* and *place*, between undetermined extensionality and culturally-determined location or a mapped field of interconnected sites, is key for all theorists of spatiality though they may disagree on the exact nature and cultural effectivity of such a polarity. For my purposes, Edward Casey’s conscious ambivalence is apposite as he strives to assert the existence of the non-textual real while reaffirming our cultural-textual access to that real, even in the case of a “wild” place such as a desert: “There is no first wild place not already in the second place of culture. There is no abyss of wilderness not already papered over (or under or around) with the text of culture. This text is a contexture: at once a texture—something closely woven—and a context. Culture contextualizes every corner of nature, including the wildest ones. The wild texture of these corners is already frayed by the domesticating f(r)iction of acculturating and enculturating processes” (*Getting Back into Place* 237). For further reading on the importance of this space/place distinction, see also Tuan, Casey (*The Fate of Place*), de Certeau, Paul Carter’s fascinating *The Road to Botany Bay* and, of course, Henri Lefebvre’s magisterial *The Production of Space*. I have further explored the charting of space as place in my study of John Wesley Powell’s journal of his expedition down the Grand Canyon (“Too Vast, Too Complex”).

<sup>4</sup> Derrida never denies the a-textual or the con-textual but neither does he deny the text its ineluctable textuality. The latter impregnates the former; the former guides, without wholly subordinating, the latter for it is only through the textual that we assign meaning to or make a referent of what resists transparent representation yet insists within it. Naming and reference are textual phenomena, not pre-textual realities. The crucial passage from Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* is worth quoting again at length: “To produce [the text’s] signifying structure obviously cannot consist of reproducing, by the effaced and respectful doubling of commentary, the conscious, voluntary, intentional relationship that the writer institutes in his exchanges with the history to which he belongs thanks to the element of language. This moment of doubling commentary should no doubt have its place in a critical reading. To recognize and respect all its classical exigencies is not easy and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism. Without this recognition and this respect, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything. But this indispensable guardrail has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading. / Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general... *There is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*]” (158).

as “evocative of a time before people, when Nature was raw and the world was made up only of wilderness” (127). Of course, both “Nature”, especially in its capitalized version, and “wilderness” are cultural representations rather than transparent designations of “raw” realities.

In what follows, I want to briefly look at—that is, read—some examples of this novel’s “geological fabric.” To look at, in this case, is to read what is not really there as a self-explanatory, self-identical visual presence except as a series of marks that inscribe an experience beyond the purely visual. One can think of the text as a metaphorical “desert”, empty before its reading, beckoning the tracing of its visible yet enigmatic scratchings, much “like pencil lines across the sand” (45) made by the shadows cast by stones and men alike in McCarthy’s novel in the projected light of a source, whether sun or alien narrator, that may cast shadows but does not illuminate decisively. This is the textual sediment which produces the overlapping planes and perspectives of this “hallucinatory void,” as the narrator describes the desert. It is a phrase that can be read to refer both to the existential emptiness that spawns the fictional representations that dissimulate it *and* to the hallucinated nature of that void itself; that is, the rending of the real as “void” must also be textually rendered in a “hallucinatory” representation. The void itself is a hallucination. In other words, this is an overdetermined expression that, I suggest, debunks its import through rhetorical overkill, for what is not hallucination if all is a representational void. And this is a novel where “killing” itself is both a literal, repeated occurrence and a representational rhetoric, a textually self-reflexive voiding of the void, most fully embodied in that arch textual trickster, Judge Holden with his textual impositions on all and sundry.

### **The desert open**

As far as its literary geography is concerned the novel opens with a melancholy prospect of Western promise or escape, undercut by the “taste for mindless violence” (3) already present in the soon-to-be orphaned “Kid” who is the narrative’s main, if inarticulate character thread. In what often appears an allegorically-charged *danse macabre* presided over by “Judge Holden,” the very suggestion of an allegorical impulse is questioned in the very process of posing it. This begins with the American penchant for projecting onto geography a landscape of individual self-making:<sup>5</sup>

Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world’s turning will there be terrains so

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<sup>5</sup> The novel has been duly read as a bleak assault on the American doctrine of Manifest Destiny and its imperialist devastations, a historicist reading that complements the equally numerous existentialist interpretations of the novel as a despairing view of the consequences of humanity’s “mindless violence.”

wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay. (4-5)

