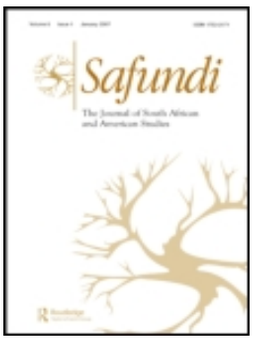

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Violent Histories: J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*

Donald Powers

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985), his fifth novel, is a work that defies comparison with most books, including much of the rest of McCarthy's oeuvre. The book earns this distinction through the detailed and voluminous depiction of violence among marauding groups of men in the Texas–Mexico borderlands around 1849. While McCarthy's other books reveal a similarly dark fascination with the fate of wanderers and misfortunates[1] and are equally virtuosic in their performance of language, what sets *Blood Meridian* apart is the visceral and unstinting narration of scenes of brutality, the theme of blood captured in the book's title. And it is the book's title that provides the point of departure for this paper, for I suggest that, beginning with the metaphorics of sun-set written into their titles, McCarthy's novel bears rich and overdue comparison with J.M. Coetzee's first novel *Dusklands* (1974).

At the level of prose style, these two writers could hardly be more different from each other, but in the case of these two novels there is much to be said about the ways in which violent episodes of the past are rewritten with an awareness of the narrativity of history. The recognition of history as a kind of discourse with the potential to erect itself as myth is particularly strong in *Dusklands*, which for some time has stood as an example of historiographical or "situational" metafiction.[2] Whereas *Dusklands* is gamesomely reflexive in its academic method, playing parodically with historical documents and the convention of realism, *Blood Meridian* is quieter about the texts it has been constructed out of, but at the same time ostentatiously dated in its use of arcane and technical language (to describe, for instance, tools and weaponry) and of epigraphic chapter summaries. For all the sense of repetitious gritty surface detail and mindless violence *Blood Meridian*

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[1]Peter Josyph captures this predilection well when he writes of "McCarthy's appetite for characters who lean toward the brute, the bloody, the brawlerous, the chronically monosyllabic, the psycho- and sociopathic" (*Blood Music*, 16).

[2]Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee*, 20.

might leave one with, it is also a novel that draws attention to the credibility and transience of any historical record. This effect is conveyed through the stylized features mentioned above but also through the character of Judge Holden, who like Jacobus Coetzee emerges as a figure apparently transcendent of the text that is supposed to contain him. It is important not to dissociate the arrogance and egomania of these two characters from their pretensions as custodians of an historical record, for as such they allow their authors the flexibility to explore a philosophy of history.

One of my central claims in this paper is that Holden and Jacobus resemble each other not just in mentality but in the formal function they perform in their respective texts. I begin by discussing the broader character dynamics in *Dusklands*, explaining how Eugene Dawn and Jacobus can be viewed as analogues of each other, characters who express their paradoxical desire for autonomy and power over others through the fantasy of an unchallenged gaze. Whereas *Dusklands* is structured on fraught father–son relationships, I note how *Blood Meridian* is marked by an absence of meaningful human relationships. This emphasis is reinforced by McCarthy's characterization of the south-western American desertlands through which his characters move as terrains that isolate and reduce human individuals to vicious and vulnerable bundles of energy with radically foreshortened vision. I discuss how the "optical democracy" of *Blood Meridian* is borne out as much in McCarthy's close attention to desert geography as in the manner of the narrator's descriptions. While it may seem that McCarthy and Coetzee are furthest apart on the degree of realism with which they represent physical space—McCarthy rendering it with forensic detail, Coetzee apparently more concerned with history as a discursive process—I argue that these novels share an emphasis on the transience of written histories. Examining these considerations will lead us to a clearer understanding of the resonance between the titles of these two precocious novels.

I

Dusklands pivots on two self-absorbed "I-figures,"[3] who predicate their identity on sovereign detachment from others and whose inner discourse constitutes virtually the whole of their respective narratives. The first part of *Dusklands*, "The Vietnam Project," is set in California in the early 1970s and focuses on the mythographer Eugene Dawn's contribution to the US war in Vietnam; the novel's second part centers on the eighteenth-century frontiersman Jacobus Coetzee, whose narrative records his two journeys into the interior of the western Cape in the years 1760–1762. The title of Coetzee's novel speaks directly to the name and activity of Eugene Dawn. As the etymology of his name suggests (*eugene*: well-produced, well-conceived), Dawn is ironically named both in relation to the novel's title (Dusklands) and the project on which he is at work (the New Life Project for Vietnam). A specialist in psychological warfare, Dawn does the creative work on his report in the early hours of the morning: "The Vietnam report has been

[3]Coetzee, "Speaking," interview by Stephen Watson, 4.

composed facing east into the rising sun and in a mood of poignant regret (*pòindre*, to pierce) that I am rooted in the evening-lands.''[4] Dawn's parenthetic note here reveals his preoccupation (which he shares with Jacobus Coetzee) with penetrancy, which early in his report he identifies as a key consideration for US war strategy in Vietnam.[5] The ''evening-lands'' Dawn speaks of inhabiting denotes his geographical place, California, but signifies too his debt to Enlightenment philosophy, specifically that of René Descartes, whom he cites in his report. As Jonathan Crewe has noted,[6] in figuring the West as a geographical and cultural site, the title of Coetzee's first novel recalls Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1923), a debt David Attwell examines in his 1993 monograph on Coetzee.[7]

