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“‘Blood and time’: Cormac McCarthy’s Writing of the American Epic in

Blood Meridian: Or, The Evening Redness in the West”

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From its back cover to essays by Harold Bloom, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian: Or, The Evening Redness in the West* frequently receives the label of epic. Bloom, the leading proponent of *Blood Meridian*'s canonical status, noted in an interview with C-SPAN Booknotes that the book is "as close, I think, to being the American prose epic as one can find" (qtd in Kiefer 39). Shane Schimpf posits as well in the introductory essay to *A Reader's Guide to Blood Meridian*, "If *Blood Meridian* is anything, it is an epic poem of war in the tradition of Homer" (51). These remarks serve as high praise indeed, and they are interesting in that they depart from the main stream of criticism, which classifies *Blood Meridian* as a Western. But they do not lead into a more extensive analysis of *Blood Meridian*'s relation to the epic tradition, a tradition defined by each example's echoing and deviation from its predecessors.

In this paper, I will attempt to contextualize *Blood Meridian* within the epic tradition, considering especially the tendency of modern epics to reflect within their aesthetics a self-awareness of their relation to traditional epics, and the unique ability for an American epic to preserve traditional epic characteristics in the modern era. Moreover, I will examine how McCarthy sets up *Blood Meridian* as an epic devoid of a heroic quest, thereby removing the violence he depicts from the traditional systems that qualify violence in epics as well as in American myths of the West, both traditional and revisionist, and informing a new national self-image based on the recognition of a brutal past seldom remembered or represented in history or literature.

Cormac McCarthy's fifth novel, *Blood Meridian* marks a departure from the Appalachian setting of McCarthy's earlier works to the Southwest, across which his more widely read Border Trilogy (1992-98) and *No Country for Old Men* (2005) also transpire. McCarthy made a similar move himself in 1974, leaving Tennessee for Texas—interestingly, the kid follows this same trajectory in the first chapter of *Blood Meridian*. There, the author finished *Suttree*, his longest work to date, in 1979, and in 1981, he was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. Supporting himself with the money from this “genius grant,” he wrote *Blood Meridian*, published in 1985. While McCarthy began *Blood Meridian* after his relocation, all the elements that mark his earlier novels as true inheritors of Faulkner's Southern Gothic tradition—“recondite vocabulary, punctuation, portentous rhetoric, use of dialect and a concrete sense of the world”—remain intact, exploited to an even grander extent in his scenes of bloodshed in the desert (Woodward, *NYT*). What McCarthy forged out of his Southern Gothic sense of darkness and his new sun-scorched landscape resembles nothing else ever written about America's Wild West.

In one of his rare interviews, this author who had long garnered comparisons with Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, told the New York Times, “I've always been interested in the Southwest.” The Southwest seems an apt choice of setting for an American writer whose fiction delves so deeply into stories and lives of violence. Robert Hodge suggests, “McCarthy's change of landscape from Appalachia to West Texas and beyond reflects the historical path of American continental expansion,” a path steeped in blood. Indeed, as McCarthy's fiction enters the Southwest with *Blood Meridian*, the violence he portrays rises from the level of personal, localized

incidents as depicted in his Southern novels to conflicts of magnified destruction, some veritable battles, which sweep across nations' borders and embroil multiple ethnic groups. As historical events that erupted across some of the Southwest's oldest cities, they distinguish *Blood Meridian* in both temporal and geographic setting from McCarthy's other works.

Though the author often sets his novels a generation or so before they are written, *Blood Meridian* marks the earliest that he looks back in his fiction. His Appalachian novels take place presumably within the first half of the 20th Century, the time period usually hinted at only vaguely, while *Blood Meridian*'s main events occur specifically during the years 1849-1850. In *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy reconstructs mid-19th century America, a land of expansionist and racist ideologies—but this only provides the context for his story. The historico-political arena in which the actions of the Glanton gang play out should not grasp our attention more so than the bloody acts and actors themselves.

Steven Shavero reflects the standard trend of critical interpretation when he writes, “[*Blood Meridian*] savagely explod[e]s the American dream of manifest destiny, of racial domination and endless imperial expansion” (qtd in Mitchell 300). The few scenes in the book that touch upon the then very recent US-Mexican War, however, reveal a treatment of Manifest Destiny that is more mocking than it is fiercely condemnatory. In Chapter 3 the kid joins a band of filibusters headed to Mexico, their goal to ignite another border conflict and thus enable the United States to secure even more land in another Mexican defeat. Captain White, who recruits the kid and justifies their mission by decrying the barbarous Mexicans' inability to

govern themselves, serves clearly as a mouthpiece for the expansionist ideology of the time:

What we are dealing with, he said, is a race of degenerates. A mongrel race, little better than niggers. And maybe no better. 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. (36)

The Captain's coarse and racist sentiments, which are given voice for several more pages, serve as their own critique, sufficiently unattractive to demystify the doctrine of American exceptionalism without McCarthy needing to depict all the bloodshed to follow in subsequent chapters. The kid, as if to deflate the Captain's vision further, joins the expedition not because he takes White's words to heart and adopts his philosophy, but for lack of any other means of occupying himself. Through such a scene as this, McCarthy makes us aware of the ideologies fueling America's national machinery at the time of the kid's wanderings, but he also has us recognize that such ideologies do not personally motivate the kid and his bloody deeds. When the filibusters march into Mexico, there is an even more opportune occasion to "explode the dream of manifest destiny" by depicting the savagery and depravity of the belligerent white invaders from the north. However, it is these white men who fall victim instead to the nightmarish onslaught of a Comanche war band that ambushes them in the desert. If the idea of Manifest Destiny unravels in this scene, it does so at the level of its promise—unlike Virgil's quest-bound Trojans in the *Aeneid*, the American filibusters are not fated to conquer a foreign land and resettle it.

These scenes and many others distinguish McCarthy's project as something more complicated than a straightforward subversion of classic Westerns, an anti-Western in which the cowboys are the actual villains. The frontier conflicts that

Blood Meridian depicts defy neat organization along racial and national lines.

Notably, the Glanton gang hunts Apaches as paid service to a Mexican, rather than American, statesman. The desire of these Mexican governors for Indian scalps is not without cause: McCarthy's Apaches—as might dismantle a reading seeking to view them more sympathetically than their cruel white pursuers—raid Mexican villages, killing, raping, and enslaving the citizenry. To further complicate matters, several Delaware Indians ride with Glanton as scouts, participating along with the rest of the gang in the massacre of warlike and peaceful tribes alike. The gang also includes a Mexican, Juan Miguel (whom the other men, in *Blood Meridian*'s not wholly absent sense of humor, call John McGill) and a black man named John Jackson, who seeks his fortune with Glanton's riders at time when many black Americans were still enslaved. For those who believe that the scalphunters embody mid-19th century American racism in a clear-cut manner, it should be noted that when Jackson kills a white member of the gang with the same name for his prejudice, no other white man raises a hand to stop him or punish this action. In a sense, there exists an egalitarian quality to the gang in that, as long as a man can fend for himself, he is fit to ride and gain his wealth. Glanton and his men are bandits after all, their only loyalty being to themselves—and most likely not to the government of the United States, the homeland where many of them are men wanted by the law. This complicated, even muddled, state of affairs from which McCarthy forges his stunning tale of bloodshed suggests to me that, in order to better understand the violence of *Blood Meridian*, we must look beyond a strictly racial or political framework.

Explaining his long-standing attraction to the Southwest in his interview with *The New York Times*, McCarthy went on to say, “There isn't a place in the world you can go where they don't know about cowboys and Indians and the myth of the West.” This statement bespeaks an interest in a narrative that is both distinctly American and universally resonant. I would argue that *Blood Meridian* is American in the way that Dante's *Inferno* is Italian or, less anachronistically speaking, Florentine. Through his imagined encounters in Hell with various Ghibellines and Guelphs, Dante examines and reflects upon the political strife that ravaged his native city (and led to his unjustified exile); in doing so, his great metaphysical epic locates and investigates those human inclinations—pride, envy, greed—that the poet sees as the cause of all mankind and civilization's ruin through the ages. McCarthy, too, looks back on dark moments in his nation's history to expose the darker side of humanity. The question becomes what he does in *Blood Meridian* to the “myth of the West.” While I resist a politically or historically revisionist reading of the novel, I find a valuable distinction made in Susan Kollin's essay about *Blood Meridian* as anti-Western. Referring to the historian Patricia Limerick's scholarship, Kollin notes that “For most Americans, [...] the legacy of slavery has been treated as a serious national concern, whereas the same has not been true for the legacy of western conquest (‘Genre and the Geographies of Violence,’ 567). By focusing his great prose epic about the Southwest on the appalling deeds of Glanton gang, figures almost lost to our national memory, McCarthy writes what in Kollin's words “becomes a meditation on the brutal past of American frontier history” (567). I believe *Blood Meridian* explodes an American ideology and legacy even more important and prevailing than Manifest

Destiny: that of heroism born on the frontier. And heroism, of course, lies at the center of the epic.