Allegory, at least the two-levelled "bad allegory" Fredric Jameson describes in his recent *Allegory and Ideology* as providing limiting one-to-one correspondences, annuls diversity and historical contingency in the interests of ideological uniformity. This sort of allegory, "what may be called a one-to-one narrative in which features of a primary narrative are selected (in the process rhetoric calls *amplificatio*) and correlated with features of a second one that then becomes the 'meaning' of the first" (5), is "bad", according to Jameson, because "it disperses the elements of each narrative line without reuniting them, at the same time opening a reversible correspondence between the two levels" (6). It closes off meaning by imposing an ideological closure whereby any and all "meaning always tends to affirm the existence of a human nature as a normative metaphysic (even when the larger nature into which it is inserted carries the meaning of 'absurdity')" (9). Such allegory tends to produce the stasis of a fixed symbol, the existentialist void in this case, with its seemingly inevitable corollary in the universal violence it calls forth. At the same time, it makes this ideological purpose evident for allegory is ideology, ideology in discursive action. This is where Jameson distinguishes between the dynamism of "genuine allegory" or allegoresis and the stasis of this naturalizing, ideologically-inflected use of allegory:

[G]enuine allegory does not seek the "meaning" of a work, but rather functions to reveal its structure of multiple meanings, and thereby to modify the very meaning of the word meaning. It is indeed part of the contemporary critique of metaphysics (and of humanism along with it) to denounce the conception of nature as meaningful: an affirmation not merely of a meaningful system at work in the natural world, but also of a human nature as well, one which virtually by definition is normative. It will be clear, then, that this naturalization of both meaning and metaphor alike is the function of the symbol, as opposed to the allegorical structure. (10)

In this light, McCarthy's strategy in *Blood Meridian* is only pseudo-allegorical or, possibly, a parody of allegory. Indeed, it often seems an ambivalently self-conscious example of the "bad allegory" Jameson mentions. The novel's occasional two-level allegorization of a natural world of unthinking automatism, a world that produces existential meaninglessness as the correlate, if not the cause, of a human violence that embraces inhumanity as its own countering gesture to the void, presents itself as an allegorical gesture that seems to rule out allegoresis or "multiple meanings" in its single-minded response to the apparent absurdity of emptiness. But, in this case, as Jameson suggests, the external world becomes merely the naturalized symbol of a(n)human denial of that very empirical reality's denial of meaningfulness. In the process, meaninglessness and its counter-violent responses become the (un)desired, univocal allegorical meaning, to the detriment of the multiplicity inherent to a multi-levelled allegoresis

(politics, society, gender, culture, ethnicity, etc.) that refuses reduction to determinate, violently (de)humanizing, universal interpretations.

McCarthy seems aware of the paradox inherent in assigning meaningfulness to meaninglessness as his novel fluctuates between the demiurgic callousness of Judge Holden, its central villain, abetted by the ice-cold aloofness and subdued melancholy of the distant narrator; and that narrator's own self-conscious, implicitly parodic use of the allegorical frame as evidenced, for example, in the reiteration of adjectives such as "fabled" or "storybook" to refer to the events and beings that populate the fictional terrain. The "terrains so wild and barbarous" of the novel may be literally so, but they are also historically distorted, the narrative being predominantly focalized through the universalizing but also (perhaps because it is universalizing) imperialist stance that empties the West, the desert, of a non-Anglo-American human presence, of its very historical specificity. The openness of the terrain, in this mythical vision undercut by its own *mythos*, invites territorial enclosure by an agent in flight from *his* own openness.<sup>6</sup> The territory's emptying, rather than its apparent emptiness, is the consequence of and the antidote to an initial emptiness in the "child" of the West: the "stuff of creation" finds an echo in the mock-Biblical "clay" of human potential not yet actualized. Clay calls to clay, it would seem, and in the process external nature becomes the insensate foil for a quite material human presence. It is a nonhuman sounding board for the novel's scalp-hunting gang that, denied articulateness and introspection by the narrator—quite realistically so we have to admit—eventually only gives back the sound of the materially nonhuman within: "There is hardly in the world a waste so barren but some creature will not cry out at night, yet here one was and they listened to their breathing in the dark and the cold and they listened to the systole of the rubymeated hearts that hung within them" (281).