Within a mythic framework, Dawn interprets the relationship between the USA and Vietnam in terms of Descartes' dualistic model of the human that distinguishes mind from body. Descartes' influence on Dawn extends beyond his report to inform his experience of himself as an individual and his relationships with his wife, child, and academic supervisor, Dawn's author-father ''Coetzee.'' Repeatedly Dawn speaks of his antipathy for his body and wishes he were all intellect. In his report, he identifies weaknesses in existing myths and proposes a counter-myth that figures the US military as a technologically potent sky-god justified in its wrath against the maternal figure of Vietnam whose treachery consists in conspiring incestuously with her warrior-sons against the authoritative US-Father. He urges the US military to embrace its superior technology in a demonstration of onanistic self-sufficiency.[8] A victim of his own too-clinical use of reason, Dawn is wracked with self-doubt, which emerges in his report in slippages of tone, notably in Section 1.6. His curt ''I look forward to Phase V and the return of total air-war''[9] recalls Kurtz's scrawled footnote ''Exterminate all the brutes!'' at the end of his report for The International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902).[10] Coetzee, Conrad, and McCarthy would agree that all men contain within them their own darkness; this is a point Dawn recognizes when he remarks that ''Vietnam, like everything else, is inside me, and in Vietnam, with a little diligence, a little patience, all truths about man's nature.''[11]

[4]*Dusklands*, 6.

[5]Ibid., 20.

[6]Crewe, review of *Dusklands*, 92.

[7]Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee*, 38–9.

[8]*Dusklands*, 25–6.

[9]Ibid., 28.

[10]Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 87. For Conrad as for Coetzee, their characters' journeys are as much geographical as psychological. Where Conrad tracks Marlow's journey in quest of Kurtz up the River Congo into the heart of ''darkest Africa,'' Coetzee suggestively juxtaposes Dawn's descent into aggressive paranoia through his vicarious confrontation with the Vietnamese in his report, with Jacobus's first exploratory and second retributive journey into the western Cape hinterland. See Harrison, who via *Heart of Darkness* reads *Blood Meridian* as ''a meditation on and a critique of the metaphysics of the American—and, indeed, the *Western*—imperial project from the eras of Manifest Destiny to American defeat in Southeast Asia.'' (''That immense and bloodslaked waste,'' 35; Harrison's italics.)

[11]*Dusklands*, 14.

The introverted Dawn, explorer of the intellect, finds his extroverted analogue in part in Jacobus Coetzee, elephant-hunter, explorer, and philosopher of the wild, and in part in S.J. Coetzee, mythologizing historian of Afrikaner nationalism. Like Dawn, Jacobus is self-conscious of his historical and textual identity and as narrator-protagonist is endowed with a marginal freedom to drift within his narrative.[12] In a number of respects—his egocentrism, his paternalism towards the Hottentots he travels and meets with, the phallocratic ideas he espouses in his philosophy of the gun—Jacobus embodies qualities that Dawn endorses in his report. The light, assured tone of Jacobus's ethnocentric pronouncements throughout his narrative confirms his cultural arrogance. The carbuncle he suffers from on his buttocks comically underlines his narcissism and his vigorously denied dependence on others for succor and self-definition.

Repeatedly Jacobus frames his actions in metaphysical terms. His musing—apparently under the influence of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943)—on the absolute power he enjoys over the ex-servants he is about to execute on his second journey exemplifies this tendency:

> There was nothing that could be impressed on these bodies, nothing that could be torn from them or forced through their orifices, that would be commensurate with the desolate infinity of my power over them. They could die summarily or in the most excruciating pain, I could leave them to be picked by the vultures, and they would be forgotten in a week. I was undergoing nothing less than a failure of imagination before the void.[13]

Jacobus's half amused, half irritated narration of the executions which follow sits uncomfortably with the violence of the scene. In an early essay on the novel, Peter Knox-Shaw noted that this is a violence that can only re-enact.[14] Attwell agreed when he wrote that "[s]uch violence is surely transgressive, not in a theoretical manner that enables one to explain it away, but in an *aggressive* mode that is aimed at readers' sensibilities."[15] At first sight, Attwell's comment seems more true of McCarthy's representation of violence in *Blood Meridian* than Coetzee's in *Dusklands*. In *Blood Meridian*, the narrator's tone contains scarcely a trace of consolatory or condemnatory bias towards the violent scenes that are narrated. Christopher Douglas notes how McCarthy has been criticized[16] for failing to offer "authorial intervention in condemning the violence" in *Blood Meridian*: "That

[12]Compare, for instance, Dawn's apparent dissociation from his body when he is assaulted by law enforcement officers at the Loco Motel and Jacobus's retreat into himself, to tot up "the profit and the loss," when he is attacked by Hottentot villagers on his first journey (*Dusklands* 42–3, 90–1).

[13]*Dusklands*, 101–2.

[14]Knox-Shaw, "A Metaphysics of Violence," 33.

[15]Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee*, 55 (Attwell's italics).

[16]Douglas cites Andrew Hislop, "The Wired West," *The New Republic*, 6 May 1985: 37–8; Walter Sullivan, "About Any Kind of Meanness You Can Name," review of *Blood Meridian*, *Sewanee Review* 93 (1985):649-56; and Caryn James, "Is Everybody Dead Around Here?" review of *Blood Meridian, New York Times Book Review* 28 April 1985: 31.

critique is indicative of our desire for a moral order that might come from outside the system—but does not and demonstrably has not. This text provokes our desire for a moral reaction.''[17] *Dusklands*, in contrast, sets Dawn's *failure* to maintain an analytic tone in his report against the self-satisfied detachment of Jacobus's narration, particularly of his acts of violence.