Part I

Ours is an age in which the term “epic” serves as a label for almost any extended or heroic fiction; but, while such a description would suit the *Odyssey*, it falls far short of containing the thematic depth and breadth of vision of Homer’s epic poem. Taking Claude Rawson’s outline of the genre for a working definition, we may say the epic is “a long poem, in elevated language, on a high theme of tribal glory, or national origins, or scriptural myth, containing narratives of battle, and usually a high valuation of martial prowess” (167). Thus, the *Odyssey* is not merely a tale of epic proportions, a phrase one might expect to read in numerous book or movie reviews: it is an epic, just as *Hamlet* is a tragedy and *The Scarlet Letter* is a romance, carrying along with it certain expectations associated with the genre. When I speak of *Blood Meridian* as epic, therefore, I use the term not in its adjectival form, an over-used intensifier, but as a noun, postulating the membership of McCarthy’s book to a specific literary genre and tradition that spans centuries. Every genre attends to certain aesthetic and thematic concerns, and thus the generic lens through which we read a text will raise certain questions, while submerging others, about the text. The following is an attempt to contextualize *Blood Meridian* within the tradition of the epic genre.

At least since the time of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, c.335 BC, scholars and critics have attempted to anatomize and define the genre of the epic. Reading through the variety of commentaries devoted to this matter reveals that no standard definition exists. In “The Norms of the Epic,” Thomas Greene accounts for the impossibility of

defining epic, asserting “a pure epic has never been written,” which he exhorts students of genre to keep in mind (193). Not even Homer’s foundational poems embody the definitive requirements of the genre, for already the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* has contributed differently to the list of features considered stock elements of the epic (the journey to the underworld, for example, is in the *Odyssey* and not the *Illiad*). With that in mind, it is easy to imagine the flaws inherent to criticism that upholds one text as the model by which all others should be judged for epic status. Along with Greene, Homer scholar John Hainsworth warns against this approach. “The trouble,” he writes, “is that generalizations are made from particular poems,” which forecloses the scope of the tradition and creates a narrow-minded understanding of the genre (2). This problematic critical approach leads to an extreme level of exclusivity: Longinus judged the *Odyssey* unfavorably by the standards of the *Iliad* and Renaissance critics found Homer barbaric in comparison to Virgil. Hainsworth sees these literary misjudgments as instances in which “the concept of an ideal form results in interpreting distance from the exemplar as a failure in aim” (4).

If “[a]ccidents must not be taken for essentials,” then a more inclusive study of the epic will look beyond formal aspects in searching for the essence of the genre (3). Most often, the word “poem” follows “epic” in the description of a text, yet locating the epic quality of a work in its form would be to miss the more meaningful connections that the poems of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton, among others, share. In the words of Georg Lukács, author of *The Theory of the Novel*, “It would be superficial—a matter of mere artistic technicality—to look for the only and decisive

genre-defining criterion in the question of whether a work is written in verse or prose” (56). A writer pursuing “an epic mode which Homer’s emulators approach along with Homer” bears no more of a burden to compose in verse than to compose in hexameter, in Ionian Greek, or orally—formal characteristics of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that successive poets have abandoned in emulating Homer (Greene, 193). Furthermore, such traditional markers of the epic genre as an opening in *media res*, invocations to the Muse, epithets, or lengthy catalogs need not all be found in a single work for it to be classified as an epic: “To describe the mode as [one] apprehends it is not to insist on its full actualization in any one poem” (193-4). We must recognize these conventions, such as epic catalogs or similes, as manifestations of the breadth and depth of epic narrative, rather than as definitive qualities of the epic. Indeed, numerous epics since the *Iliad* have incorporated some or all of these elements, and when they appear, they call our attention to an ongoing conversation among epicists and their works; while not losing sight of the significance of Homeric tropes as they appear in other texts, however, we should remember as Green urges us to, that “[t]o describe the [epic] mode, then, is not to prescribe” (194).

In part, what distinguishes Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton as the authors of great epics is that each poet repurposed the genre in composing his masterpiece, deviating from his models in decisive ways. As Hainsworth writes in the conclusion to his extensive study of the epic, “Each one of the major epics in the classical tradition was in some significant respect an innovation and was made worthwhile by the very way in which it was unconventional” (146). Homer, perhaps through sheer force of genius and originality, elevated his *Iliad* from the level of folkloric heroic

lay to a sophisticated, highly crafted piece of tragic poetry. Virgil's *Aeneid* adapted many of the tropes of Homer's heroic poems to write an epic serving a nationalistic purpose; Dante, while acknowledging his debt to the Latin epics of Virgil, Lucan, and Statius, introduced the first-person—really, the autobiographical—narrator to the genre, and transformed the epic into a spiritual journey leading to God of the Catholic, rather than classical, faith. Milton, in turn, drew even more heavily from the Bible in his Christian epic, expanding a crucial scriptural passage with such emotional and psychological depth—thereby moving beyond older epics' focus on action—as to envision the destiny of humanity on a scale more universal than perhaps any of his famed predecessors had. In the composition of these canonical epics, each poet emerged from the preexisting tradition by reinventing the genre in form and theme. The lasting influence and importance of their poems bespeaks the generative, rather than deteriorative, effect of innovation on the time-old tradition of the epic.

As texts that generally profess or celebrate certain cultural or moral values, epics respond to the specific realities of a given time period and place, meaning that the genre must, and will, change with the ages. In Hainsworth's assessment, the various epics that appear over the centuries demark distinct phases of civilization: "Epics have sprung up with every appearance of spontaneity whenever societies throughout the world achieved a certain stage of development or a certain kind of culture" (3). That the Restoration-era epic of the Puritan John Milton struck its critics in many ways as un-Homeric should be of little surprise. After all, *Paradise Lost* speaks to a Protestant, rather than pagan, conception of the divine and of the heroic.

Poetry that has preserved the Homeric tone closely in a post-Homeric age often results in something parodic; in its most deliberate execution, this style has given rise to an offshoot of the tradition known as the mock-epic. These 17th and 18th century takes on the genre testify to some degree to the difficulty of producing an epic about modern, urban life. Authors may still write “serious epics” (as Hainsworth calls the texts he analyzes) if they realize what Thomas Greene has said of the tradition: “to be perpetuated and renewed, [the epic mode] had to be violated and extended” (194). The prose, stream-of-consciousness narration, and the demotic language and subject matter of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, or the fragmentary and multi-register text of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, exemplify some of the violations that have adapted the epic to the 20th century.

Of course, deviations from a standard become recognizable only after familiarizing ourselves with that standard, and even though Hainsworth and Greene warn against treating Homer or Virgil’s poems as paradigms, no scholar of the epic tradition, or author seeking to contribute to it, can disregard the ongoing influence of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*. Epics can be realized no more within a literary vacuum than within a social or cultural one. Even an epic as personally voiced as Dante’s *Divine Comedy* reflects and articulates beliefs belonging to the society from which it emerges. Allusion is a key tool of the epicist, as it signals the affinity between his work and its predecessors. The epic is “a sentimental genre, a conscious preservation or re-creation in a literary environment” of a mode that emerged in the West with Homer (Hainsworth 146). Furthermore, by casting such a resemblance, the author can then display his originality with greater effect by contrasting his vision

from his model's. Dante, for example, encounters many of the same figures in the early cantos of *Inferno* that Aeneas does in his journey to the underworld in *Aeneid* Book 6; however, whereas these beings are fearful deities in their own right in Virgil's poem, in the *Inferno* they are no more than obeisant supervisors of a justice meted from on high who can do nothing without God's consent, which emphasizes the superiority of Dante's Christianity to Virgil's paganism. Notably, in this example Dante differentiates his epic from Virgil's with respect to their conceptions of the order of the cosmos. The way in which an author reimagines the themes or worldview handed down to him by the epic tradition is ultimately the central question when considering what it means to read a text as epic, because the spirit of the genre lies in the ideas that it expresses more so than in the tropes or formal characteristics that aid in expressing those ideas. Approaching the genre of the epic as a long tradition that thrives on innovation and re-creation, I turn now to the tradition as it has developed in the modern age leading up to McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.

Since Homer, every epicist has confronted the challenge of writing a Homeric poem outside of Homer's Heroic Age. The poet's choice of heroic figure for his epic lies at the center of his task; not only must he adapt the elevated language and thematic seriousness of the genre to his own time, but so, too, must the epicist adapt his hero to embody the values of the society to which the epic is addressed. Virgil, for example, despite appearing to us in the present day as Homer's immediate heir, composed his epic about seven hundred years after his model, during which

time other Roman poets had attempted and failed to endow their nation and their people with an epic that matched the artistry and timelessness of the Greeks'. Unlike his compatriots, however, Virgil ultimately rejected the option of a historical hero for his epic—such as Scipio Africanus, victor of the Second Punic War, or the even more obvious choice of his emperor and patron, Caesar Augustus; instead, the poet chose the Trojan Aeneas, a figure identified as a very distant ancestor to the imperial house of the Julii and a peripheral character in Homer's own *Iliad*. As a character who began his life in Homer's verse but remained relatively obscure, Aeneas provided Virgil with the pretext for his heavy application of Homeric structures to his poem while leaving him the freedom to furnish those structures with details specifically directed toward celebrating imperial Rome. Furthermore, in choosing a hero from a mythological age, Virgil availed himself of a figure that possessed greater symbolic potential than the historical Scipio or still living Augustus: Aeneas's trials could make a statement about Roman virtue that extended from the fabled days of the Trojan War on through the *pax romana* of Augustus, rather than one restricted to a specific battle—which, if still fresh in the people's memory, would likely not yet have shed all of its less-than-glorious details. Virgil's creative conception of a hero for his poem was his solution to an obstacle that has continually arisen for the authors of epics in the wake of Homer—one which the history of the form suggests has become increasingly difficult in the modern era.