By the end of the novel, the ("bad") allegorical annulment of the external "world" as a site of violence-inducing meaninglessness has been questioned by the anti-mythic *mythos* McCarthy deploys. But even a *broken* allegory can persist in its allegorical impulse. This is especially so when it is an allegory of brokenness, of human insufficiency challenged by a despairingly imperious and self-denyingly imperialist violence. One can see such persistence as the self-cancelling reaction to the very failure of "bad" allegory, the allegory of the West continued in self-destructive fulfillment of its hidden tendencies. It is this *allegory of allegory*, the novel implies, that is virtually impossible to root out. A counter-allegory of sorts develops, ambivalently embodied in the Judge who imposes his demiurgic will on the gang. In his assertion to the Kid late in the novel that "if war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay" (307), we perceive the dehumanizing will to transcend the boundaries of "clay," of the natural world

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<sup>6</sup> The gendered possessive is intentional as this is a predominantly, if not exclusively, *male* strategy of narrative and ideological enclosure and of domestication of both the open without and the open within.

altogether, via the destructive sovereignty over that very nature, human nature included. The land, the desert, is rhetorically emptied of its own vaunted emptiness and filled with the blanker emptiness of specifically (in)human “desert spaces”: “You wouldnt think that a man would run plumb out of country out here, would ye? . . . It aint country you’ve run out of, he said” (285). This last affirmation is one of the few signs of what we could call moral sentience on the part of the Kid, the unnamed focalizing point of the narrative in the main. It seems a recognition of an emptying of the human itself in the face of the ravaging of the territory. The arrogant willfulness of self has “run out of” the very “country” of that self, a country that in fact has never existed except as a “storybook” imposition on the land, on the desert. This self encounters its own deserted nature by emptying out the desert itself.

### **Deserting the desert**

The apparent emptiness of the desert has traditionally been filled, allegorically, with narratives both naturalist and spiritualist. McCarthy does not shy away from either but, in combining them, as in the Judge’s contradictory proclamations of philosophical hubris, his novel comes close to bankrupting them both. Or, perhaps, we should say that allegory does become self-conscious allegoresis, “the reading of a text *as though* it were an allegory” (25) as Jameson puts it. Through that “*as though*,” meaning is simultaneously posited and suspended. This self-conscious, postmodern allegorical urge, does not do away with allegory but hollows out any univocal allegorical charge: “allegory, having been discredited by bourgeois culture, re-emerges as allegoresis in the dispersal of that culture and the relativization of its facts and its literal levels, its national and linguistic references, and the multiplicity of its historical situations and populations” (Jameson 26). Two examples of McCarthy’s desert allegoresis bear this out:

Far out on the desert to the north dustspouts rose wobbling and augered the earth and some said they’d heard of pilgrims borne aloft like dervishes in those mindless coils to be dropped broken and bleeding upon the desert again and there perhaps to watch the thing that had destroyed them lurch onward like some drunken djinn and resolve itself once more into the elements from which it sprang. Out of that whirlwind no voice spoke and the pilgrim lying in his broken bones may cry out and in his anguish he may rage, but rage at what? And if the dried and blackened shell of him is found among the sands by travelers to come yet who can discover the engine of his ruin? (111)

They crossed a vast dry lake with rows of dead volcanoes ranged beyond it like the works of enormous insects. To the south lay broken shapes of scoria in a lava bed as far as the eye could see. Under the hooves of the horses the alabaster sand shaped itself in whorls strangely symmetric like iron filings in a field and these shapes flared and drew back again, resonating upon that harmonic ground and then turning to swirl away over the playa. As if the very sediment of things contained yet some residue of sentience. As if in the transit of those riders were a thing so profoundly terrible as to register even to the uttermost granulation of reality. (247)

The first quotation stages the naturalist response, the allegory of meaninglessness that we find in naturalist writing, properly antithetical to what we call nature writing with its usually transcendentalist appreciation of a self-sufficient realm beyond the contingencies of the human;<sup>7</sup> the second quotation employs simile or near-simile—“as if” constructions that simultaneously establish a parallelism and fail to confirm it—to suggest an allegory of fateful meaningfulness. Both work in complementary ways, hinting at meaning, even the paradoxical naturalist meaning of meaninglessness that, in Stephen Crane, for example, calls forth an ethical response that McCarthy’s text comes close to deriding by suspending the validation of such meanings, leaving only a shadow of meaningfulness.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the withdrawal from determinate meaning, rather than the complete abrogation of meaningfulness, leaves patent the human machinations behind the creation of meaning, the endowing of the real desert or of the existential desert of the real with a universalizing meaning(lessness) that this very rhetorical strategy short-circuits. But, to repeat Jameson’s assertion, “genuine allegory does not seek the ‘meaning’ of a work, but rather functions to reveal its structure of multiple