Tone is an important consideration in *Dusklands*: a key precursor text to the novel is Coetzee's 1967 letter to the editor of the University of Texas student newspaper, *The Daily Texan*, in which Coetzee replied to a letter by one John Morby who described the US war in Vietnam as a ''blunder'' and a ''crime.''[18] In his letter, Coetzee pointed out that US strategy in Vietnam is ''carefully calculated,'' the product of ''clear and systematic thinking'' by ''intelligent men'' —phrases which perfectly describe an individual such as Eugene Dawn. ''As for 'crimes' in Vietnam,'' Coetzee concludes, ''doesn't an arrow in the stomach kill just as dead as a face full of napalm?'' Coetzee's blank tone in this letter shows up the emotional basis of Morby's argument while recognizing the unalterable fact that humans will kill each other by whatever means.[19] The neutral tone in which Coetzee puts his argument in this letter anticipates Dawn's matter-of-fact propositions in Sections 1.1–1.5.1 of the introduction to his report, in particular his observation in Section 1.41 that ''Questions of conscience lie outside the purview of this study.''[20] In Section 1.6, ''Victory,'' Dawn loses his composure and, veering between the first person singular and plural, implicates himself and his compatriots in the US war in Vietnam in melodramatic fashion.

In the second part of *Dusklands*, what is provocative about Jacobus's violence is not just its graphic depiction but the detachment with which it is narrated and justified, and more broadly how incongruously it sits with the poised intellectualism of the rest of *Dusklands*. In *Blood Meridian*, there is no incongruity because there is no saving formal device or perspective that offers the reader motivation for or relief from the graphic narration of successive scenes of violence. The equanimity and detachment of McCarthy's narrator leaves the reader feeling exposed to what is narrated; in contrast, Coetzee's narrator-protagonists make a show of indicting themselves. Whereas McCarthy aestheticizes human violence in his descriptions of landscape and skyscape, or what might be called the climatography of the American West, Coetzee explores the ways in which colonial and imperial violence can be rationalized as a discourse and with what detachment—as

[17]Douglas, ''The Flawed Design,'' 20.

[18]It was while in Texas, working on a doctoral thesis on Samuel Beckett, that Coetzee began reading ''reports on the territory of South West Africa by its German explorers and administrators, accounts of punitive expeditions against the Nama and Herero, dissertations on the physical anthropology of the natives, monographs by Carl Meinhof on the Khoisan languages, … makeshift grammars put together by missionaries'' and travelers' and missionaries' histories of the Hottentots of the Cape. Coetzee, ''Remembering Texas,'' 52. In terms of Coetzee's biography, *Dusklands* can be read as an account of his sense of complicity with Apartheid in the late 1960s and the colonial history that led up to it, juxtaposed with his discomfort, while living in the United States, with witnessing the war in Vietnam.

[19]Attwell, Coetzee Collective workshop, 25 July 2008.

[20]*Dusklands*, 22.

seen in the example of Jacobus's failure of imagination quoted above—it can be carried out.

As narrator-protagonists of *Dusklands*, Dawn and Jacobus occupy almost the whole of their respective narrative frames. They easily invite critique as individuals, but it is more accurate to think of them as figures through whom Coetzee articulates, respectively, the self-validating arguments of American imperialism in Vietnam and Dutch colonialism in South Africa. The point is clearer in the case of Dawn, a war-propagandist and myth-writer; in the case of Jacobus, Coetzee subverts the record in constructing him as a literate and literary figure familiar with "the irony and moralism of forensic oratory,"[21] with metaphysics,[22] even with poetry not yet written, for instance Blake's.[23] More to the point, Coetzee presents Jacobus as a character alert to the discursive force of history. Though openly dismissive of the "savages" he encounters on his first journey, Jacobus is alive to the possibility that "[the savage] threatens to have a history in which I shall be a term:"[24] hence, in turn, his "continued … exploration of the Hottentots, trying to find a place for them in my history."[25] Toward the end of his narrative, lodged at a mental institution, Dawn is similarly sensitive to his new status as the object of others' scrutiny and potentially a character in another's narrative. In theory, he approves of the enterprise of "exploring the self"[26] but in fact resists his doctors' attempts to explain his rash actions at the Loco Motel and probe what he thinks of as the "secret"[27] that makes him tick.

One of the ways Dawn and Jacobus express their desire for uncompromised presence and control is by asserting the authority of their vision. Flowing from his riven sense of self, Dawn is eager to inhabit the position of the voyeur. He expresses this urge in relation to his wife Marilyn and the collection of 24 photographs classified for his work on his report. Suspecting Marilyn of infidelity, "as an exercise" Dawn observes her "through a strange man's eyes."[28] One afternoon, he returns home from work earlier than usual to spy on her through their bedroom window.[29] His conviction that she is unfaithful reassures him, for in Dawn's logic "if strangers prize her then she must be valuable."[30] Dawn is similarly surreptitious in his habit of poring over his photographs on evenings when "the sober edge of reality is sharpest."[31] In one photograph, a US sergeant demonstrates his strength by arching his back while standing with a Vietnamese woman astride his

[21] *Dusklands*, 70.
[22] Ibid., 78–81.
[23] Ibid., 106.
[24] Ibid., 81.
[25] Ibid., 97.
[26] Ibid., 46.
[27] Ibid., 48.
[28] Ibid., 11.
[29] Ibid., 33.
[30] Ibid., 11.
[31] Ibid., 15.

erect penis; in another, two grinning sergeants pose with severed Vietnamese heads; another, an enlarged film-still, pictures a caged "communist," one eye aglint, the other dark. In the case of each photograph, Dawn responds with "fresh excitement" to the sleek proof of an alienating "physical Vietnam"[32] which he congratulates himself for having kept at a distance from. For Dawn, the photographs become a means to vicariously experience the US domination he endorses in his report by "meeting" the gaze of the Vietnamese other depicted within them, without being at all compromised in the encounter.