Since the 17th century, the majority of works considered to be approaching the epic genre have proceeded from and reflected a belief that the age in which they are written is no longer suited for the very genre they are adapting. T.S. Eliot, who

would go on to write such a poem himself in *The Waste Land*, summed up the sentiment concisely when he wrote, “since Milton, we have had no great epic poem” (quoted in *Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, 167). If *Paradise Lost* marks for many the end of the epic tradition, it is Milton’s prodigious skill rather than his historical circumstance that seems the more likely cause. Having combined a Shakespearean sense of characterization and conflict with Virgilian diction and breadth of vision, Milton presented in *Paradise Lost* a literary achievement that no other Englishman of his day seeking to write a Protestant epic was going to surpass, just as Virgil’s *Aeneid* had precluded further attempts at a Roman imperial epic. Still, with its condemnation of the older epics’ celebration of war and its emphasis on thought and emotion over action, Milton’s epic signals a change in the cultural outlook of Europe that would make the continuation of epics with Homeric substance no longer feasible. Claude Rawson, in “Mock-heroic and English poetry,” explains this shift in the social and cultural stance:

Changing attitudes to war played a part in the gradual extinction of the idea that heroic poems were the greatest work that the soul of man was able to perform, a definition repeated by rote as late as Dryden’s translation of Virgil (1697). An increasing bourgeois readership, the dilution of aristocratic aspirations and classical values, were further predisposing features of a culture increasingly inhospitable to epic. The emergence of mock-heroic in the narrow sense is one of the poetic consequences. (170)

In an age when neither war nor God held the same intellectual appeal, the mock-heroic—or, mock-epic—became the project of those with grand poetic ambitions.

For the original authors of the mock-heroic, parody served as the instrument for preserving the high style of the epic. In a post-Milonic age in which poets no longer believed that the option of writing a serious epic was available to them, the aim of their skill “was to project epic aspiration through a filter of irony” (168). As

Rawson explains, “The demise of military epic threatened to deprive poetry of certain cherished opportunities for an elevated style. It seemed that this could only be recovered by irony” (169). Through the purposeful distance that parody or irony provided from their models, authors such as Alexander Pope and John Dryden succeeded in employing a style that had no longer seemed natural while applying it to events and characters that were representative of their time. In contrast to the purpose of the older but still fashionable genre of the burlesque, which put lowly language into the mouths of classical heroes, mock-heroic poetry’s “objective [was] not to undermine a revered form, but to affirm its worth by exposing the modern realities that failed to rise to its standard” (169). At the same time, the authors of mock-heroic sought to elevate their own work to that standard: “Their style, though seemingly designed to deflate, was protective of the older epics, and, by retaining and even absorbing some of the primary majesties it was travestyng, actually aspired in its way to emulating them, achieving through parody the status of what Dryden called ‘Heroique Poetry it self’” (167).

Within a genre whose practitioners have always been intensely aware of their relationship to their predecessors, one built on both echo and competition, the technique of the mock-epicists represents another level of complexity in the dialogue between new and old epics. For at the same time that these modern poets succeeded in emulating the elevated style of their forebears by means of parody, there was in this emulation a struggle to overcome the very parodic mode that engendered it. As a demonstration of the complicated operation of the mock-heroic mode, Rawson cites the opening couplet of Dryden’s *Mac Flecknoe*: “All humane things are subject to

decay, / And, when Fate summons, Monarchs must obey.” He observes in these lines an appearance of seriousness that plays with the reader’s reception of the couplet: “It is, in the first instance, a joke with a straight face. But during the instant that a reader doesn’t realize this, it acquires a heroic bravura which shadows forth the aspiration of mock-heroic to transcend its parodic element” (174). Published in its final form some sixty years after *Mac Flecknoe*, Pope’s *Dunciad* represents for Rawson the supreme example of this aspiration at work. “The full weight of Miltonic resonance,” Rawson explains, “is invoked not in order to confer pomp on ‘trivial Things’, but to express the undiminished enormity of its evil subject,” the detrimental influence of Dulness sweeping modern English society (179). Through his ironic dependence on Milton, as well as Homer and Virgil, Pope accessed the epic mode and elevated his vision of modern life to a serious statement about the character of a particular society, which all epics encompass. As parody provided Pope with the pretext for employing an epic mode in the first place, however, he could not wholly separate his poem from it. Samuel Johnson’s *Vanity of Human Wishes*, published in the same decade, achieved an elevated style while eschewing the mechanism of irony, but it also eschewed allusions to the epic tradition (179). Other products of the era, such as “[t]he *Scribleriad* and Hayley’s *Triumph of Temper*, which attempt mock-heroic with minimal mockery, are a remarkable demonstration of that fact that even in a context of resolute humorlessness, the option of returning to an unmediated form of heroic expression did not appear to suggest itself” (183). As if the modern development of the epic tradition had lost sight of itself, “The pathway was not a return to epic idiom

but an un-parodying of parodies of that idiom,” which later poets such as Wordsworth and Eliot would again attempt to restore.

19th and 20th century productions under the label of modern epic, such as *The Waste Land*, signal their aspirations to the epic genre and simultaneous sense of its unattainability not through a parodic filter, but through designed incompleteness. Leaving one’s poem unfinished seemed symptomatic of the fragility of epic ambitions in an age after Milton: before turning to the mock-heroic style, Pope, among others, first attempted and then later aborted the composition of more traditional epics. Later poets, however, undertook expansive poetic projects in which non-completion was programmed into the very plan of the work. As an ambitious poem that purposely lacks conclusion, *The Prelude* of William Wordsworth (1805, 1850) provided a formalistic pattern for the modern epic: “these texts are in many ways deliberately provisional, open-ended, formally unfinished and distinguished throughout by the sense of possibility, of inclusion rather than perfected and completed design” (Whittier-Ferguson 213-4). For Wordsworth, the choice of subject material precluded his epic’s completion: denied the glorious topics of the old epics, the introspective poet turned to “the one subject authentically at his command,” the story of his life and development as a poet—a narrative that not only demands the continuous revision of the poet as his life advances and his self-understanding changes and grows more complex, but a story that cannot end until the poet himself dies, by which time, of course, he can no longer edit his work (and, indeed, after many years of revision, *The Prelude* was at last published posthumously without a formal end) (213).

T.S. Eliot took the design of non-completion to a more concentrated and meta-literary level of expression in *The Waste Land* (1922). Composing his great poem in “fragments,” which read as “distinguishable and often separable parts,” Eliot mimics the unfinished state of previous modern attempts at the epic (214). “What Eliot gives us [...] in *The Waste Land* [...],” John Wittier-Ferguson writes, “is a poem that is less an epic than a gathering of parts that might belong in an epic, none of them developed for more [...] than twenty or thirty lines” (215). In their brevity as well as constant shifting, Eliot’s narrative units gain a concentrated intensity, like that of lyrical poetry, which transcends the parody of mock-heroics, while also signaling the impossibility of composing in the old epic form, which, among other things, requires an extended narrative. The serious yet frenzied style of *The Waste Land* functions as a statement that the artistic drive toward the epic has not died out in the modern age but can no longer find a subject that can sustain it long enough to engender a proper epic. But where incompleteness is a consequence of *The Prelude*’s subject, it is also the subject itself in the fragmentary as well as highly allusive *Waste Land*, in which the striving is not that of a hero but that of the poet himself for a revered genre which he reclaims, if fragilely—it is likewise a formal expression of the dysfunction and disjunction of the society it portrays: *The Waste Land* is, arguably, the epic of the chaos of modern civilization. Eliot’s poem represents the highly self-conscious inclination in all modern exponents of the epic tradition to signal their own lack of a core component—whether a serious tone, unity and length of plot, or another quality—belonging to the primary form of the genre.

