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WHALES, JUDGES, AND MORTALS: HUMAN WILL AND DIVINE DESTINY IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S *MOBY-DICK* AND CORMAC McCARTHY'S *BLOOD MERIDIAN*

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have noted Cormac McCarthy's debt to Herman Melville, and they have recognized that *Blood Meridian* responds to *Moby-Dick*. As yet, nobody has studied exactly what links these two novels. I perform a comparative analysis, arguing that *Blood Meridian* offers a complementary view to *Moby-Dick* on the topic of the tension between free will and divine determinism. To support this argument, I focus on three areas of the novels which are intertextually related: the genre, the theology, and the denouement of each work. Firstly, regarding genre, both novels operate within the American epic tradition using four specific conventions of epic poetry. Secondly, the theology of *Blood Meridian* and *Moby-Dick* is Calvinist, as ideas such as absolute human debasement and predestination abound, but both novels swerve away from the specific doctrines of Calvin's religious thought. Thirdly, *Moby-Dick*'s denouement, with the survival of Ishmael from the Pequod's destruction by the divine white whale, holds onto a belief in the workings of free will, while transcendent determinism emerges triumphant with Judge Holden's annihilation of the kid at the end of *Blood Meridian*. Finally, I suggest that this project is significant because it exposes a thread of continuity that exists within the American epic tradition.

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Introduction

Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* foreground the conflict between human agency and divinely authored destiny. Each novel follows the descent of an everyman into a group of exiles on a doomed enterprise. Ishmael leaves the shore for the whaling industry aboard the Pequod, and the anonymously named "kid" flees his Tennessee home and falls into the company of the historical Glanton Gang in the deserts of North America. The narrators and characters in each work brood on the existence and nature of metaphysical freedom, and it is not until the denouement of each that they are finally able to resolve a singular question: can an individual's will escape from transcendent necessity and exert influence to author his or her own destiny? *Blood Meridian's* answer is far darker than *Moby-Dick's.*

McCarthy scholars have recognized a debt to Herman Melville, and they focus this debt on *Moby-Dick's* influence on *Blood Meridian*. Yet, almost all of the criticism notes only that *Blood Meridian* has moments and characters that allude to Melville's novel.[1] The scholarship does not probe further than simply recognizing that the influence exists. Scholars of each novel have recognized that *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* contend with the problem of agency and destiny; however, no one has studied the conversation that exists between these two novels. I will engage this point, arguing that human agency triumphs in *Moby-Dick*, as the novel ends with Ishmael's escape from the destruction caused by the white whale; and that *Blood Meridian*'s ending, with the kid's annihilation by the transcendent Judge Holden, qualifies *Moby-Dick*'s answer and proposes that destiny asserts ultimate authority over any act of human will.

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[1] See Essary's "'We Languish in Obscurity': The Silence of God as Atavistic Calvinism in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction" (2014); Frye's "*Blood Meridian* and the Poetics of Violence" (2013); Sepich's "The Dance of History in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" (1991).

To develop my argument, I will track the debt *Blood Meridian* owes to *Moby-Dick* in terms of genre, theology, and denouement. First, I will establish that each novel fits the conventions of epic and that the novels are textually and thematically linked within the specific tradition of the American epic novel. Second, I will turn to Calvinism in each book.[2] Here, I will discuss the particulars of each novel's metaphysical underpinnings, examining how human will and predestination operate in each novel. And third, I will discuss these distinct theological schemas in relation to each other through the characters of each story. For each novel, I will focus on three characters who serve as mirrors and embody the metaphysical debates: Ishmael and the kid, Captain Ahab and Captain John Joel Glanton, and Moby Dick and Judge Holden. A comparative analysis of character will reveal the world view that each novel presents.

I suggest that the above argument is significant because the critical histories of *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* have remained largely separate. This thesis works to create a bridge. Overall, I seek to explore a thread of continuity in the genre of the American epic novel. This continuity is not just one of influence but of conflict and revision as well. *Blood Meridian*'s response to the centuries-old question of the nature of human freedom is tightly linked to *Moby-Dick*'s. Yet McCarthy's novel not only pays homage to Melville's but also inverts it in such a way as to allow for a new reading of *Moby-Dick* that bears *Blood Meridian*'s qualifications in mind.[3]

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[2] See Herbert's "Calvinism and Cosmic Evil in *Moby-Dick*" (1969); Werge's "*Moby Dick* and the Calvinist Tradition" (1969); Essary's "'We Languish in Obscurity': The Silence of God as Atavistic Calvinism in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction" (2014).