Jacobus Coetzee declares more directly than Dawn his investment in the eye as an organ of power and domination. He maintains that of the five senses only the eyes have power since only the eyes are unconstrained by their housing.[33] He characterizes vision variously as projection, reflection, and consumption: "The eyes are free, they reach out to the horizon all around. … I become a spherical reflecting eye moving through the wilderness and ingesting it. Destroyer of the wilderness, I move through the land cutting a devouring path from horizon to horizon. There is nothing from which my eye turns, I am all that I see."[34] Jacobus's idea of himself as a mobile eye that hungrily arrogates what it sees is the obverse of Emerson's model of the "transparent eyeball" that humbly absorbs stimuli. The image of a passive, undiscriminating eye that accommodates whatever streams into it serves Emerson as a model of how men might renew their sense of wonder at the world.[35] In his essay "Nature" (1836), Emerson writes, "Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I am become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God."[36] As if with these phrases from Emerson in mind, S.J. Coetzee, author of the Afterword to Jacobus's Narrative, records that Jacobus was "a humble man who did not play god,"[37] a claim squarely at odds with Jacobus's hubristic self-portrayal. Jacobus's image of himself as an all-seeing eye may usefully be understood as a symptom of his anxiety about history. In picturing himself as a panoptic figure, he speaks directly to the privilege he enjoys as unchallenged narrator-protagonist. The "savages" of his imagined archetypal encounter on the African highland represent in his eyes a threat to his freedom to dictate a history for himself.

> On the far side he [the savage] is nothing to me and I probably nothing to him. On the near side mutual fear will drive us to our little comedies of man and man, prospector and guide, benefactor and beneficiary, victim and assassin, teacher and pupil, father and child. He crosses it, however, in none of these

[32]Ibid., 16.

[33]Ibid., 79.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Tanner, *The Reign of Wonder*, 31.

[36]Emerson, *Selected Essays*, 39. Coetzee quotes the same phrase in his essay "The Picturesque and the South African Landscape," *White Writing*, 59.

[37]*Dusklands*, 111.

> characters but as representative of that out there which my eye once enfolded and ingested and which now promises to enfold, ingest, and project me through itself as a speck on a field which we may call annihilation or alternatively history. He threatens to have a history in which I shall be a term.[38]

That Dawn's and Jacobus's repeated self-justifications do not stand up to scrutiny should not distract one from the more fundamental point that their anxiety is finally not existential or metaphysical, though occasionally it is cast in those terms, but historiographical. Both seek to protect themselves from alternative interpretations to their own: whereas Dawn hopes to disarm by preempting his doctors with his own account of his condition, Jacobus declares himself finally indifferent to anything beyond himself: "whether I ever lived or never was born has never been of real concern to me."[39]

II

In *Dusklands*, then, Coetzee outlines in Dawn and Jacobus a psychology of domination, while emphasizing the contestability of their accounts. Jacobus is a version or *extroversion* of Dawn, while both are positioned as father and son respectively to figures of the author within their narratives. For Dawn, the figure of the author-father is his supervisor Coetzee, whom he privately struggles to challenge and impress, while at home he extends this narrative of oedipal rivalry to include his son Martin. In the second half of the novel, the "translator" J.M. Coetzee finds a fictional father in the academic S.J. Coetzee, who makes of his ancestor Jacobus one of the founding-fathers of the Afrikaner nation (I will shortly return to this point). Whereas in *Dusklands* the father-son dynamics mark a struggle for power through authorship and contribute to the novel's self-reflexivity, in *Blood Meridian* there are few meaningful relationships to speak of; instead, the emphasis falls on the characters' mutual suspicion of and isolation from each other. (The relationship between Judge Holden and the kid might be taken as an exception, but it too is founded on the wariest regard.)

Whereas Coetzee pivots *Dusklands* on two egocentric characters, in *Blood Meridian* McCarthy's omniscient narrator's radically equalizing vision refuses any anthropocentric point of view. McCarthy's narrative tracks an opaque character called simply "the kid,"[40] who signs up first with a ragtag army of filibusters and later a company of men contracted to hunt Apaches and gather their scalps as bounty. The novel is largely an account of the brutalities inflicted by this roaming group on whatever people they happen to encounter, and McCarthy is as much concerned to document the violence of these men and those they collide with as he is to backdrop this violence against the desert landscape.

[38]Ibid., 81.

[39]Ibid., 107.

[40]See Guillemin, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*, 94 and fn. 17 on the same page, for a useful gloss of the anti-romantic connotations of McCarthy's naming this character the "kid" rather than the "child."