As a product of modern literature, *Blood Meridian* inherits this brand of epic self-awareness, an aesthetic awareness, and yet, it returns more closely to the traditional epic mode than do any of its aforementioned predecessors. Indeed, in outlining how modern epics diverge from their classical models, that “[n]one of [these works] belongs straightforwardly to the genre of the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, or *Paradise Lost*, in the sense of being a long poem, in elevated language, on a high theme of tribal glory, or national origins, or scriptural myths, containing narratives of battle,” Rawson provides a fairly accurate description of what we do find in McCarthy’s book. Aside from being written in prose rather than verse—a change Hainsworth finds natural in our age: “Only rarely are such things, with epic breadth and depth, now attempted in verse: prose can do it better”—*Blood Meridian* satisfies Rawson’s description of the traditional epic in nearly every way (148). In countless passages, McCarthy narrates scenes of mass violence fought between men from different lands through the most highly crafted language. With a single yet vast sentence such as this, he achieves “Things unattempted [...] in Prose or Rhime” since such a poem as Homer’s *Iliad*, if ever attempted at all (*Paradise Lost*, 1.16):

Now driving in a wild frieze of headlong horses with eyes walled and teeth cropped and naked riders with clusters of arrows clenched in their jaws and their shields winking in the dust and up the far side of the ruined ranks in a piping of boneflutes and dropping down off the sides of their mounts with one heel hung in the withers strap and their short bows flexing beneath the outstretched necks of the ponies until they had circled the company and cut their ranks in two and then rising up again like funhouse figures, some with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives and running about on the ground with a peculiar bandylegged trot like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair and passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping of limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera, genitals, some of the savages so slathered up with gore they might have rolled in it like dogs and some who fell upon the dying and sodomized them with loud cries to their fellows. (56)

This overwhelming, paratactic surge of martial imagery, replete with “headlong horses,” “clusters of arrows,” “shields winking in the dust,” “blades,” spears, and clubs, sounds more like the narration of an ancient battle than of a scene from the 19th century of, say, Wordsworth’s *Prelude*.

Another sweeping description of the desert battlefield on the preceding page evokes not only greater horror but a heightened sense of McCarthy’s application of the epic mode:

A legion of horribles, hundreds in number, half naked or clad in costumes attic or biblical or wardrobed out of a fevered dream with the skins of animals and silk finery and pieces of uniform still tracked with the blood of prior owners, coats of slain dragoons, frogged and braided cavalry jackets, one in a stovepipe hat and one with an umbrella and one in white stockings with a bloodstained weddingveil and some in headgear of crane feathers or rawhide helmets that bore the horns of bull or buffalo and one in a pigeontailed coat worn backwards and otherwise naked and one in the armor of a Spanish conquistador, the breastplate and pauldrons deeply dented with old blows of mace or sabre done in another country by men whose very bones were dust and many with their braids spliced up with the hair of other beasts until they trailed upon the ground and their horses’ ears and tails worked with bits of brightly colored cloth and one whose horse’s whole head was painted crimson and all the horsemen’s faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns, death hilarious, all howling in a barbarous tongue and riding down upon them like a horde from a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning, screeching and yammering and clothed in smoke like those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools. (55)

The presence of the adjectives “attic or biblical” in the first line reveals a degree of the aforementioned self-awareness of epics, the author acknowledging those source or traditions, classical and Christian, from which he borrows and with which he must contend in creating this hellish spectacle. The narrator’s claim toward the end that these Comanche Indians descend like creatures from “a hell more horrible yet than the brimstone land of christian reckoning” implies a challenge to the Christian epic poets Dante and Milton, whose works have left a more vivid and long-lasting image of Hell in Western minds than the Bible itself; and McCarthy’s hellscape would seem the more horrifying, for it exists in a historical place and time. In *Blood*

Meridian, the characteristically epic topoi of the journey to the underworld has turned its sights above ground, with the journey—the kid’s own nightmarish one—occurring in lands that even today we can locate on our maps, and its devils mortal men like ourselves.

The passage above is a rich example of epic devices operating in a modern prose work. In conjunction with the parataxis of the prose, which imitates in form the vastness of the sight of the Comanche war band, the extensive, vividly detailed list of bizarrely garbed warriors that McCarthy describes becomes a veritable epic catalog of grotesques. The immense variety of the imagery, which is overflowing and yet carefully structured by the rhythm of the sentence, conjures up a carnival of phantasmagoria that recalls passages from the *Inferno*. We are not only told that the clothing of the Comanche is “still tracked with the blood of prior owners,” ominous enough of a detail, but made to envision such chilling extensions of the author’s imagination as a Comanche warrior wearing “white stockings with a bloodstained weddingveil,” an image so outlandish as to just be believable. The sum effect of its features is that this remarkable passage of McCarthy’s writing achieves the narrative expansiveness of the epic mode. “This expansiveness is at the foundation of epic,” writes Hainsworth, who comments on its value citing the professional wisdom of a modern day Bosnian bard:

The involvement of the audience calls for some expression of the quality of a scene or act, as one singer explained:

Well, for example, [a good singer] adds what the heroes were wearing. He says that they were carrying knives, and saddle pistols, and Osmanli saddles. Then he says: ‘Over the saddle,’ he says, ‘are fine blankets, over the blankets,’ he says, ‘are scattered thin rupees. And in the middle,’ he says, ‘are small mahmudis,’ and so forth. He ornaments it. He tells that the hilt of the sword is gold, and the blade of deadly steel, and there is a bit of twelve pounds in the [horse’s] teeth, and he adds more ... and in that way he sings it longer and better. People say it’s better that way.

-as well they might, for the bare event of panoramic narration has been replaced by the stimulating color of a detailed picture. (7)

Though the singer explains the process of ornamentation with respect to oral composition, expansiveness of narration in the literary as well as oral form is a manifestation of the breadth and depth that distinguishes an epic as more than storytelling. The scene that the bard uses as his example of epic narration bears a striking resemblance to the passage taken from *Blood Meridian*, both describing in fine detail what horsemen are wearing; the similarity in subject matter and level of specificity suggests again the presence of the traditional epic mode in McCarthy's writing. At this point we must wonder, then, if McCarthy enters a tradition defined in the modern era by Pope, Wordsworth, and Eliot's unconventional examples of the genre, what enables him to depict martial scenes and employ old epic grandeurs in an age when they have supposedly been cut off from the Western author with epic ambitions. The striking appearance in the passage of "the armor of a Spanish conquistador...dented with old blows...in another country by men whose very bones were dust" suggests what the distinguishing factor is: with this epic, we are in the New World.

"[T]he first epic poem which in its grandeur and its universality speaks for the modern world," according to the classicist and epic scholar C.M. Bowra, is Luís de Camões's *Os Lusíadas* (1572), an epic about the founding of a colonial empire (qtd. in Monteiro 117). It must claim our attention, after examining the relationship of Pope, Wordsworth, and Eliot to the genre, that Bowra attributes "grandeur" and "universality" to Camões's modern epic without any sort of tentativeness. But then,

in the opening stanza of the *Lusíadas* we read verses written in a Virgilian register that is un-filtered by parody or any other self-conscious device intended to offset the improbability of writing a modern narrative in an ancient mode:

Armes, and the Men above the vulgar File,
Who from the *Western Lusitanian* shore
Past ev'n beyond the *Trapobanian*-Isle,
Through *Seas* which never *Ship* had sayld before;
Who (brave in *action*, patient in long *Toyle*,
Beyond what strength of *humane* nature bore)
'Mongst *Nations*, under *other Stars*, acquir'd
A *modern Scepter* which to *Heaven* aspir'd. (Canto 1, stanza 1, qtd in Monteiro

122)

“Having chosen to practice his art in the genre of the epic,” George Monteiro writes, “Camões was willing to adhere to the conventions of the epic whenever possible” (123). The possibility for Camões’s close adherence to epic conventions arises from his subject matter—as one can see from the stanza above, the Portuguese poet’s epic possesses not only a Virgilian tone but Virgilian content as well.

In writing an epic “which sings of Vasco de Gama’s voyage around Africa and the Portuguese colonization of the Indies,” as Erich Auerbach summarized the poem, Camões undertook a project with the nationalistic scope of the *Aeneid* and necessarily drew parallels between his heroes’ quest and Aeneas’s perilous journey around the Mediterranean and subsequent encounter with the natives of the Italian peninsula (qtd in 119). That is to say, a voyage from the Age of Exploration proved the ideal subject for a poet with epic aspirations in the modern era. Among the lands colonized by Europeans in this age were, of course, the Americas, and the 19th century North American setting of *Blood Meridian* provides McCarthy with the same opportunity that Camões had to reproduce epic scenes, such as the Comanche raid discussed above. America is a land like Virgil’s Latium in which new peoples

traveling from the east arrived and staked their claims to the land in bloodshed, killing and being killed by the natives they encountered in what was to them a yet uncultivated wilderness; the massacre of Captain White's filibusters at the hands of the Comanche is a species, if an inverted one, of that drama of invasion and conquest. The ever expanding United States of the 19th century was also an environment rife with frontier wars, the type of conflict that comprises the main action of the *Song of Roland*. Thus, as a relatively young land in the eyes of the Western literary world, the Americas, among other colonies, have enabled modern authors to write once again about the founding of a nation or empire, a traditional epic subject, in an organic fashion.