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<sup>7</sup> This first passage, furthermore, is a good example of McCarthy’s literary borrowings, a subject studied at length in Michael Lynn Crew’s recent *Books Are Made Out of Books: A Guide to McCarthy’s Literary Influences*. True to the non-finite nature of intertextuality, as pointed out by the early poststructuralists such as Roland Barthes, even this reasonably thorough overview by Crew cannot detect all such influences. This passage, for example, is culled in tellingly modified form from an early “classic account of the aesthetic qualities of the desert environment of the southwestern United States,” to quote from the 1980 edition’s back cover, art historian John C. Van Dyke’s *The Desert*, a source for several of the novel’s desert descriptions that Crew fails to mention. The whole paragraph from the novel begins: “On the day that followed they crossed a lake of gypsum so fine the ponies left no track upon it. The riders wore masks of bone-black smeared about their eyes and some had blacked the eyes of their horses. The sun reflected off the pan burned the undersides of their faces and shadow of horse and rider alike were painted upon the fine white powder in purest indigo” (111). It then continues to the end of the paragraph with the passage quoted above. The comparison with the source passage from Van Dyke reveals the rhetorical and semantic inflation it undergoes in McCarthy’s paragraph: “And again, there were dry lakes covered with silt; and vast beds of sand and gypsum, white as snow and fine as dust. The pony’s feet plunged in and came out leaving no trail. The surface smoothed over as though it were water. Fifty miles away one could see the desert sand-whirls moving slowly over the beds in tall columns two thousand feet high and shining like shafts of marble in the sunlight. How majestically they moved, their feet upon the earth, their heads towering into the sky!” (16). The effect of McCarthy’s rendition is to both lay bare Van Dyke’s admiring yet comforting aestheticism and foreground the narratorial filtering of unconfirmed meaningfulness through the mute eyes of the travelers. Both responses, McCarthy’s version implies, are textual products and, at the same time, their ostensible meaning is never fully validated.

<sup>8</sup> A close reading of Crane’s “The Open Boat,” for example, makes clear that naturalist “despair” is never really such because, on its own terms, it is perfectly aware of its own projection of “meaning” and the human responsibility involved. Hence, in the sixth of the seven parts in which the short story is divided, the aloof narrator provides an implicitly metafictional aside in which the “correspondent” belatedly understands and empathizes with a school reading of a trite poetical passage on the death of a soldier in Algiers. If actual experience now allows him to respond to that early (non-)reading, it is also true that that text enables a hint of understanding of the correspondent’s actual circumstances. While in no way making definitive sense of the empirical context he finds himself in, it does enjoin him to respond ethically to the situation. Meaning must be humanly made for meaning is the human response to meaningless circumstance. By the end of the tale, we are told, the men “felt that they could then be interpreters” (Crane 909), admittedly not a confirmation of the validity of that interpretation but still an awareness of its ethical responsibility. McCarthy provides, perhaps, a more despairing view of the possibilities of such response and responsibility, but I think they remain as something the reader must enact.

meanings, and thereby to modify the very meaning of the word meaning” (10). In other words, it lays bare its ideological structure, its discursive articulation as ideology. McCarthy’s rhetoric, in its universalizing expansiveness, both promotes an ideological discourse of existentialist despair and travesties it implicitly, even unwittingly, through the grandiosity and self-consciousness of his forceful textuality. Indeed, one critic, Peter Josyph, rejecting the historicist readings of the novel, has affirmed that, like the *Iliad*, it is a novel about “force,” whether the energies intrinsic to the natural world, the furious strivings of human conflicts and urges, or the rhetorical demiurge which is language itself (Josyph 63). It is in the shape of this rhetorical demiurge that there lies, perhaps, the whiff of the postmodern in McCarthy and in this novel in particular.