The kid's childhood is glossed in sepia images in the novel's opening pages. Never referred by a first name, an orphan, his personality "largely a cipher,"[41] the narrator's gaze fixes on the kid at the outset as if to mark him as the *bildung* subject. But in the course of the narrative, the kid matures in no discernible way. He is the dark opposite of the child figure exalted by the romantics, who recognized in the child's naive vision a capacity to absorb the world without judgment or reservation, fresh.

> The child's wondering eye offered the romantic writer an avenue back to a reality from which he fast felt himself becoming alienated. By recapturing a naive vision he might once again enjoy an untrammeled intimacy with nature. There would be a new reverence, a new quietude, a new sense of total glory.[42]

In contrast, McCarthy's kid projects stoical indifference to the world, including perhaps indifference to his own death.[43] In the narrator's curt sketch of the kid's history on the novel's first page, Wordsworth's familiar line is invoked in passing but only to inflect with dark irony an ominous description of the kid's aggressive proclivities: "He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence. All history present in that visage, the child the father of the man."[44] The kid's indifference signals a blankness or "skeptical reserve,"[45] which is partly why a reader is more likely to identify with him than with any other character in the novel. With the exception of Judge Holden, who speaks freely and mischievously on immediate and recondite topics, the other characters' conversation is terse when it occurs, and otherwise rare. McCarthy's narrator offers scant insight into any of the characters' minds. Just as, according to Holden, God "speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things,"[46] so McCarthy's characters, bar Holden, express themselves more formidably in action than words.

A distinguishing feature of McCarthy's text is its attention to the haecceity or indubitable thisness of objects in the world. McCarthy's prose is sensitive at once to the density and surface of things. Coetzee in *Dusklands*, on the other hand, treats this preoccupation with surfaces and interiors in terms of his protagonists' hermeneutic desire to penetrate and explicate what is unfamiliar and uncharted—be it a physical geography or human psychology. Coetzee offers a philosophical dimension to this desire by emphasizing Dawn's and Jacobus's unhappy Cartesian outlook, which sorts the world into substance and spirit, facade and essence, and which explains their fascination with the quiet interiority or stable being-in-itself of stones.[47] Jacobus's definition of himself as an explorer whose

[41]Bloom, "Introduction," 3.

[42]Tanner, *The Reign of Wonder*, 7.

[43]Guillemin, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*, 88.

[44]*Blood Meridian*, 3.

[45]Shaviro, "The very life of the darkness," 149.

[46]*Blood Meridian*, 116.

[47]As Stephen Watson notes, the thread of this preoccupation also runs through *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) and *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) ("Colonialism in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee," 30).

"essence is to open what is closed, to bring light to what is dark"[48] finds an echo in the aptly named Captain White of *Blood Meridian* who informs his new recruit the kid of their collective task in Mexico: "Son, said the captain. We are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land. That's right. We are to spearhead the drive."[49] White's words exemplify the righteous rhetoric of US imperialism, although in White's case this mission is cut brutally short when he and his motley band of soldiers are massacred by a painted horde of Indians. Where Coetzee's emphasis falls more directly on the philosophical and historiographical aspects—rather than material processes—of the Dutch and American incursions into south-western Africa and Vietnam, in McCarthy's text the human figures are subsumed in a far broader vision, Schopenhauerian insofar as the narrator pictures life as "a mindless, ceaseless striving of energies, a blind vortex of creation and destruction without goals."[50] McCarthy locates his characters' actions on a spatial and temporal scale not calibrated specifically to the human. The following description from late in *Blood Meridian* of the scalphunters' progress across the desert floor illustrates this point.

> The horses trudged sullenly the alien ground and the round earth rolled beneath them silently milling the greater void wherein they were contained. In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence.[51]

From "alien ground" to "round earth" to "greater void," these already diminished riders all but disappear in the broader cosmic perspective. Like the "milling" earth, the riders move apparently without purpose or terminus. As Phillips has argued, McCarthy's narrative takes its bearings from natural history and a geological timescale: "The present world as McCarthy describes it is an ancient world not of myth but of rock and stone and those life forms that can endure the daily cataclysms of heat and cold and hunger, that can weather the everyday round of random, chaotic violence."[52] McCarthy's contextualization of violence beyond the human element in *Blood Meridian* is informed by his view that "[t]here's no such thing as life without bloodshed."[53] Phillips observes that McCarthy's violence in *Blood Meridian*, unlike Melville's in *Moby-Dick*, "is not a sign or symbol of something else," nor is darkness in this novel a "'theme,' a dire metaphysical

[48]*Dusklands*, 106.

[49]*Blood Meridian*, 34.

[50]Eddins, "Everything a hunter," 28.

[51]*Blood Meridian*, 247.

[52]Phillips, "History and the Ugly Facts," 452, 453.