Of course, this means that any epicist turning to such foundation narratives must write about events and figures belonging to recent history, which authors of classical epics generally avoided. Camões did not write about the founding of Portugal itself but of its maritime empire, which was established mainly during the century before the poet's birth by such expeditions as Vasco de Gama's. As Monteiro says of the author of *Os Lusíadas*:

Much like Virgil, Camões celebrates the heroic deeds of his people in their foundation of a great empire, but where Virgil, in celebrating the Roman Empire, had looked back to its foundation many hundreds of years before in the story of Aeneas, Camões describes the business of empire-building, a thing of the recent past, historically a moment of national greatness already in decline even as the poem itself was being written, published, and read. (Monteiro, 119)

While epics concerning a people's recent past have been composed since the time of the ancient Greeks, most have followed a fate similar to that of Choerilus's *Persica*, an epic celebrating the Greek victory in the Persian Wars, which, except for a few unenlightening references by critics, has left behind no trace. The obstacle that

perhaps sank the *Persica*, and which Virgil seems to have avoided by rejecting the Punic Wars or Octavian's victory over Cleopatra at Actium as subjects for his nationalistic epic, is suggested by the fourth century Greek orator Demosthenes: certain events "through being more recent in time have not yet been 'mythologized' and have not been elevated into heroic form" (qtd in Hainsworth, 63). Had Virgil, for example, chosen Julius Caesar as the hero of his poem, the less popular aspects of his life and career, still fresh in the collective memory, would likely have besmirched Virgil's epic enterprise—in fact, when Virgil's fellow Roman poet Lucan later wrote an epic featuring Caesar as a central character, it was with the full intention of condemning the general and dictator. In the case of *Os Lusíadas*, the historical content did not elicit negative reactions from its immediate audience, who proudly adopted the poem as Portugal's national epic, but from certain critics in the twentieth century. Revealing *Os Lusíadas*'s complicated situation as what many consider the first modern epic, Thomas Greene explains that, because "[t]he history represented in his poem is authentic [...] [Camões] makes of the poem an historical artifact which is subject to the abrupt reverses of history, and thus *Os Lusíadas* today seems almost swamped by the twentieth century" (qtd in 120). The very context that enabled Camões to write an epic of Virgilian proportions successfully in the modern era now worked against a favorable reception of his poem; as Greene says, "Of the two great forces which animate it, imperialism and nationalism, the first is largely discredited in our time, and the second is beginning to be suspect" (qtd in 120).

Still, *Os Lusíadas* has had a lasting effect on the modern imagination, receiving high praise from many scholars and poets, and its legacy demonstrates that

a modern epic can inform a sense of nationhood and affect the way in which figures from the past are remembered by a people. Demosthenes's remark that recent historical events lack heroic form because they have not had time to become mythologized implies that the process of heroization must occur before, rather than through, the composition of an epic. But the celebrated legacy of Vasco de Gama following the publication of *Os Lusíadas* suggests that a literary epic can in fact accelerate the process. As Monteiro writes, "In Gama the poet took a figure whose historical significance, given the nature of his troubled and troublesome career, not to mention his questionable nature, was still far from settled, creating, single-handedly, the legendary figure that to this day is enshrined in Portuguese history" (120). By making Gama the hero of his poem, Camões transformed the explorer into the hero of the Portuguese people, and perhaps he remains better remembered for his deeds in *Os Lusíadas* than for those on his actual missions (Monteiro's use of the verb "creating" to describe Camões's effect on Gama's legacy would suggest as much). Camões took an event formative in the evolution of his homeland into an empire and elevated it to something far more glorious than the pages of a historical document could contain: as one biographer of Gama wrote, "Camões transforms Gama's voyage in tone and *content*, from the mundane to the divine" (qtd in 120, emphasis mine). McCarthy's representation of John Glanton's westward quest, however, has quite the opposite effect.

Part II

As our examination of the epic's history shows, *Blood Meridian* occupies a unique place in the tradition of the genre. Like *Os Lusíadas*, it sings of a land which made late contact with Europe and was lately colonized by Old World powers, and it reclaims Homeric and Virgilian grandeurs for modern literature. Yet, produced some four hundred years after Camões's epic, *Blood Meridian* is also written against the backdrop of the changing attitudes to imperialism and nationalism which have "swamped" *Os Lusíadas* in the last century, and no one could accuse McCarthy of celebrating these forces. Furthermore, at the same time that *Blood Meridian* revives the old epic mode, it also reads, like other late modern epics such as *The Waste Land* and Pound's *Cantos*, as a reflection on a tradition that has already been solidified. As such, *Blood Meridian* not only presents a narrative that is epic in scale, re-envisioning the foundational period of a nation's history and the bloodshed that went along with it, but also demonstrates an awareness of the influence that previous epics have had on the interpretation of such events. For all that the historical moment of *Blood Meridian*'s setting primes us to expect something akin to the *Aeneid*, McCarthy does not tell us as Americans a story we are expecting or that we necessarily want to hear: his is not a tale we have been told before. If, as I have said, all modern epics lack some central component belonging to their models, then *Blood Meridian* lacks—or rejects—the most crucial of them all: a heroic enterprise which glorifies the nation's past and thereby solidifies a celebratory self-image of the nation's people.

The same year that *Blood Meridian* begins, 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo radically altered the map of the American Southwest—Mexico ceded more than 500,000 square miles of territory to the United States, which would later form the states of California, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming (Griswold del Castillo, *Online*). It is across this changing and expanding American landscape that the kid makes his bloody journey with the Glanton gang. Like the *Aeneid* or the *Song of Roland*, then, *Blood Meridian* re-envisions an empire in formation: an America freshly victorious in the US-Mexican War and yet little more than a decade away from the catastrophic Civil War (which in part arose from disputes between free states and slave states about the territory acquired through Guadalupe Hidalgo). Despite choosing this as the backdrop for his epic narrative, however, McCarthy does not focus his work on grand events, such as a major battle in which patriotic warriors like Roland are martyred or the legendary beginnings of our nation.

One might account for this distinction by arguing that, as an American writing in the wake of both World Wars and, more closely, Vietnam, Cormac McCarthy could not possibly produce an epic that celebrates the old subjects of war and nationalism, even if capable of the elevated language and universal scope befitting a traditional epic; that is to say, a contemporary author could not successfully write an *Os Lusíadas* for his nation as Camões did in his own time. However, even in the twenty-first century, traditional epics are being composed in North America. In October of 2011, I attended the performance of such a poem, called *The Plains of Abraham*. Composed by Jack Mitchell, an Assistant Professor of

Classics at Dalhousie University, this epic takes for its subject the Siege of Quebec in 1759, “a vital episode in Canadian history” (Mitchell, *Online*). The poem not only returns to a Homeric use of fixed meter and rhythm and formulaic language (such as the repetition of phrases and epithets), but is also performed orally, through memorization and improvisation as in the style of ancient rhapsodes. The poem’s subject matter is equally as traditional, recounting the trials and deaths of warriors and commanders on both sides of the conflict, which according to Mitchell is “the most famous moment in the Canadian historical imagination” (Mitchell, *Online*). That Mitchell has found audiences receptive to his epic—touring throughout his homeland and performing before a total of 1600 people in 2005—bespeaks the interest of North Americans not only in the battles that have shaped their national identity, but in the highly crafted retelling of such events in the epic mode.

While McCarthy might not have turned to such a medium as oral poetry, there are at least two defining events in United States history that would lend themselves well to a grand American epic novel. The Revolutionary War, with its many already-mythologized elements, would be the natural choice for an epic on the founding of the nation: one celebrating the ideals of liberty and equality that continue to loom large in the national imagination, however Americans choose to respond to their nation’s complicated past. A more likely subject still for epicization would be the Civil War, a conflict whose scope and scale of bloodshed make it arguably the most epic event ever witnessed on American soil. It is a subject that would lend to an American epic the complexity and tragedy of the *Iliad* itself. A comparison with Wordsworth’s process of electing a subject for his epic sheds light on McCarthy’s

own choice to focus on obscure historical figures. Exemplifying the self-reflexive nature of modern epics, *The Prelude* begins with the poet's own contemplation over choosing his hero. Paul Cantor notes in "The Politics of the Epic: Wordsworth, Byron, and the Romantic Redefinition of Heroism" that although "[t]he greatest—the most epic—event of Wordsworth's lifetime was the French Revolution," the only Frenchman to enter the list of possible candidates is an unidentified figure referred to as "that one Frenchman" (Cantor 382; Wordsworth I.205). Even once identified in the poet's notes as Dominique de Gournes, this man remains obscure (Wordsworth tells us he was a "French gentleman who went in 1568 to Florida to avenge the massacre of the French by the Spaniards there") (qtd in Cantor 382). Cantor says of this unlikely choice of a candidate: "The oblique allusion to an obscure Frenchman at the beginning of *The Prelude* virtually forces us to think of other Frenchmen Wordsworth might have chosen as the subject for an epic celebrating the struggle for liberty" (382).

It would seem highly unlikely given the time period that Wordsworth simply did not think of more famous and influential Frenchmen as he began *The Prelude*. Therefore, "[t]he allusion to Dominique de Gournes has the feel of a poetic evasion, an act of literary disinformation," making such revolutionaries as Danton, Marat, or Lafayette, or the even more epic figure of Napoleon, conspicuously absent from "Wordsworth's roll call of epic subjects" (Cantor, 382). Wordsworth did not somehow overlook the French Revolution as a possible subject of his epic, but instead actively rejected it—ultimately, that is because this event which the poet had put so much hope into turned out to be a great disappointment for him, and his

beliefs about revolution, and of course epic, turned from the political to the personal. Wordsworth's act of "poetic evasion" suggests a cause behind McCarthy's own choice of subject matter: like Wordsworth, McCarthy deliberately passes over famous figures and events because he does not wish to celebrate them. The accepted narrative arc of the Civil War, for example, typically culminates in the ultimate triumph of freedom and union over the evils of slavery and separatism—and I believe that is precisely McCarthy's reason for avoiding the Civil War in *Blood Meridian*, although the book spans the years of the war in the kid-turned-the-man's later years. McCarthy goes further than Wordsworth by writing his grand work on obscure historical figures, revealing how little McCarthy wishes to produce a celebratory epic.