This rhetorical *deserting* of the desert takes place, fittingly enough, through the rhetoric of the desert itself or, rather, the rhetoric the desert seems to invite in order to textually fill its emptiness. In this respect, McCarthy is not too far from Jean Baudrillard’s ecstatic visions of America’s desert zones though McCarthy employs his stark descriptive language, unlike Baudrillard, to forge a void-like, non-communicating gulf between the object described, the desert, and the perceptual agent through whom the description is focalized. The following is an example:

They rode through regions of particolored stone upthrust in ragged kerfs and shelves of traprock reared in faults and anticlines curved back upon themselves and broken off like stumps of great stone treeboles and stones the lightning had clove open, seeps exploding in steam in some old storm. They rode past trapdykes of brown rock running down the narrow chines of the ridges and onto the plain like the ruins of old walls, such auguries everywhere of the hand of man before man was or any living thing. (50)

This supposedly impassable gulf between observer and observed, of course, is bridged by the language itself, its rhetoric still palpably a product of a human intervention despite its adoption of a stance beyond the human, a textual paradox the novel illustrates from time to time as in this passage’s descriptions of the Southwestern desert’s signs of past geological turmoil. These primeval “auguries” still require human imagination and perception though the passage employs its rhetoric to also render such perception difficult and obscure through its own arcane vocabulary. Despite such “nomenclature,” these descriptions hint at the impossibility of their objective while striving to name the nameless or even unnameable, the desert as “a terrain that was without other designation” (215) than that which man—the narrator, in this case—projects upon it with his “heraldic” (215) constructions. In such passages, narratorial stance and character focalization fuse indistinctly. The desert is emptied rhetorically into the human emptiness of the sacrilegious “pilgrims” which are the gang members; one of the Judge’s concluding perorations, in alignment with the narrator’s stance this time, confirms this: “This desert upon which so many have been broken is vast and calls for largeness of heart but it is



also ultimately empty. It is hard, it is barren. Its very nature is stone” (330). Through—rather than despite—such rhetoric, neither characters nor narrator, whether the blood violence of the former or the rhetorical violence of the latter, can escape the perspective of the human, a view that also envelops the human attraction to the inhuman.

Baudrillard, on the other hand, converts the desert into a projection of the imploding simulacral landscape of postmodern or hyperreal America. In his case, the desert disappears into his blackhole vision of America as vanguard site of hyperreality, the simulated copy for which there is no original. Yet his trans-human vision, lagging stylistically behind McCarthy’s textual baroque, echoes the latter’s flirting with the inhuman. Baudrillard’s postmodern glee mirrors in near-parodic form the resigned, even accepting despair of McCarthy’s narrator:

American culture is heir to the deserts, but the deserts here are not part of a Nature defined by contrast with the town. Rather they denote the emptiness, the radical nudity that is the background to every human institution. At the same time, they designate human institutions as a metaphor of that emptiness and the work of man as the continuity of the desert, culture as a mirage and as the perpetuity of the simulacrum. (63)

True to his postmodern euphoria, Baudrillard revels in hyperreality’s “deserts of the sign” (63), seeing in them—but definitely not *seeing* the desert—a “mythic operator” that chastises “the excess of signification, of intention and pretention in culture” (64). McCarthy’s text, even in its debunking of American (or human, in general) manifest destiny, also functions as a “mythic operator,” though it is a textual myth that undermines humanist ideals. The difference between two texts published at about the same time in the mid-1980s seems one of affective response rather than ethical and epistemological stance. Both McCarthy’s novel and Baudrillard’s *America* insist on imagining “auguries” of the human within the non-human.<sup>9</sup> The desert remains in their writing a textual phenomenon, both geologically and literarily.

Nevertheless, McCarthy’s textual self-consciousness goes beyond Baudrillard’s cinematic vision of America and its deserts.<sup>10</sup> If Baudrillard moves towards imploding all of the real into

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<sup>9</sup> Here is Baudrillard’s version of these “auguries” (though nowhere else does his text suggest a reading of McCarthy’s novel): “Upturned relief patterns, sculpted out by wind, water, and ice, dragging you down into the whirlpool of time, into the remorseless eternity of a slow-motion catastrophe. The very idea of the millions and hundreds of millions of years that were needed peacefully to ravage the surface of the earth here is a perverse one, since it brings with it an awareness of signs originating, long before man appeared, in a sort of pact of wear and erosion struck between the elements. Among this gigantic heap of signs—purely geological in essence—man will have had no significance. The Indians alone perhaps interpreted them—a few of them. And yet they *are* signs. For the desert only *appears* uncultivated” (3). Here, the significance of non-significance, an essentially human appreciation, again rears its paradoxical head.