[3] See Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1997) for a discussion of the term "tessera"

I. Genre: *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* as American Epic Novels

Blood Meridian and *Moby-Dick* fit various conventions of the epic genre. I will begin by outlining four conventions of epic that theorists of the genre have noted, and argue that the two novels fit those conventions. Then, I will describe the textual linkages between *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* that form the novels into pillars of the tradition of the American epic novel.[4]

Theorists such as Georg Lukács have defined the novel in opposition to the epic. In *The Theory of the Novel*, he recalls that the epic is a genre of a more ancient time, where the text is a perfectly constructed, noble, aristocratic, and complete work of artistic order. In contrast, he sees the novel as a genre characterized by several registers of language, disunity, and an overall democratic form. In light of these fundamental distinctions, he helps us ask the question, what is an epic novel? I accept Lukács' distinction between the two forms, but argue that novels containing conventions of epic can operate as epics.

In "Epic as Genre," John Miles Foley pushes against Lukács' formulation of the epic as a monolithic form and argues that the epic is a vast genre that encompasses many others. Instead of positing that the epic is a concrete form, he notes that all epics share similar characteristics and assume different forms across cultures and periods—characteristics such as prologues, specified diction, similes, and encyclopedic elements. These characteristics and their specific conventions can exist in novels, as demonstrated by *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian*.

The prologue is an epic convention that Foley finds in nearly all epics. Whether the invocations of a pagan muse in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*, or the petitioning of the Christian holy Spirit in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the epic usually begins by setting the context of the story. In the prologue to the *Iliad*, Homer establishes the conflict between Achilles and

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[4] See Evans' "To Disenchant and Disintoxicate: *Blood Meridian* as Critical Epic" (2014) for a discussion on how McCarthy might be subverting the epic form.

Agamemnon, the war in which that contention occurs, and the mythic framework of the Achaean cosmos. The same convention occurs in the first few stanzas of both the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. These epic prologues exist in both *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian*.

Before the reader gets to the first chapter of *Moby-Dick*, which itself functions as the epic prologue of Melville's story, he or she encounters two strange sections titled "Etymology" and "Extracts." In "Etymology," a "Late Consumptive Usher to a Grammar School" writes the word "whale" in thirteen different languages. Then, in "Extracts" a "Sub-Sub-Librarian" catalogues nearly eighty times that whales have appeared in writing, citing works that range from the Bible to Shakespeare to Milton to sailors' sea shanties. This is Melville invoking his muse: literature (both traditional and popular). Just as Homer and Virgil have Calliope, and Milton has the Holy Spirit, Melville has a tradition of literature. He invokes the texts of his culture and the rich history of whales across cultures to provide a platform for him to tell his own story. In this sense, Melville incorporates the epic prologue into his novel.

The epic prologue need not consist of an invocation to a goddess or an existing literary canon. Foley notes that epic poems such as *Beowulf* use the prologue convention to establish the cultural and historical context of the world in the story. *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* employ this sort of prologue as well. Beginning with *Moby-Dick*, the first chapter, "Loomings," details no aspect of the plot other than Ishmael's reasoning for wanting to go on a whaleship. Rather, Ishmael introduces himself, broods on the city of Manhattan, and then defends his choice to take to the sea. He is equally philosophical, jovial, and prophetic, but he does not reveal anything about specific plot events. He takes time to outline the historical and philosophical context of his story. Ishmael narrates, "Why is almost every robust healthy boy with a robust healthy soul in him, at some time or other crazy to go to sea?... Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why

did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and make him the own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning" (Melville 5). By page five, Melville has developed no plot, but he has established the tone and philosophical dimension of the work.

The prologue without an invocation also occurs in *Blood Meridian*. The first eleven paragraphs of Chapter I are offset from the rest of the chapter by a section break, and they function in the same fashion as *Beowulf*'s prologue or *Moby-Dick*'s. Like *Moby-Dick*'s, *Blood Meridian*'s first few paragraphs detail events that lie outside the plot. It deals with the kid's birth, runaway, and subsequent wanderings throughout the south, and it stops right as he gets into the western town of Nacogdoches. The prologue in the south stands apart geographically from the rest of the novel. Like "Loomings," the prologue to *Blood Meridian* establishes some of the philosophical questions and cultural norms that the novel will examine. For instance, the narrator says early on:

> Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay. (McCarthy 4-5)