In writing *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy has exhumed a cast of haunting figures from the archives "of obscure historical data that carry little relation to the grander picture of 'standard' Western progress or morality" (Moos 24). John Sepich, who has extensively researched McCarthy's sources in *Notes on Blood Meridian*, cites a number of documents attesting to the very real nature of both John Glanton and the practice of Mexican state governments to contract with mercenaries for Apache scalps in the mid-19th century. Shane Schimpf, who has also investigated McCarthy's sources, notes that Glanton led a long and tumultuous career in the Southwest:

By the time he was sixteen, Glanton was already a Texas Ranger captain [...] Later he would be involved in the Regulator-Moderator War where he is said to have wounded or killed the best fighter on both sides of the battle. [...] During his service [in the US-Mexican War] he killed an unarmed man and stole his horse leading the Mexican authorities to complain. This resulted in General Zachary Taylor ordering his arrest. His

commander at the time, Captain Lane, warned Glanton thereby allowing him to avoid arrest by escaping to Texas. [...] In 1849 Glanton headed for California in search of riches in the gold fields of California with thirty men. [...] On the way, Glanton and Michel H. Cheallié wound up in Chihuahua City where they may have convinced the state legislature to pass the Fifth Law which allowed Chevallié to contract with mercenaries to take care of troublesome Indians either through capture or death. [...] By 1850, however, Glanton turned to killing peaceful Indians [...] As a result a bounty was put on his head forcing him to retreat into the state of Sonora. It is after this eviction that Glanton and his gang took over the ferry at the Yuma crossing [where Glanton eventually met a violent death]. (126-127)

The Glanton we encounter in *Blood Meridian* is this man of criminal violence, and his bloodstained enterprise forms the core of the narrative. Even the kid, who remains unnamed throughout the book, might have been inspired by the historical figure of Samuel Chamberlain; Chamberlain, who also ran away from home as a teenager, deserted in the US-Mexican War and later joined Glanton's men on the scalphunting expedition (Moos, 25). His autobiography, *My Confession*, while "exaggerated and romantic" according to Moos, nevertheless places many of *Blood Meridian's* characters and events in a historical context, and it is certainly McCarthy's source for the character of Judge Holden, who already in Chamberlain's account is a man of immense size and erudition, as well as a suspected molester and murderer of children (26). Sepich and Schimpf also offer historical documents listing the names of Tobin, Harlin, Marcus Webster, David Brown, the black John Jackson and several other scalphunters encountered in *Blood Meridian*. While Glanton and his men are not, after all, unsung heroes of America's past, they are indeed unsung, and *Blood Meridian* confronts us with an unforgettable account of their deeds.

Rather than depict persons who already occupy a place in the collective imagination and historical events whose memory is contested, *Blood Meridian* exposes us to elements of American history that are rarely ever a part of the discussion about our nation's past. Through his highly crafted aesthetic rendering of

the Glanton gang's brutality, McCarthy makes this history powerfully present in our minds; the history and fiction present in *Blood Meridian* do not serve to counteract but to enhance each other—"McCarthy weaves fiction and history: he builds certain major fictional events in the narrative out of pieces of minor historical artifacts and strings certain major historical events together with his fiction" (Moos 25). In this way, *Blood Meridian* satisfies Ezra Pound's formulation: "An epic is a poem including history" (if we take "poem" to mean "a making," as the Greek root of the word is often translated, rather than language set in verse) (qtd in Whitter-Ferguson 222). Pound believed, however, that a major obstacle to producing such a poem in the twentieth century was the necessity of a "damn long time for the story to lose its garish detail and get encrusted with a bunch of beautiful lies" (qtd in 221). This predicament, which returns us to Demosthenes's comment about mythologized events versus recent historical events, does not quite apply to McCarthy, however. If anything, the "garish detail[s]" of the Glanton gang's activities have already been submerged beneath "an American collective frontier sensibility" or "collective unconscious about the West" (Moos 24, 36). By bringing their memory to the forefront of the reader's consciousness, *Blood Meridian* re-informs America's self-image by challenging our belief in a West that has been "encrusted with a bunch of beautiful lies."

"See the child"—in this, the first line of *Blood Meridian*, we hear the narrator speaking to us directly (3). It evokes the orality of the classical epic, as if here our narrator assumes the role of bard in calling up the image of this child before

us. The echoing of this tradition form of narration reveals a metafictional awareness throughout *Blood Meridian* in regards to storytelling and the transmission of information through representation and language over time. As an imperative, a direct address, the first line of the novel has the effect of drawing us into the narrative—as do the first lines of *Beowulf* and the *Inferno*: “Lo! *we* have heard of the past glory of Danish kings...” (qtd in Greene 207, emphasis mine); “Midway in the journey of *our* life” (*Inferno* I.1, emphasis mine). The use of the present tense throughout the first pages of *Blood Meridian* heightens a connection between reader and the kid by collapsing any semblance of temporal distance. The more conventional employment of the past tense in the narration of novels implies that we are already a step removed from the action; by contrast, when *Blood Meridian*’s narrator continues, “He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire,” it implants us within the scene.

A powerful example of this effect can be found in the narration of the Comanche raid on Captain White’s filibusters (see the second passage, from *BM* p. 56, discussed on p.21). The massive sentence, describing the multitudinous ways in which the Comanche decimate the filibusters, begins, “Now driving in a wild frieze;” here, the use of “Now” along with the present participle doubly enforces a sense of immediacy and perpetual occurrence. Nearly every action in this 21-line sentence is narrated using the present participle, thus performing each act of violence anew before our eyes. A. E. Stallings, writing about Virgil’s use of the historical present, finds a further effect in the present tense as a narrative tool: “The received wisdom about the historical present is that it makes a narrative more vivid and gripping. But

it also makes for a curious stasis. Nothing happens; rather, it is always in the process of happening” (Stallings, *Online*). Stallings thus implies that the actions described continue beyond the timeframe of the text. Indeed, bloodshed between Americans, Mexicans, and Native Americans occurred before the events of *Blood Meridian* and certainly continued long after Glanton and most of his men were killed by the Yuma. Less literally speaking, the events, via this narration, remain ongoing and alive in our minds. Stallings’s remarks on this point draw a striking connection between *Blood Meridian* and the *Aeneid*:

We think in the present tense when we are in the midst of something so wonderful or horrific we cannot believe it is really happening. We do not live in the present tense so much as we relive in it—replaying memories or nightmares. *The Aeneid* also has this effect on us—as if we are in a particularly vivid nightmare. The gods are able to turn their eyes away from the violence and horror; we are not.

Like the *Aeneid*, *Blood Meridian* presents a people with a story of its nation’s past: the vision it projects has often been called nightmarish. The novel charges us to revisit this gruesome past and, as in the first line—“See the child”—to bear witness.

Blood Meridian has us look to the past in order to register its “presence” in the present. In this way, it again bears comparison with Virgil’s epic: “The epic traditionally is timeless, set in the distant heroic past; *The Aeneid* is instead timeful, looking forward and backward like Janus, not only back to Rome’s ancestor, but forward to his legendary descendants (to the Roman reader, still pre-history), to contemporary Augustan Rome, and even far into the future” (Stallings). For Virgil, the meeting point of these time frames is Aeneas’s shield, upon which the god Mulciber, “Knowing the prophets, knowing the age to come,/ Had wrought the future story of Italy” (*Aen.* VIII. 849-50). While Aeneas “Know[s] nothing of the events themselves,” the Augustan-era reader would immediately recognize the array of

images on Aeneas's shield as scenes from Roman history; thus, what their ancient ancestor carries upon his shoulder as "all the destined acts/ And fame of his descendants," are for the Romans of Augustus's day fulfilled prophecies, proof of Rome's blessed fate (VIII. 989; 991-2). If there is an image in *Blood Meridian* that corresponds to the shield, uniting past, present, and future, it is that of the kid himself—"All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man" (3). The absence of verbs in this statement, even in the present tense, makes the relationship between predecessor and successor all the more immediate—in Wordsworth's "My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold," from which McCarthy borrows the phrase, it reads, "The child *is* the father of the man" (l.7, emphasis mine; qtd. in Schimpf, 61). Moreover, the image is one of unified entity: the child lives on in the man that he becomes, just as the past permeates the present. As the *Aeneid* does through Aeneas's journey, *Blood Meridian* makes "history present" through the kid's journey.