[53]Woodward, "Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," 7.

possibility mad characters can urge upon saner men, but a reiterated fact.''[54] However, this observation needs to be qualified by noting McCarthy's repeated animation of natural phenomena with aggressive potential, a spirit antipathetic to human life.[55] Thus, we find a thematic resonance between the sun, particularly in its rising and setting, and the scalphunters' rapacity. In *Blood Meridian*, the sun serves as a rich source of narrative energy, functioning as an emblem of human predaciousness. The following quotations are representative:

> The sun was just down and to the west lay reefs of bloodred clouds up out of which rose little desert nighthawks like fugitives from some great fire at the earth's end.
>
> They rode on and the sun in the east flushed pale streaks of light and then a deeper run of color like blood seeping up in sudden reaches flaring planewise and where the earth drained up into the sky at the edge of creation the top of the sun rose out of nothing like the head of a great red phallus until it cleared the unseen rim and sat squat and pulsing and malevolent behind them.
>
> The sun to the west lay in a holocaust where there rose a steady column of small desert bats and to the north along the trembling perimeter of the world dust was blowing down the void like the smoke of distant armies.[56]

McCarthy writes into the sun a wild, ravening quality that emerges also in the narrator's descriptions of landscape: a ''hungry country,'' a ''howling wilderness,'' a ''terra damnata,'' ''that immense and bloodslaked waste.''[57] Barren and blighted, with a thirst of its own, the westlands of America are portrayed in McCarthy's text as a theater in which ''wild and barbarous''[58] nature brings into relief corresponding qualities in the human characters.[59] By a sleight of perspective in such phrases as ''the riders looked burnt and haggard coming up out of the sun'' and ''a wind was blowing out of the sun where it sat squat and pulsing at the eastern reaches of the earth,''[60] McCarthy merges the planes of earth and sky to picture the sun as a kind of forge toward or away from which men wander as figures in some primal or apocalyptic tableau. The effect is to alienate and diminish the characters while

[54]Phillips, ''History and the Ugly Facts,'' 438.

[55]Guillemin captures some of this emphasis when he writes that ''Although *Blood Meridian* is committed to an egalitarian esthetic of 'optical democracy,' the absolute indifference of the natural environment and the absolute license of the social environment combine in the text as if to subject picaresque survivalism and relational biocentrism to the universal truth of entropy and death.'' ''*The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*,'' 100.

[56]*Blood Meridian*, 21, 44–5, 105.

[57]Ibid., 17, 42, 61, 177.

[58]Ibid., 4–5.

[59]Charles Frazier, who writes heavily under the influence of McCarthy, captures this idea of nature red in tooth and claw in his epigraph to *Cold Mountain* (1997), an epigraph he draws from Darwin's 1839 journal: ''It is difficult to believe in the dreadful but quiet war of organic beings, going on in the peaceful woods, & smiling fields.'' (For Madison Smartt Bell, Frazier is an example of that unfortunate kind of writer who in the Eliotic spirit goes out to ''steal'' another writer's style but lacks the strength, in the Bloomian sense, to leave his own signature on what he has stolen (''A Writer's View,'' 6–7).)

[60]*Blood Meridian*, 63, 227.

amplifying the presence of the landscape. In contrast to *Dusklands*, then, where there is a tandem emphasis on the authority of a narrating "I" and the ideal of the explorer's and the historian's penetrant, panoptic vision, in *Blood Meridian* the human characters are depicted as foreshortened figures in relation to the desert environment they move through.

A considerable amount of criticism on *Blood Meridian* seeks to understand McCarthy's method and vision in that novel in the light of the idea of "optical democracy."[61] According to this line of criticism, "optical democracy" captures the narrator's equalizing vision in which the human individual enjoys no special privilege but is just another thing among things. In Vereen Bell's opinion, a precondition for entering the world of McCarthy's novels is for one "to surrender all Cartesian predispositions and rediscover some primal state of consciousness prior to its becoming identified with thinking only."[62] Citing Martin Jay, Jonathan Pitts makes a similar point when he suggests that McCarthy's vision in *Blood Meridian* be understood as a baroque reply to "the tyranny of Cartesian perspectivalism:" that is, a vision "mad" with vigor and variety "in whose dazzling, disorienting, ecstatic surplus of images [lies] a rejection of Cartesian monocular perspectivalism."[63] Yet, it must be emphasized that mingling with the "mad" or unrestrained, hallucinatory quality Pitts identifies is an austerity of description. The sunstruck barrenness of the desert regions through which the scalphunters move lends itself to a visual starkness.[64]

In an essay on the links between the nature of photography and the trope of the desert in literature, John Beck notes how McCarthy's desert is both a physical and metaphysical space: vacant, depthless, inhospitable, and suggestive of "cosmic indifference or, worse, of an actual hostility toward human life, a mineral disdain for the vulnerability of the organic."[65] With the ceaseless surface movement of McCarthy's characters in mind, Beck describes McCarthy's text itself as "a linguistic desert of dry and shifting particles."[66] By this, Beck means to describe both the profuseness and granulation of McCarthy's vocabulary, as attentive to minute and transient insect life as the wide-angle panorama. Beck's point is that desert space is particularly conducive to this oscillation of focal length, as in these examples:

> The kid spat dryly and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. A lizard came out from under a rock and crouched on its small cocked elbows over that piece of froth and drank it dry and returned to the rock again leaving only a faint spot in the sand which vanished almost instantly.

[61]For exemplary instances of this criticism, see Guillemin, *The Pastoral Vision of Cormac McCarthy*, and Holloway, "Modernism, Nature, and Utopia."

[62]Vereen Bell, "The Ambiguous Nihilism," 31.

[63]Pitts, "Writing On," 19.

[64]Vereen Bell describes McCarthy's style as "photorealistic in its precision and yet characteristically rich and suggestive" (*The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, xii), and Woodward has written of the "morbid realism" of McCarthy's novels ("Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction," 2).

[65]Beck, "A certain but fugitive testimony," 210.

[66]Ibid.