Before launching into the plot of the story, McCarthy foregrounds his novel's deep questions of agency, creation, and the nature of the world. He also builds the nightmarish culture of *Blood Meridian*'s world with intimate and brutal sensory details:

> [the kid] lives in a room above a courtyard behind a tavern and he comes down at night like some fairybook beast to fight with sailors. The child's face is curiously untouched by the scars, the eyes oddly innocent. They fight with fists, with feet,

> with bottles or knives. All races, all breeds. Men whose speech sounds like the grunting of apes. Men from lands so far and queer that standing over them where they lie bleeding in the mud he feels mankind itself vindicated. (McCarthy 4)

Here, the universality of violence is apparent: "all races, all breeds." No one gets leave of the brutality, yet there is something innocent and perhaps primal in the kid's eyes—a detail which will recur. The narrative voice establishes the novel's tone as gothic and haunted, which characterizes *Blood Meridian*'s West.

In addition to the prologue, Foley highlights stylized diction as a convention of epic, and this language-register exists in both *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian*. Homer uses epithets and repetition in a noble style. Foley writes: "this special 'register' or way of speaking has long been counted as an important aspect of Homer's epic style. In addition to their structural contribution, these strategies have expressive implications: formulas, typical scenes, and story patterns can contribute idiomatically as well as tectonically" (Foley182). In another instance, common soldiers in Shakespeare's *Henry V* speak some of the most beautifully complex sentences on the ethics of warfare. This distinct register of language in epic is often deliberately stylized to pivot away from mimesis in speech. Both *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* engage in this same linguistic project.

If we were to read a soliloquy of Ahab or Starbuck out of the context of the plot, we would not be able to guess that the character speaking is a sailor on a whaling voyage in the early 1800s. Whaling was one of the most "blue-collar" jobs that existed in Melville's day, and so the poetic language of his characters allows him to work against representing the world as it is experienced. For instance, here is how the lowly carpenter of the Pequod speaks: "Drat the file, and drat the bone! That is hard which should be soft, and that is soft which should be hard. So we

go, who file old jaws and shinbones…. Saw a live tree, and you don't get [dust]; amputate a live bone, and you don't get it…. Come, come, you old Smut" (Melville 511). This simple worker considers philosophical implications of material and texture in musical language. Melville raises his language, and therefore his story, into the register of epic.

McCarthy, in *Blood Meridian*, also uses the stylized language often found in epic, but he does so in a different fashion than Melville. McCarthy's characters speak as one would expect uneducated murderers in the Wild West to speak. It is anything but a high Homeric style. Instead, McCarthy invents a narrator to tell the story, and it is this narrator who employs the language-register of epic. The narrator describes a traveling army in the desert:

> That night they rode through a region electric and wild where strange shapes of soft blue fire ran over the metal of the horses' trappings and the wagonwheels rolled in hoops of fire and little shapes of pale blue light came to perch in the ears of the horses and in the beards of the men. All night sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunderheads, making a bluish day of the distant desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear. The thunder moved up from the southwest and lightning lit the desert all about them, blue and barren, great clanging reaches ordered out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land that come the day would leave them neither trace nor smoke nor ruin more than any troubling dream. (McCarthy 49)

He uses this style of diction throughout the novel. In this passage, the narrator describes only the landscape and a storm, but the quality of the language and the connections the narrator draws

imbues it with epic power. He moves from a discussion of lightning to geology to a demon kingdom, showing his rhetorical range.[5]

The third epic convention Foley notes and is present in *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* is the device of the simile. He discusses primarily the Homeric simile, but similes are a feature throughout the tradition. The epic simile is not a simple comparison but rather a long, complex device that links two disparate concepts, often something happening in the story to some naturalistic phenomenon or philosophical idea. The epic simile contributes to the quality of universality. Foley finds that in Homer there is a conventional formula by which to deploy the simile: "many epics make use of elegant comparisons, often—like Homer's poems—aligning the hurly-burly of the present narrative moment with quieter scenes from the untroubled world of nature, the multiline structure that stretches majestically from 'As' to 'So'" (Foley 184). Both Melville and McCarthy use these epic similes.

Melville's similes often emerge when Ishmael ponders Ahab. In one instance, Melville compares Ahab's response to the weather:

> For, as when the red-cheeked, dancing girls, April and May, trip home to the wintry, misanthropic woods; even the barest, ruggedest, most thunder-cloven old oak will at least send forth some few green sprouts, to welcome such gladhearted visitants; so Ahab did, in the end, a little respond to the playful allurings of that girlish air. More than once did he put forth the faint blossom of a look, which, in any other man, would have soon flowered out in a smile. (Melville 136)

In another instance, Ishmael likens Ahab's determination to the fixity of the North Star:

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[5] See Schopen's "'They Rode On': *Blood Meridian* and the Art of Narrative" (1995) for a longer discussion on the effect of this heightened language.