However, McCarthy's description of the kid casts him in opposition to Aeneas, offering no explanation or justification for his wanderings and acts of bloodshed. Virgil and McCarthy both announce at the beginning of their works the violence that is to come, but whereas the *Aeneid*'s subject is "warfare and a man at war," that of *Blood Meridian* seems to be "mindless violence," a "taste" for which "already broods" in the child, as we are told on the first page (*Aen.*I.1; *Blood Meridian* 3). War, while acknowledged as destructive and gory even in a martial epic such as the *Iliad*, nevertheless has its valid causes and goals, ordained by Fate and

ensured by the immutable will of the gods. Mindless violence, on the other hand, has no place in a traditional epic, except perhaps in a figure like Aeneas's adversary Turnus, whose consuming rage dooms him to lead an insurrection against Aeneas's mission to settle Italy, and whose subsequent destruction marks Aeneas' triumph over his last obstacle between him and his claiming of the land his descendants are destined to rule. In *Blood Meridian*, no such mission gives shape to the kid's travels, nor do any noble triumphs ultimately redeem them. In a reversal of Odysseus's journey, "At fourteen he runs away. He will not see again the freezing kitchenhouse" where he has lived his whole life (4). Unlike Aeneas who "came to Italy by destiny" so "he could found a city and bring home/ His gods," within a year of his wanderings, the kid is "finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny" (*Aen.I.3*, 10-1; *BM* 4-5). Aeneas carries the remnants of Troy, his family (at one point literally carrying his father on his back), and his household gods with him to the land where they are destined to found a powerful and illustrious civilization; the kid travels aimlessly, bereft even of his name, to a land that promises him nothing. Most crucially, the violence he commits is not in the name of God or nation, and the enterprise with which he aligns himself has no great or glorious purpose.

By evoking the epic and setting *Blood Meridian* in the frontier American West, McCarthy makes us doubly aware of the absence of heroism associated with both the epic and Western genre. In "The Western: From Silents to Cinerama," Fenin and Everson propose, "The frontier is, in fact, the only mythological tissue available to this young nation" (qtd in Mitchell 263). While it might not be the only

source of national myth—as said earlier, the Revolutionary and Civil Wars occupy a special space in the popular imagination as well—the frontier has nonetheless deeply influenced the nation’s self-image. As Mitchell writes, “In its popular conception, the West undeniably remains ‘fused in the popular mind with such notions as freedom, opportunity, self-sufficiency, a better life,’” notions at the center of America’s nationalist ideology (293, qting from Zanger). As the representative of these national ideals, Mitchell writes, “[t]he cowboy, then, serves for Americans the same purpose as Her[ac]les did for the Greeks and Beowulf for the Anglo-Saxons”—that is to say, cowboys are the epic heroes of America (293). Fenin and Everson are more explicit on the matter, saying of life on the frontier: “Above this epic looms the pathos of the fight between good and evil so dear to Anglo-Saxon hearts, a theme that finds its highest literary expression in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*” (qtd in Mitchell 293; one must wonder if there is some conflation here in the term “Anglo-Saxon” between the Germanic tribes who celebrated the deeds of Beowulf and the appellation often taken to mean white American). Many scholars and critics have already noted the parallels between *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian*, but the “pathos of the fight between good and evil” remains conspicuously absent in McCarthy’s book.

Even in the oldest epics, heroism entails complications: Achilles calls a plague down upon his fellow Achaeans as retribution for a personal offense; Aeneas struggles between duty and desire; Roland’s pride forbids him from calling on aid, leaving him and his men outnumbered by their enemies; Milton’s Adam and Eve falter, succumbing to personal desires, and betray their God—yet, these less-than-

heroic actions are contained within a larger enterprise defined by a certain moral and rational system, whether classical Fate, heroic and chivalric codes, or Christian Providence. Interestingly, the Glanton gang also partakes in an enterprise, which from the perspective of the Mexicans who first enlist them would seem to be a glorious and just undertaking; when the gang first sets out from Chihuahua City, the citizenry give them a farewell which seems to heroize their mission:

Three days later they rode out single file through the streets with the governor and his party, the governor on a pale grey stallion and the killers on their small warponies, smiling and bowing and the lovely darkskinned girls throwing flowers from the windows and some blowing kisses and small boys running alongside and old men waving their hats and crying out huzzahs and Toadvine and the kid and the veteran bringing up the rear [...] Out of the edge of the city by the old stone aqueduct where the governor gave them his blessing and drank their health and their fortune un a simple ceremonial and they took the road up country. (84)

The blessing of a governor, the leader of his community, and the celebration of the people cast the Glanton gang as valiant warriors from an old heroic poem; Mitchell's allusion to *Beowulf* comes to mind here, as the Mexicans and their governor look to the gang for deliverance as Hrothgar and his Danes look to Beowulf. Amid the paratactic display of happy images (such as might appear on the shield of Aeneas or Achilles), however, McCarthy lodges the label "killers" for the gang. With the vast and creative vocabulary that he employs throughout *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy could have chosen from many more poetic synonyms, but his word choice here sets itself in deliberate opposition to the tone of the rest of the passage—not a judgmental or condemnatory term, but rather a term with the coldness that marks the disillusionment that characterizes McCarthy's narrative of violence in the American Southwest.

The breakdown in a *Beowulf*-like system of violence waged between man and monster becomes quickly apparent, for all the parties involved in McCarthy's epic

are human, and all act monstrously. In fact, McCarthy's introduction of the gang in the same chapter quoted above [heavily] echoes/mirrors, in form and content, the description of the Comanche raiders who massacre the filibusters:

[Toadvine and the kid] saw one day a viciouslooking pack of 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. (82-3)

Once again, the narration turns to a sweeping, vivid, paratactic description told almost entirely in the present progressive—another waking nightmare, as Stallings would call it; the repetition of “human” five times in the passage, four times within close proximity of each other, continues building a sense of the brutality attributed to these figures as McCarthy gives us another epic catalog of violent creatures and devices. The reference to the Native Americans among the company as “savages” is ironic, pointing out the absurdity in reserving the term for these men (and men like them) given the appearance of their white counterparts, as we realize when McCarthy ends the catalog describing “the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh,” a place not unlike the “hell more horrible yet” from which the Comanche ride out against Captain White's filibusters.

While subverting traditional narratives of frontier heroism, *Blood Meridian* also subverts revisionist approaches to the mythic West by depicting an environment in which “slaughter had become general” (162)—there is no race, nationality, or

ideology that owns a monopoly on the violence of the borderlands. Two nights after departing Chihuahua City, the gang camp “in the corral of a hacienda” where “[t]wo weeks before [...] a party of campesinos had been hacked to death with their own hoes and partly eaten by hogs while the Apaches rounded up what stock would drive and disappeared into the hills” (92). The brutal raids of the Apaches are a constant threat to the Mexican settlements, and the terrorized villagers attempt to avert this danger by hiring Glanton’s gang. McCarthy shows, however, that in this land, violence flows in more directions than one. Several days after camping at the site of the massacre described above, the scalphunters ride

past a place of bones where Mexican soldiers had slaughtered an encampment of Apaches some years gone, women and children, the bones and skulls along the bench for half a mile and the tiny limbs and toothless paper skulls of infants like the ossature of small apes at their place of murder and old remnants of weathered basketry and broken pots among the gravel. (95)

The author does not attempt to justify one act of violence by the other; the two raids happened years apart and in different locations. But both events have a place in the history of the land, a history which includes the factious violence in the region between non-white groups that revisionist narratives often do not give due attention to. Americans such as Glanton and his men add to the widescale bloodshed, but do not introduce it to the region.

The passage describing the gang’s slaughter of the Gileños explodes both traditional and revisionist histories of the West simultaneously. McCarthy describes the scene as one of uncontained violence: “Women were screaming and naked children and one old man tottered forth waving a pair of white pantaloons. The horsemen moved among them and slew them with clubs or knives” (162). Glanton’s men clearly act in violation of popular beliefs about the West such as, “A cowboy is

kind to small children, to old folks” (from Gene Autry’s “Ten Commandments of the Cowboy, qtd in Mitchell 291). At the same time, we are told, “There were in the [Apache] camp a number of Mexican slaves,” and in one of the most graphic descriptions of the violence, it is not a white man but another Native American killing the Apaches: “one of the Delawares emerged from the smoke with a naked infant dangling in each hand and squatted at a ring of midden stones and swung them by the heels each in turn and bashed their heads against the stones so that the brains burst forth through the fontanel in a bloody spew” (162). The effect of this passage and others like it in *Blood Meridian* is not to mitigate the brutality of one group by exposing that of another, but rather to impress upon us the full picture of violence in the borderlands, one that resists neat framing.