> … in the long light of the evening he saw from that high rimland the collision of armies remote and silent upon the plain below. The dark little horses circled and the landscape shifted in the paling light and the mountains beyond brooded in darkening silhouette. The distant horsemen rode and parried and a faint drift of smoke passed over them and they moved on up the deepening shade of the valley floor leaving behind them the shapes of mortal men who had lost their lives in that place. He watched all this pass below him mute and ordered and senseless until the warring horsemen were gone in the sudden rush of dark that fell over the desert.[67]

At the level of style, the flattening out of human history into natural history in *Blood Meridian* is conveyed through parataxis, which involves placing "one thing beside another without subordination. No relation of cause and consequence is proposed: no article requires more attention than another … [the words] are subdued to the reign of *and*."[68] Beyond McCarthy's syntax, the absence of a consoling or mitigating explanatory framework for the narrated events, a refusal of the kind of psychological *insight* we find in a book like *Dusklands*, mocks the idea of human intelligence mastering this desert environment. Among the characters, perspicacity is only evident in the dubious Holden; the emphasis is otherwise on the opacity of the characters and the landscape they move in. In contrast to Dawn's and Jacobus's dream of unchallenged metahistorical vision and authorial insight in *Dusklands*, in *Blood Meridian* we find characters in grim attitudes of sightlessness: a blind man led on a string by a child "to a place of vantage" to witness the passing scalphunters; White Jackson, who "was sat as before save headless, drenched in blood, the cigarillo still between his fingers, leaning towards the dark and smoking grotto in the flames where his life had gone;" the slain and scalped Apache left "to scrutinize with his drying eyes the calamitous advance of the sun."[69]

Supporting McCarthy's emphasis on the inadequacy of human consciousness in this desert terrain are repeated references to the transience of any kind of historical record (save that which Holden keeps in his ledgerbook). In *Dusklands*, the account given towards the end of S.J.'s Afterword of the physical traces left by the passage of Jacobus's party through the Namaqualand is a parody of the empirical authority aspired to by orthodox historical accounts. The litany of microscopic details—"From scalp and beard, dead hair and scales. From the ears, crumbs of wax. …"[70]—tips the scientific exactitude of this account into absurdity, in the process showing up the *imaginative* work that has gone into reconstituting Jacobus's journey.

In *Blood Meridian*, the point is repeatedly made that in the desert there is no history of human actions and natural events save that reducible to dust. This emphasis is as strong in the descriptions of impressive natural phenomena (electric storms, dustspouts, and falling stars[71]) as in the descriptions of human histories

[67] *Blood Meridian*, 63, 213.

[68] Donoghue, "Reading *Blood Meridian*," 416.

[69] *Blood Meridian*, 90, 107, 110.

[70] *Dusklands*, 119.

[71] *Blood Meridian*, 47, 111, 333.

erased by the passage of time. Thus we read of "pauldrons deeply dented with old blows of mace or saber done in another country by men whose very bones were dust," of the scattering to the wind from a gutted diligence of "letters penned for any destination save here," of dry weeds lashing "in the wind like the earth's long echo of lance and spear in old encounters forever unrecorded,"[72] and of the disintegration of all material trace of a massacred Indian tribe:

> 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 a 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 any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died.[73]

Yet in the face of McCarthy's insistence on the disintegration and erasure of human histories, it is the arch-textualist and rhetorician Holden who passes through the novel apparently without aging and who at the close emphatically stands clear of the other characters as if he were of a different order to them.

III

In closing, I want to draw out the similarities between Judge Holden and Jacobus Coetzee as metatextual figures, beginning by way of McCarthy's debt to Melville's *Moby-Dick* in his representation of Glanton and Holden.[74] Insulted by the "outrageous strength" and "inscrutable malice"[75] of the white whale, Melville's Ahab is unswervable in his determination to destroy it. His extravagant pride prompts him to declare that he would "strike the sun if it insulted me."[76] In *Blood Meridian*, Glanton is similarly mad of purpose but in a more general way than Ahab, for whom the whale is foremost the thief of his leg. The ruthlessness of Glanton's resolve is illustrated by the following passage, where the succession of *and*s generates an effect of headlong momentum:

> He'd long forsworn all weighing of consequence and allowing as he did that men's destinies are given yet he usurped to contain within him all that he would ever be in the world and all that the world would be to him and be his charter written in the urstone itself he claimed agency and said so and he'd drive the remorseless sun on to its final endarkenment as if he'd ordered it all ages since, before there were paths anywhere, before there were men or suns to go upon them.[77]

[72]Ibid., 52, 112–3, 105.

[73]Ibid., 174.

[74]As other critics have observed, other notable points of contact between the two novels at the level of character include Ishmael and the kid, the prophet Elijah and McCarthy's Mennonite, and vast hairless Holden and the white whale.

[75]Melville, *Moby Dick*, 128.

[76]Ibid.

[77]*Blood Meridian*, 243.