> As the unsetting polar star, which through the livelong, arctic, six months' night sustains its piercing, steady, central gaze; so Ahab's purpose now fixedly gleamed down upon the constant midnight of the gloomy crew. It domineered above them so, that all their bodings, doubts, misgivings, fears, were fain to hide beneath their souls, and not sprout forth a single spear or leaf. (Melville 582)

The epic formulation of "So…As…" exists in both of these comparisons, and each likens Ahab to the natural cosmos. The complexity of the simile is on display as Melville does not simply compare Ahab to another thing in a one-to-one relationship, but he introduces several components. In this way, character and universe become conflated.

McCarthy's similes take a different form. Instead of using one long extended comparison between something from inside of the plot to something outside, McCarthy will pile on several similes together in short succession. For instance, when describing the judge and his fool wandering in the desert, the narrator says:

> It was the judge and imbecile. They were both of them naked and they neared through the desert dawn like beings of a mode little more than tangential to the world at large, their figures now quick with clarity and now fugitive in strangeness of that same light. Like things whose very portent renders them ambiguous. Like things so charged with meaning that their forms are dimmed…. They lumbered on, the judge a pale pink beneath his talc of dust like something newly born, the imbecile much the darker, lurching together across the pan at the very extremes of exile like some scurrilous king stripped of his vestiture and driven together with his fool into the wilderness to die. (McCarthy 294)

I have quoted this paragraph almost in its entirety because it is emblematic of McCarthy's fiction as a whole. In one paragraph, there are no less than five different similes, as well as references to Foucault ("Like things so charged with meaning that their forms are dimmed" is a line lifted almost directly out of *Madness and Civilization*), Shakespeare (the scurrilous king with his fool alludes to *King Lear*), and Melville (Ahab and Pip are parodies of Lear and his fool). Unlike Melville's similes, McCarthy's do not primarily connect his plot to nature. Rather, he uses the simile, with its direct allusions to classic works, to connect his novel to a larger tradition.

The fourth epic convention that Foley notes and that is present in *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* is the encyclopedic aspect of the genre. Homer has his famous catalogue of ships in Book II of the *Iliad*, Aeneas listens to a long list of Roman heroes in Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Milton employs the device in Book I of *Paradise Lost* to describe the fallen angels making their way from the lake of fire to Pandemonium. *Beowulf* is full of long genealogies detailing the lineages of great northern houses, and Spenser devotes nearly two stanzas of the first Canto in Book I of the *Faerie Queene* to listing all of the trees of the forest in which the Red Crosse Knight and his party take shelter. Foley believes that the epic is a genre that consumes and contains other genres as well, writing, "Critics have identified prayers, laments, proverbs, catalogues and inset stories within *the Iliad* and *Odyssey*…. What we can say, however, is that all of these forms and more are found in living, well-documented traditions, and further that they act as cues with special indexical force" (Foley 182). The epic catalogue is one of the most striking and consistent aspects of the epic genre.

Moby-Dick's catalogues come in the form of the seemingly endless descriptions of the technical aspects of whaling and whales themselves. Melville explains how to throw a harpoon, how to properly deploy the smaller whaleboats from the main ship, and how to work the various

stations on the ship. However, the clearest example of the encyclopedic nature of the novel is the infamous chapter, “Cetology.” In this chapter, one of the longest in the whole book, Ishmael details a humorous schema for biologically classifying whales. He leads the reader through the scholarship that has been accepted regarding the zoology of the leviathans. In his classification of the right whale, Melville tells us:

> Among the fisherman, he is indiscriminately designated by all of the following titles: The Whale; the Greenland Whale; the Black Whale; the Great Whale; the True Whale; the Right Whale. There is a great deal of obscurity concerning the identity of the species thus multitudinously baptized. What then is the whale, which I include in the second species of my Folios? (Melville 150)

He goes on in this verbose manner for another thirteen species. Aside from being a direct nod to the epic catalogue tradition, this encyclopedic chapter contributes to the universality of the epic novel. Foley’s idea of catalogues working to contain other genres within the epic exists here: *Moby Dick* is a novel containing conventions of epic in the form of scientific categorization.