<sup>10</sup> “It is useless to seek to strip the desert of its cinematic aspects in order to restore its original essence; those features are thoroughly superimposed upon it and will not go away. The cinema has absorbed everything—Indians, *mesas*, canyons, skies . . . [T]he only natural spectacle that is really gripping is the one which offers both the most moving profundity *and at the same time the total simulacrum of that profundity*. As here, where the depth of time is revealed through the (cinematic) depth of field” (Baudrillard, *America* 69-70).

the simulacral realms of the non-referential sign, his particular conception of the “desert of the real,” McCarthy’s explicit harnessing of intertextuality, if not his outright incorporation of textual fragments from other works, functions not as plagiarism but, Shakespeare-like, as a cobbling together of intertexts shoring up the representational void those very texts hint at through their borrowed status. As critics such as Vereen Bell in the first book-length study of McCarthy have noted, the “perverse and tantalizing density” of his writing is an attempt to “resist [language’s] abstraction and classification” in the search for “a knowledge of origins” or an “eidetic experience” before its subsumption “into doctrine and ideology” (2). Perversely, we might say, rhetorical flourishes accumulate in order to suggest the pre-rhetorical “concrete world” and, at the same time, maintain “its aura of mysterious, opaque, and unyielding signification” (2). The aura of meaningfulness is created against a backdrop of quite determinate meaninglessness yet ultimate, transparent meaning is denied: “Risking extravagance, [such passages] serve to keep us from subsiding into a merely naturalistic perceptual realm” (2). But the stylistically and rhetorically enforced suspension of meaning or meaning’s fall into ideological discourse is itself a form of ideology in its aspiration to the capture of the (non-signifying) real.

McCarthy is fully aware of this as his very textual rhetoric bears out. Meaning cannot be fully suspended if only because it does not depend solely on the text and its intentionality, but is called forth from the text by the reader’s efforts in response to its “extra-vagance.” Like McCarthy’s gang’s insensate rambling, meaning rhetorically wanders between dispersed meaninglessness and disseminating meaningfulness. Within the domain of McCarthy’s textual desert, then, all is copy but not plagiarism for there is no *original* desert. An origin can only be certified by its copy, its representational mediation. But to represent is to *originate*, to incorporate that *real* origin as the original of the representation that makes it perceptible. Such mediation, however, also makes it clear that it is textuality and rhetoric all the way down. The wonder lies in how this textual wandering hints at an interpretive path within an apparently chartless reality. Herein we intuit the rhetorical power of this textual intimation of the a-textual desert.

### **The desert absolute**

In a review of McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*, the novelist Madison Smartt Bell describes McCarthy’s project as “to make artifacts composed of human language but detached from a human reference point.” In other words, he seeks some sort of literary absolute, a sort of degree zero of language unmediated by a human narratorial presence, a direct, non-subjective view of the real. Yet such a striving for nonhuman rhetoric is, we know, itself a human task. Even language’s non-humanity, its founding impersonality, requires a “human reference point.” The desertion of the human is, McCarthy’s opus ceaselessly suggests, a very human gesture. In

narratological terms, the “desert” of McCarthy’s novel is every bit a narratorial strategy as it is descriptive context. “Detached from a human reference point,” this view from nowhere (science), like the view from everywhere (God, religion)—the Judge alternately assumes both roles in his rhetorical posturing and scornfully debunks them both—dons the transcendental prerogative of no view at all, a denial of any representational or perceptual mediation of the real, an absolute or *ab-solved* vision of the real: vision itself is absolved of its mediating interference.<sup>11</sup> But such a (non-)view, aspiration alike of naturalist and transcendentalist writing, can only ever be a specifically human aspiration articulated through a textual rhetoric that denies or dissimulates its own rhetoricity. Self-consciously, melancholically, it can only ever employ the very strategies it pretends to leave behind as the textual detritus of its rhetorical opening to the open itself.

Two passages from the novel reveal the political and representational stakes of this aspiration for the absolute. The first is often quoted as an example of the problematic ethical and political stances of McCarthy’s novel:

The horses trudged sullenly the alien ground and the round earth rolled beneath them silently milling the greater void wherein they were contained. In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (247)

Is this the desert as an allegory of democracy? Or does it actually do away with what Jameson sees as the inherently utopian, hence implicitly democratic potential of “genuine allegory” itself? Or, is this the text itself as an inhumanly democratic allegory: an example of Jameson’s assertion that “allegory is itself allegorical, that it contaminates its environment with a disturbing ferment” (19) so that it tends to become “an interpretive virus that, spreading by way of its own propagations, proliferates and perpetuates itself until, in a kind of incurable interpretive frenzy, it becomes indistinguishable from the text and no longer visible to the naked eye” (1)? In this case, the allegorical process collapses into the “bad” allegory of naturalization and universalizing, transhistorical judgments. Furthermore, what does this do to the real(?) desert? More ominously, what does it do to the idea of democracy? That loaded term is consciously undermined here by the very *optics* of such passages, a leveling down to the object-like of democracy’s vaunted defense of the difference of subjects. And who or what does the bequeathing here? The desert itself in its “neuter austerity”? Who or what says so?