Beyond its lack of sentimentality, *Blood Meridian* challenges both traditional and revisionist narratives of the West in that the violence it depicts is not attached to any sort of ideology. Glanton and his men do not act in the name of “the American dream of manifest destiny, of racial domination, and endless imperial expansion,” which Shaviro claims *Blood Meridian* indicts (qtd. in Mitchell, 300). When they massacre a village or tribe, they leave behind ruins—they do not build upon the burnt site as Aeneas and his Trojans build upon the land they win in battle from Turnus’s forces. As Moos writes, “Violence on this frontier is merely carnage, without any rejuvenating or civilizing component” (24). If the gang’s acts of violence lend themselves to “civilization,” it is in the preservation of the Mexican cities that hire them to hunt the Apaches—but the violence soon sheds itself of even that purpose as they begin to scalp Mexicans as well; upon return from their last official campaign,

“[t]hey entered the city haggard and reeking with the blood of the citizenry for whose protection they had contracted” (193). The order that the contracts intend to forge out of Mexican payment, American force, and Apache blood falls completely apart, giving way to uncontained bloodshed. McCarthy [reveals] the wantonness of this violence when Glanton begins the attack on one of the Mexican villages the gang decimates: “As they rode in the people ran before them like harried game. Their cries to one another or perhaps the visible frailty of them seemed to incite something in Glanton. [...] He nudged forth his horse and drew his pistol and this somnolent pueblo was forthwith dragooned into a weltering shambles” (188-9). This merciless, unprovoked bloodshed obviously contradicts traditional myths about frontier heroism, but it also frustrates a revisionist reading. No doctrine or ideology informs Glanton’s destructive acts—McCarthy’s use of the words “or,” “perhaps,” “seemed,” and “something” reveals the inability to explain or locate the source of Glanton’s violence. Instead, of interpreting the violence, and perhaps explaining it away, we are left to bear witness to its terrible reality.

McCarthy provides a simile after the slaughter of the Gileños that creates the same effect of circumventing attempts to explain the violence of *Blood Meridian*. A condensed Homeric simile, which often compares scenes from the battlefield with scenes from nature, it reads: “The dead lay awash in the shallows like the victims of some disaster at sea and they were strewn along the salt foreshore in a havoc of blood and entrails” (163). After the narration of the brutal ways in which the Apaches were killed, to compare them to the victims of a natural disaster seems to minimize the savagery of the Glanton gang, for natural events do not destroy with

any sort of intent or consciousness. However, therein lies the connection to the violence: natural disasters cannot be interpreted through a moral framework, and in writing *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy endeavors to dislodge the violence of our nation's past from the moral interpretations that have cast it into myths, whether traditional or revisionist. For both conceptions of the West mediate and mitigate the violence, either attributing a noble purpose to it or attributing it to ideologies that we can denounce and distance from ourselves in the present. *Blood Meridian* instead functions to leave raw in our minds the memory of a violent history more brutal than either of these perspectives on the West acknowledges. "But," as Moos writes, "*Blood Meridian* tells not only of murder and ruin, but also of history and the ways that we represent history, how we make stories stand in for actions" (24).

Throughout *Blood Meridian* there is an awareness on the part of the text about the ways in which the world becomes remembered, as well as forgotten. As one who constantly records and then destroys the objects around him, the judge occupies the core of *Blood Meridian*'s reflection of history: "he is a way for McCarthy to comment on the process of historical representation and to show how those who are in control over language are the ones in control of so-called objective facts" (Boissevain 14). The judge offers his own perspective on the process as such: "It is not necessary [...] that the principals here be in possession of the facts concerning their case, for their acts will ultimately accommodate history with or without their understanding. But it is consistent with notions of right principle that these facts—to the extent that they can be made to do so—should find a repository in the witness of some third party" (89). In his constant recording of objects and

creatures, the judge serves as the witness, the repository of information. But in order to control information, he must destroy the originals of what he sketches so that his version is authoritative. To record what he sees in the world and then destroy it is to make his notebook the only testament to an object's existence. For example, after the judge sketches "the footpiece from a suit of armor hammered out in a shop in Toledo three centuries before," "he crushed it into a ball of foil and pitched into the fire," after which, "he seemed much satisfied with the world as if his counsel had been sought at its creation" (146). The judge might well feel this way, as his notebook now remains the only source of knowledge of the armor piece, which is not any object, but something we would regard as a historical artifact.

The acts of recording and destroying inform, of course, not only the judge's knowledge but that of humanity. He does not produce records to share with others, but in erasing the articles, he nevertheless shapes their knowledge by depriving them the awareness of certain facts. In fact, when asked by a member of the gang what his purpose in making his sketches and notes is, he replies that "it [is] his intention to expunge them from the memory of man" (147). Just as he destroys the objects so that his notebook stands in for the originals and thus makes himself the keeper of the physical world, his erasure of history and storing of it in the book gives him control over what other men can and cannot know: "The judge alone, by engaging this power of reproduction, becomes sole owner of knowledge, not his own in an individualistic sense, but of a singular collected knowledge that allows him to reproduce the world and ultimately command it" (Moos 30). But he does not only manipulate and control knowledge through erasure; a most eloquent speaker, he also

uses language to create the stories that people take for truth. In the first chapter, by the judge's word alone, a preacher is made to be a pedophile and persecuted as such by the crowd that only a moment before the judge's appearance was his faithful congregation (*BM* 7). For the judge, this is not an act of falsification, for as he tells the kid in their final encounter at the end of *Blood Meridian*, "Men's memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little from the past that was not"—as far as mankind is concerned, the preacher was the criminal that the judge made him out to be (344). In this way, the judge exercises a powerful force over mankind's understanding of the past, as do historians and epic poets: it is no slight detail that the judge is heard one night "declaiming in the old epic mode" (124).

Yet, against this closing in of knowledge, McCarthy offers *Blood Meridian* itself. His epic expands rather than erases our awareness of what has happened. A striking example of *Blood Meridian*'s meta-literary quality and deep reflection on how history is represented illustrates the difference between the judge's and McCarthy's approach. After the Glanton gang massacre a village, McCarthy lingers over the ruins and reflects:

In the days to come the frail black rebuses of blood in those sands would crack and break and drift away so that in the circuit of few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell to any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died. (182)

This massacre, too, is an act of erasure by the judge, and while McCarthy states that no scribe will exist to give this people's record, the author has just narrated on the previous page their deaths at the hands of the Glanton gang. This passage reflects on *Blood Meridian*'s ability to make history present; though the physical objects might be lost, because time, or the judge, has erased them, the literary text can recapture

them and make them visible again. In the look to our past that *Blood Meridian* provides, it is indeed epic. In confronting us with a past we have seldom recognized, it bursts us from a collective unconscious such as the judge builds, and in its ability to form, or re-form, our national self-image, takes on the even greater role of epic literature.

Conclusion

“If *Blood Meridian* is an indictment on anything,” concludes Mitchell, “it is of both the traditional myth of the West and of the alternative one of those revisionists who seek to portray the settlement as yet another case of rapacious European descending, wolflike, on peaceful natives” (302). McCarthy challenges us to take a deeper look at the violence behind the shaping of the American Southwest by refusing to filter it through either biased lens. In transporting us to scenes of wide scale bloodshed that enveloped all ethnic and national groups in the aftermath of the US-Mexican War, “it is as if he is forcing the reader to acknowledge the moral ambiguity of history and not allowing anyone to easily take sides or justify the brutality while reading the novel” (Boissevain 9). Like the poems of Homer or Virgil, *Blood Meridian* has us confront the reality of violence as an inescapable part of life in this world. For McCarthy, this unflinching examination and acceptance of the reality of violence is a necessary step to truly engaging with the world:

There’s no such thing as life without bloodshed [. . .] I think the notion that the species can be improved in some way, that everyone could live in harmony, is a really dangerous idea. Those who are afflicted with this notion are the first ones to give up their souls, their freedom. Your desire that it be that way will enslave you and make your life vacuous. (qtd in Woodward)

Notions of traditional frontier heroism as well as ideologically based revisionist interpretations of history both seek to explain, and thereby explain away, the violence by creating neat categories and narratives for it. But with *Blood Meridian*, “[t]he carnage of the text and the various permutations of representations, both within the novel and the novel itself, effectively destroy any sense of acceptable order in the popular memory of a mythic frontier West” (Moos 36).

In this way, McCarthy writes something more complex than revisionist history. *Blood Meridian* challenges both traditional and revisionist theories of “how the West was won,” by challenging the totality of such a notion. Its setting and use of historical material reveals that the US-Mexican War did not, by drawing up borders, settle things once and for all—rather, the history of the borderlands has been one of continual contentiousness among various groups, which has gradually shaped the land and the character of the people there and continues to do so today. For this reason, “Spurgeon argues correctly when she says that McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* ‘interrogate[s] the consequences of our acceptance of archetypal Western hero myths’ and rewrites them ‘to bridge the discontinuity...between the mythic past of the American West and its modern realities’” (Vieth 56). These modern realities, depicted in McCarthy’s later novel *No Country for Old Men*, set in the late 20th century, are those of continued bloodshed spilling across from both sides of the border.

Ultimately, *Blood Meridian* expands our conception of the West that looms so large in our national imagination, exposing us to a harsher reality than we have come to integrate into our understanding of ourselves as a nation. If, as Hainsworth writes, an epic is at its core an elevated “artistic expression of the survival myth of a nation” which expresses “ideas that st[an]d at the center of its audience’s view of themselves in the world,” then *Blood Meridian* is an epic that drives us further, challenging us to reexamine those ideas and reform them based on the realities of our violent past (150). As Moos contends, “Like the judge, we build histories that subscribe to our future desires. We dismiss the details of historical violence or blame

atrocities on maniacal or ostracized individuals”—or on ideologies we denounce, and we also use the idea of heroism as a way to mitigate violence and give it a purpose that satisfies our needs or beliefs (36). *Blood Meridian*, however, is an epic that, in contrast to the *Aeneid*, does not fashion the past to respond to the present, but forces the present to respond to the past

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