Blood Meridian includes encyclopedic elements in a different manner. The encyclopedic aspects of *Moby-Dick* are almost exclusively contained in their own chapters, while McCarthy embeds his catalogues within the narrative. The encyclopedic nature of *Blood Meridian* comes in the form of geographical descriptions. McCarthy’s description of the deserts of the southwestern United States and Northern Mexico are so detailed that one feels as if they could be used to actually navigate that landscape. For instance, the narrator describes a common gorge:

> They rode down from this country through a deep gorge, clattering over the stones, rifts of cool blue shade. In the dry sand of the arroyo floor old bones and broken shapes of painted pottery and graven on the rocks above them pictographs

> of horse and cougar and turtle and the mounted Spaniards helmeted and bucklered and contemptuous of stone and silence and time itself. Lodged in faults and crevices a hundred feet above them were nests of straw and jetsam from old high waters and the riders could hear the mutter of thunder in some nameless distance and they kept watch on the narrow shape of sky overhead for any darkness of impending rain, threading the canyon's close pressed flanks, the dry white rocks of the dead river floor round and smooth as arcane eggs. (McCarthy 145)

Passages such as these, where the narrator seems to take a magnifying glass to the ground, sky, weather, and features of the landscape, occur on almost every other page. Just as Melville incorporates the genre of biological writing, McCarthy incorporates the genre of travel-writing.

In addition to the four conventions of epic that both novels use, *Blood Meridian* and *Moby-Dick* share textual similarities. Virgil's *Aeneid* mirrors Homer's poems, and Dante then includes Virgil as a principle character in his *Commedia*. *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* are not only epic novels, but they are epic novels in the American epic tradition. The novels are linked both textually and thematically to create a conversation, and the clearest instances of this linkage come from the characters. McCarthy's characters are responses to and inversions of Melville's characters.

The first instance of intertextuality occurs in the very first sentence of *Blood Meridian*. *Blood Meridian* opens with the sentence: "See the child," which echoes the famous first sentence of *Moby-Dick*: "Call me Ishmael." Both are three-word imperatives that identify the protagonist of each story, interpolate the reader into the novel, while also keeping the reader at a distance. McCarthy never reveals the kid's actual name in the same respect that the verb "call" implies that Ishmael is not his real name either.

The linkage between these two characters exists also in the structural placement in each novel. In *Moby Dick*, Melville makes Ishmael the narrator, who speaks in the standard first-person until boarding the Pequod. From this moment, the first-person narration slips into third person omniscient, as Ishmael describes the inner monologues of Ahab in his cabin or conversations between the mates, to which Ishmael could not have been privy. One only remembers that Ishmael even exists in the story because of his frequent digressions into the technicalities of whaling, and the fact that he is the only survivor of the voyage. In terms of plot, Ishmael recedes to the background.

Similarly, the kid disappears into the background of the Glanton Gang. *Blood Meridian* can be roughly divided into three sections. The first six chapters are about the kid's initiation into the violent world of McCarthy's southwest. Chapters VII to XIX relate the wanderings and final destruction of the Glanton Gang, and the final four chapters concern the kid and the judge in a physical and metaphysical battle. In the first and third sections, the kid is clearly the protagonist. The narrator's eye and voice follow him directly, but during the wanderings of the Glanton Gang, he is almost never mentioned. Just as one might forget that Ishmael is the narrator, so one might forget that the kid is among the filibusters of the Glanton Gang.

McCarthy's intertextuality operates not only by allusion but also by inversion. The kid is an inverted form of Ishmael. Ishmael is verbose, charming, and solemn, but he is never silent. Melville gives us the interior of Ishmael. Readers know his thoughts and opinions, his philosophy, and his worldview. In contrast, McCarthy denies his readers the interior of the kid. We never learn how the kid reacts to the violence or horror of the judge or the Glanton Gang except by his outward actions. McCarthy never writes "he thought" or "he felt." McCarthy has hollowed Ishmael out to form the kid.

The second pair of linked characters is Captain Ahab and Captain Glanton. The first connection is their hierarchical positions. Each is the leader of a rugged group of men, exiles from society, who betray the contracts that sent them out into the wild parts of the world. In the end, each is killed by the very prey which they hunt: the white whale drags Ahab down to the depths, and the Yuma Native Americans split the head of Glanton down to the throat.