While Glanton, like Ahab, is ruthless in his determination to stamp his will on an obstructive world, Holden is no less savage but cannier in his projection of agency. In his preoccupation with history and with dominating nature, Holden with his ledgerbook mirrors Jacobus, tamer of the wild, who moves through the wilderness reducing it to name and number. As we briefly saw earlier, Jacobus discourses on the sovereignty of the human eye, on the subordinating powers of textuality, and on the significance of the gun to the colonial enterprise. That the historical Jacobus Coetsé was illiterate and the fictional Jacobus's arguments have a wistful logic—as seen in the passage below—are details secondary to the philosophical terms in which Jacobus frames his experiences:

> The gun stands for the hope that there exists that which is other than oneself. … The gun is our mediator with the world and therefore our savior. … The gun saves us from the fear that all life is within us. It does so by laying at our feet all the evidence we need of a dying and therefore a living world.[78]

Like Jacobus, Holden is presented as a learned figure, but whereas Jacobus's knowledge is contrived and anachronous, Holden owns his erudition in the sense that it is consistent with his portrayal as a preternaturally omniscient figure. As Sepich has noted, Holden appears as a larger-than-life figure in one of McCarthy's source texts for his novel, Samuel Chamberlain's *My Confession* (1956): outsize, erudite, immensely strong, a deft fiddler and dancer, with a reputation for violating children. In Chamberlain's words, "Who or what he was no one knew but a cooler blooded villain never went unhung."[79] With Baconian zeal and a "metaphysical hubris"[80] to rival Ahab's, Holden seeks to put nature on the rack and rout out its secrets by representing its artifacts in his ledgerbook. Informed by the dictum that "[w]hatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent,"[81] Holden seeks to transcribe the world in its many aspects to his ledgerbook, and on the trust of that gesture supplant the physical object. For Holden, to textualize is more than to domesticate, for as Grace Kim observes, "whatever the judge incorporates into his knowledge, he destroys … the judge's special mode of creation is violence."[82] In this respect, if we recall Jacobus's philosophy of the gun quoted above in which he affirms the life of other creatures by annihilating it, we find a notable consistency between Holden and Jacobus in their common interest in the ideological violence involved in the writing of history.

Beyond their arrogance as characters, Holden and Jacobus perform similar functions in enabling the metafictional dimension of these texts. Jacobus's mythic status is on the one hand the work of the revisionary historian S.J. Coetzee, who is concerned to identify Jacobus as one of the founding fathers of Afrikaner nationalism: "The present work," writes S.J., "… is a work of piety toward an ancestor

[78]*Dusklands*, 79.

[79]Sepich, "What kind of indians was them?" 125.

[80]Eddins, "Everything a hunter," 30.

[81]*Blood Meridian*, 198.

[82]Kim, "Then they all move on again," 178.

and one of the founders of our people, a work which offers the evidence of history to correct certain of the anti-heroic distortions that have been creeping into our conception of the great age of exploration when the White man first made contact with the native peoples of our interior."[83] On the other hand, Jacobus's extravagant self-consciousness and slipperiness as a character are a function of the anti-realistic turn of *Dusklands*, which is in line with J.M. Coetzee's aim, as outlined in *Youth* (2002), to at once evoke and subvert an eighteenth-century "horizon of knowledge."[84]

Whereas the mythic stature of Jacobus is nakedly cultivated by S.J. Coetzee in the Afterword and self-consciously enacted in the Narrative, Holden's disarming erudition goes largely unchallenged by his fellow characters. Holden is voluble and expansive in his pronouncements yet equally a sophist and trickster figure, who no sooner convinces others of his speculations than laughs "at them for fools."[85] Openly distrusted by the ex-priest Tobin and warily regarded by the inscrutable kid, Holden passes through the novel much like Jacobus through his narrative, apparently as untouchable as an extra-diegetic narrator. It is Holden who speaks the words that give McCarthy's novel its title.

> The way of the world is to bloom and to flower and die but in the affairs of men there is no waning and the noon of his expression signals the onset of night. His spirit is exhausted at the peak of its achievement. His meridian is at once his darkening and the evening of his day.[86]

A meridian is a high-point (usually of a star in its orbit), the prime of something, a period of full splendor. Holden here suggests that the prime of mankind should not be understood in terms of a myth of progression and improvement that positions modern man at an altitude from his primitive beginnings—that is, a notion of human development extolled by Eugene Dawn: "I am a story not of emotion and violence … but of life itself, life in obedience to which even the simplest organism represses its entropic yearning for the mud and follows the road of evolutionary duty toward the glory of consciousness."[87] Instead, Holden maintains that the true story of mankind is written not in books but blood. Informed by his notion that "War is god,"[88] he argues for the cardinal value of violence: a game of ultimate stakes, religious as blood, inevitable as sunset.

Part of the reason for Holden's preternatural status is that he performs a metafictional function in expressing some of the underpinning ideas of McCarthy's narrative, such as that violence is endemic to humankind ("War is god") and that the past is endlessly redeemable as story ("Men's memories are uncertain and the

[83] *Dusklands*, 108.
[84] *Youth*, 138–9.
[85] *Blood Meridian*, 116.
[86] Ibid., 146–7.
[87] *Dusklands*, 27–8.
[88] *Blood Meridian*, 249.

past that was differs little from the past that was not''[89]). It is characteristic of the bleak spirit of *Blood Meridian* that the figure closest to a protagonist, the kid, with whose reserve, if nothing else, a reader might identify, is himself violated, and left dead by Holden at the novel's close (at least this outcome is strongly implied). The gnomic epilogue detracts little from the triumph that is Holden's, whose words in the mouth of the narrator (''He says that he will never die''[90]) put the seal on the novel. In the titles ''Dusklands'' and ''Blood Meridian,'' then, Coetzee and McCarthy harness the metaphoric charge of sunset in their critique of the notion of human progress. For both, the image of sunset connotes neither enlightenment nor civilization but the ungovernable primal violence that underwrites the high-minded rhetoric that dignifies the colonial and military enterprises of men.

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[89]Ibid., 330.

[90]Ibid., 335.

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