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<sup>11</sup> For a thoroughgoing critique of this attitude within scientific inquiry itself, see Thomas Nagel’s *The View from Nowhere*.

Can the desert speak? What does “equality” mean here? An authoritarian hierarchy reduced to unranked homogeneity? That seems the import of nouns such as “precedence” and “preference.” Why not use the term “difference”? Is democracy, even an “optical democracy,” a question of precedence / preference rather than difference? Is the desert *democratic*, even in metaphorically “optical” terms? While one can understand the tenor of the metaphor—it all *looks alike*—the vehicle employed, a de-particularizing optics, may apply to the demagoguery that goes by the name of democracy in the novel’s historical period (and perhaps ours) but it also comes across as an ethical travesty of the differences democracy should respect and also make.

The text through its narrating voice both projects some sort of impersonal, transcendent agency and withdraws any hint of agential purpose. The effect is to reflect back on the speaking voice’s hermeneutic role, a voice that brackets interpretive validity. The political consequences of such an intentionally ambivalent *desertion* of meaningfulness counteract the numbed assertion of meaninglessness. “Optical democracy” is a visionary image, an apocalyptic one that annuls diversity in the interests of a lifeless homogeneity that sabotages ethical choice (much like the Judge does) and imposes the fascistic a-politics of warring power. This is indeed a “strange equality,” strange because of its difference-annulling homogeneity but also strange in its very obliteration of strangeness and singularity. This absolutist vision absolves its referent, whether desert or democracy, of its immanent singularity and diversity. While it dehumanizes its visionaries and its mere observers alike, it also emplaces them as inhumanly human presences at the center of a nonhuman universe. The singular, even in its assumption of agency through violence, ultimately becomes the shared commonality of utter divestment of ethical choice. The ethics of the pack, as embodied in the scalp-hunters, paradoxically belies the demiurgic obscenity of an agential power, whether its leader Glanton or the Judge, that refuses agency to any other than itself. What I have termed self-reflexively the desertion of the desert implies the desertion of the human. The rhetorical investment of the desert is every bit a divestment of the human, one echoing the other. It is an image of abandonment within the imperious centripetal focus of the narratorial agency that has concocted this absolutism:

The desert upon which they were entrained was desert absolute and it was devoid of feature altogether and there was nothing to mark their progress upon it. The earth fell away on every side equally in its arcature and by these limits were they circumscribed and of them were they locus. (295)

Enclosure within the absolute absolves the human of its very humanity. It also dissolves or, perhaps more appropriately, devolves the absolute into the void out of which it originated. If fear of the void calls forth absolutist responses, in turn the apocalyptic desire for the absolute creates the empty echo-chamber of the void itself.

## Desert enclosed

The desert absolute is an island domain. It is both infinite and circumscribed. It is a totalized infinity and, we have suggested, as a result of that absolute totalization, it is a truly *deserted* desert. I borrow the image of the island from Gilles Deleuze's musings in his essay "Desert Islands," though I appropriate it by inverting it. Deleuze himself, who sees the desert island as a site of human potential or, more precisely, virtuality, a site for the creation of the human free of predisposed parameters, effectively thought of the island as "deserted more than it is a desert" (11). I would say the same of McCarthy's desert but with an import opposite to that of Deleuze. Deserted of humanist predispositions, the cultural, the civilizational, Deleuze's island is an opportunity for the creation of the human; McCarthy's desert has been actively deserted by human force, its emptiness enclosed and violently policed.<sup>12</sup> In McCarthy's vision, de-creation is the essence of the human in its very rage against a non-human universe though it is the uncertainly human presence of the Judge who most fully embodies this position: "Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent . . . 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" (198). The Judge appears at times as a personification of both the narrative's and the narrator's ambivalence, a figure larger than fact, given to cryptic pronouncements on the utter meaninglessness of the universe yet also intensely interested in knowing as much of it as possible. As such the Judge also seems an "allegory of an allegory," a fictional representation of the human temptation to escape the human, the desire to "be no godserver but a god himself" (250).<sup>13</sup> In this sense, McCarthy's Judge is a quite literal desert creature / creator, a gnostic demiurge whose desire for absolute primacy requires the sovereign destruction that produces a desert environment, literally or metaphorically. And the Judge is quite aware of the frighteningly mythological role he plays, much as the narrator unavoidably participates in this devil's game of representational dominion.