McCarthy creates direct textual allusions to Ahab in his characterization of Glanton beyond the positions they both occupy in their respective groups. One of Ahab's most famous lines reads, "Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (Melville 178). This exclamation comes in the midst of Ahab's diatribe against God, fate, nature, and even reality. He asserts his own radical independence as well as his deeper mission in defiance of the powers that impress themselves upon him. Ahab always acknowledges the power of these forces, stating, somewhat contradictorily, "Ahab is for ever Ahab, man. This whole act's immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by thee and me a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders" (Melville 611). Ahab believes in fate, but at times he acts in defiance of it, while at other times he invokes its power.

Similarly, in a strange moment of *Blood Meridian*, the narrator actually does attempt to get inside the head of Glanton rather than just observing; he narrates:

> 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's ordered it all ages since,

> before there were oaths anywhere, before there were men or suns to go upon them. (McCarthy 254)

Glanton, like Ahab, acknowledges the power of fate, while at the same time acting in his own independent defiance. The true instance of intertextuality, however, occurs in the discussion of the sun. “He’d drive the remorseless sun on to its final endarkenment” (McCarthy 254) is a stunning variation of Ahab’s “I’d strike the sun if it insulted me” (Melville 178). McCarthy’s version invokes the language of horse riding, rather than the brute violence of Ahab’s speech. Yet, each captain sets himself against the powers of nature and the transcendent, claiming power for his immanent self.

The final intertextual pairing of characters concerns the enigmas of each novel: Moby Dick and Judge Holden. In these two beings, the transcendent is made manifest. Each one of these creatures is a giant, an albino, and a destructive figure. McCarthy likens the judge to Moby Dick in a simile:

> [the judge] shone like a moon so pale he was and not a hair to be seen anywhere upon that vast corpus, not in any crevice nor in the great bores of his nose and not upon his chest nor in his ears nor any tuft at all above his eyes nor to the lids thereof…. As that great bulk lowered itself into the bath the waters rose perceptibly and when he had submerged himself to the eyes he looked about with considerable pleasure, the eyes slightly crinkled, as if he were smiling under the water like some pale and bloated manatee surfaced in a bog. (McCarthy 174-175)

McCarthy likens the judge to a manatee, a water-dwelling mammal like a whale, and there is a physical resemblance to Melville’s hairless and alabaster-colored leviathan. At the end of each story, Moby Dick and Judge Holden are the ones who alone remain triumphant. *Moby-Dick*

wrecks the Pequod and swims away to the deeps, and the judge annihilates the kid and dances screaming that he will never die.

Moby Dick and the judge are also both consistently referred to as monsters. The judge is called a djinn, in Lovecraftian language, a “vast abhorrence,” or even Satan himself (McCarthy 254). Moby Dick is never seen by anybody as a simple whale except by Starbuck. He is always identified with the great biblical leviathan. Each is otherworldly, similar to creatures that exist on earth but different enough that they seem to belong to the transcendent world.

McCarthy’s policy of inversion evidences itself further in his characterizations of Glanton and Judge Holden. In Melville’s novel, Ahab is the great speech-maker. He is the one seducing his crew with rhetoric and philosophy. His power and his sublimity come from his ability to articulate his thoughts and aspirations in incredible language. Glanton is silent. He spits, he nods, he gives short commands, but he never makes any type of extended soliloquy. Like the kid’s relation to Ishmael, Glanton is a hollowed-out phantom of Captain Ahab—a shadow of Melville’s epic captain.

Conversely, Melville’s great leviathan, being a whale and not a human, is an icon of silence. He is a thing to be wondered and guessed at. Yet, Judge Holden takes up Ahab’s penchant for making speeches. He tells parables, extolls his philosophy of violence, and theorizes over war and the nature of morality. He remains inscrutable, like Melville’s whale, but his inscrutability comes not from silence but from speech. For instance, a few members of the gang find prehistoric fossils and begin to wonder at them, clearly mesmerized. Judge Holden rides up and tells them, “There is no mystery to it…. Your heart’s desire is to be told some mystery, the mystery is there is no mystery.” McCarthy’s narrator then relates the following: “He rose and moved away into the darkness beyond the fire. Aye, said the expriest watching, his pipe

cold in his teeth. And no mystery. As if he were no mystery himself, the bloody old hoodwinker" (McCarthy 263). Melville's whale becomes a mystery because of silence and absence, leaving the crew-members to wonder at his nature and meaning. The gang-members do the same thing precisely because the judge is never silent and always present.

Melville's *Moby-Dick* and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* each contain various conventions of epic that scholars such as Foley discuss. They are long works with a prologue, a heightened register of language, long complex similes, and encyclopedic elements. However, because of their linkages in character, as McCarthy inverts Ishmael, Ahab, and Moby Dick to create the kid, Glanton, and the judge, they are epic novels deliberately in the same American epic tradition. The intimate connections between the two novels do not stop at character, as McCarthy models the religious schema, in which the forces of fate operate in *Blood Meridian*, to that of *Moby-Dick*.

II. Theology: Calvinist Predestination in *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian*

Blood Meridian's conception of the problem of free-will and determinism owes a debt to the same conception in *Moby-Dick*. The primary theological schema in which they engage with the tension between human agency and fate is Calvinism, which holds to a strict insistence upon the absolute power of divine destiny over human agency. *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* focus on two threads of Calvin's theology: the absolute separation of humans from God, and the fact of predestination. Humans are so corrupted and full of sin, they are fundamentally cut off from their deity, and as such they can only be saved by God's grace. There is no room for the human will to achieve salvation for itself. Calvin's famous notion of predestination follows logically from the absolute power of God in all aspects of the world. *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* draw from Calvin's theology but finally subvert it.

Calvin held that humans were depraved. The fall of Adam and Eve brought sin and death into the world and created a rift between God and humanity. In light of this fact, humans can only gaze with wonder at the Almighty and hope that they are given God's grace. Thomas Werge, in "*Moby-Dick* and the Calvinist Tradition," explains the gravity of the separation of humans from God:

> Calvin is not simply concerned with the corruption of the human mind, but with the dialectic of the mind's relation to the power of a transcendent and judging God. The immense power of God and His judgements, then, is not merely to be admired. It is to effect awe in the beholder and remind him of the limitations of his own knowledge. (Werge 489)

The inscrutability of God becomes central to Calvin's theology, and both *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* explore this limitation. Werge concludes, "Calvin's doctrine of 'total depravity,' then,

is an insistence not only on the corruption of the will but on man's utter inability to reach God and his judgements through any mode of earthly knowledge" (Werge 486).

Ahab rages against this inability to know God, at one point yelling, "That inscrutability is chiefly what I hate" (Melville 178). In *Blood Meridian*, the judge sees the inability to understand God as an opportunity to assert himself as an author of fate. Kirk Essary explains the judge's project succinctly in "'We Languish in Obscurity' The Silence of God as Atavistic Calvinism in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction": "It's all quite a twisted sort of Calvinism wherein God's providence is recognized, chalked up as arbitrary on account of its incomprehensibility, and ultimately rejected—but rejected not as a belief-proposition: rejected rather as fodder for encouraging a certain way of living in the world. God's silence cannot command obedience" (Essary 278-279). The judge does not dispute Calvin's God, but he does hold that the inscrutability of God's plan makes it arbitrary, and he can therefore command it himself. Calvin's notion of depravity and the limits of human knowledge lead into the strict belief in predestination, the other aspect of Calvin's theology that *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* interrogate.

Calvin's understanding of predestination follows from a single question, as John Hesselink writes in "Calvin's Theology": "The question that troubled him was, how is it possible that when people hear the gospel, one accepts it and another rejects it" (Hesselink 83). Calvin considers these two groups, and decides that those who accept it feel an internal voice speaking to them, and those who reject it do not hear this voice. In light of this divison, Hesselink writes, "Calvin then concluded that from eternity God elects some to salvation and rejects others to damnation" (Hesselink 83). Human will has no ability to alter whether or not the inner voice calls to it. David C. Steinmetz elaborates on Hesselink's analysis in "The Theology of John

Calvin," writing, "For Calvin, predestination explained as no other theory could how faith was possible in a fallen world that repeatedly demonstrated that it had no place or time for God…. Faith was never the believer's gift to God but always God's gift to the believer" (Steinmetz 124). Predestination is the logical outcome of the notion of depravity.

The narrators of *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* have Calvin's theology on their minds, yet neither subscribes directly to Calvin's beliefs. Ishmael and the unnamed narrator of *Blood Meridian* are particularly philosophical and will often enter into long digressions regarding the operations of fate and free will. This is a useful narrative device because each author has provided himself with a method for philosophical musings that might be extraneous or forced in other circumstances.