As Deleuze makes clear, "the essence of the deserted island is imaginary and not actual, mythological and not geographical. At the same time, its destiny is subject to those human conditions that make mythology possible" (12). Applied to the desert, this is not to deny its

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<sup>12</sup> For a cultural history of this process in the nineteenth century, see the second volume of Richard Slotkin's "regeneration through violence" trilogy, *The Fatal Environment*, with its focus on Western expansion and the continuing ideological relevance of the "Frontier Myth" whose "categories still inform our political rhetoric of pioneering progress, world mission, and eternal strife with the forces of darkness and barbarism" (12).

<sup>13</sup> The difficult passage of the coldforger "enshadowed" (310) by the Judge, a scene the wounded Kid imagines in his delirium in the later stages of the novel after the routing of the gang, would seem to suggest an answer to the Kid's earlier question, "What's he a judge of?" (135). The Judge judges man's ability to simulate the human given man's embracing of the inhuman within: "Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end" (310).

empirical existence; what counts though is its human habitation and valuation, whether the desert remains desert or whether it is left deserted of its “imaginary” presences, that is, its natural, historical and cultural Real. The novel’s strange Epilogue suggests as much. As gravely mock-apocalyptic parable, it seems to portray in a dystopian light the charting of an essential emptiness, the enclosure of the desert, a truly empty place now where not even wandering is truly itinerant. An unthinking horde of “wanderers” mechanically follows “a man progressing [is this Progress?] over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground” (337). He makes them with a two-handed implement that seems a posthole digger, the sort of tool instrumental in the fencing or the barbwire enclosure of the West: “he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there” (337). The violent gridlocking of the West, emptying the desert of its *desertness*, ransacking its natural resources, is condensed in this image for the “track of holes . . . runs to the rim of the visible ground” (337). Yet the “real” desert, the Real, period, insists within the very grid that names it into a fenced-in existence. It is that very grid that allows one to name it but which also threatens it with a terminal representation. It is this representational mediation, this textual rhetoric, that allows us to read this resistance and glimpse this insistence. But, to pun on Derrida’s phrase, there is no *Ur-text* because there is no *hors-texte*. McCarthy’s desert is necessarily intertextual through its desire to outstrip the textual. Hence, his intertextual borrowings, rather than being a betrayal of the *Ur-reality* that, in its Modernist guise, his text despairs of attaining, are a circumspect Postmodernist recognition, channeled through the voice of that arch textualist, the Judge, that reality and its denizens are “tabernacled in every other” and that “What is to be deviates no jot from the book wherein it’s writ” (141). Where the judge deviates from the stance of the implied author, perhaps, lies in his absolutist textualism, his belief in demiurgic control through the reduction of all reality to literal text. This, we have seen, is the reductive reading of Derrida’s *hors-texte*, for it denies and banishes any extra-textual reality rather than admit our mediated access to it. It converts the text into an absolute in the face of the lack of an absolute reality.

The motives for such a destructive absolution of the real are more than economic for all move inertly “like mechanisms whose movements are monitored with escapement and pallet,” a clockwork impassivity that is not even the response to “a prudence or reflectiveness which has no inner reality” (337). The posthole digger draws along behind him the whole motley crew of humanity in general, both the fanatically convinced, the opportunistic scavengers of rationality’s refuse and the unthinking majority, all spellbound to a senseless instrumentality. The consciously and unconsciously imperialist violence of the period covered by McCarthy’s novel has now been internalized as the authoritarian mindset of material progress at any cost and in the capitalist interest of cost-efficient profit itself. The mechanism itself and the thought that dictates it, the ideological inertia of marking the real because it is there to be marked, have

become self-perpetuating, a crazed, self-involved rationality impervious to what it cannot account for. The real must be rational, the desert must be ontologically deserted, emptied into the lifeless spaces of a grid, all in the interests of empowered reason itself, power disguised as reason and reliant on the aimless momentum of rationality: “less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it” (337). The desertion of the rational, the desertion of the real, this is the ultimate “desert absolute” of McCarthy’s novel, a desertion depicted with unavoidable rhetorical complicity that is also its only means of contestation.

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