Ishmael turns his mind to the problem of fate in human lives in Chapter 47, "The Mat-Maker." This chapter comes right after Ahab has revealed the true purpose of the Pequod's voyage and incorporated the whole crew (save for Starbuck) into his demonic mission to kill Moby Dick. In the chapter, Ishmael and Queequeg are weaving a sword mat for one of the smaller whale boats, when Ishmael relates: "I say so strange a dreaminess did there reign all over the ship and all over the sea…that it seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the fates" (Melville 233). The repeated rhythmic motions lull Ishmael into a dreamy trance-like state. From this state, Ishmael's mind wanders into a metaphor of the weaving process as the interplay of the cosmic forces of fate, will, and chance.

The first part of the loom that Ishmael considers are the actual threads on the warp. He says, "There lay the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging vibration, and that vibration merely enough to admit of the crosswise interblending

of other threads with its own. This warp seemed necessity" (Melville 233). Necessity, Ishmael's word for transcendent fate, becomes the threads of the mat that they are weaving. The threads do not ever move but rather vibrate, and the idea of the "thread of life" is an ancient conception that goes back to the Fates in Greek Myth. The threads intertwine and cross, like human lives, but they are ultimately subject to the person working the loom. In this way, human life is at the mercy of the divine weaver.

Ishmael returns to this idea of God as a weaver creating the threads of human life in a chapter titled "A Bower in the Arsacides." At this moment, Ishmael is pondering the skeleton of a dead whale ensconced in vines, and sees the hand of God at work:

> Oh, busy weaver! unseen weaver!—pause!—one word!—… The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice; and by that humming, we, too, who look on the loom are deafened; and only when we escape it shall we hear the thousand voices that speak through it. (Melville 490)

The force operating the loom is God creating the threads and destinies of human life. No mortal can change his method or creation. The power of human agency does not have the ability to interfere with God's weaving. This seems to fit within Calvin's theology.

However, Ishmael's metaphor of the loom does not simply stop at the Calvinist position, with God dictating all terms of human life. He next considers the shuttle that moves between the threads, and says, "This warp seemed necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads" (Melville 233). This is a complication, although not a contradiction. The threads are still "unalterable," but the shuttle is essential to the production of the weaved mat. In this way, human agency completes the authored destiny—not able to change the threads of necessity, but able to navigate through the predestined

life. Ishmael holds out hope for human agency to exercise some power within the overwhelming force of God's plan.

There is a third component of the metaphor: Queequeg. As Ishmael weaves his life into the fabric of necessity, Queequeg uses his sword to hit and mold the fabric. Ishmael finds chance embodied in his action: "this savage's sword, thought I, which thus finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof; this easy, indifferent, sword must be chance—aye, chance, free will, and necessity—no wise incompatible—all interweavingly working together" (Melville 234). The idea of chance adds another layer of complexity to the Calvinist model of predestination: a force outside of God's providence and human agency, which functions as a sort of randomness and chaos. These cosmic powers work together to weave the fabric of the world as humans experience it.

Ishmael sums up his metaphor in one final paragraph. First, he talks about necessity: "The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course—its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that" (Melville 234). Divine destiny ultimately reigns supreme. It will follow its course regardless of any interfering powers. Ishmael then moves on to free will: "free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads" (Melville 234). So, within the unbending course of destiny, the human will can navigate a path. It will not be able to change what necessity has authored, but it has a lateral freedom to navigate. Finally, Ishmael discusses chance: "and chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity and sideways in motion modified by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events" (Melville 234). Chance occupies a strange place in the cosmos of *Moby-Dick* because it is subservient to necessity and free will, but it also has the final say in events. Necessity reigns supreme, as expected in a Calvinist framework, but

free will and chance each have their own roles to play, perhaps offering an alternative to destiny. Ishmael works from a Calvinist perspective, yet without unyielding fidelity to Calvin's conclusions. The exact nature of the forces interplay remains shrouded.

Ishmael uses the metaphor of the loom to outline the interlacing of various metaphysical forces, and *Blood Meridian*'s narrator uses a similar device to explore those same forces in his desert world. While wandering through northern Mexico in Chapter XII, the Glanton Gang comes across a group of slain gold hunters who were making their way to California. They were murdered by a group of white men, but they disguised it as the work of Native Americans. The narrator breaks into the narrative:

> Notions of chance and fate are the preoccupations of men engaged in rash undertakings. The trail of the argonauts terminated in ashes as told and in the convergence of such vectors in such a waste wherein the hearts and enterprise of one small nation have been swallowed up and carried off by another. (McCarthy 159)

McCarthy's narrator is specifically engaging Ishmael's conception of the forces by invoking the language of chance and fate, and he subtly dismisses the crew of the Pequod as "men engaged in rash undertakings." The rest of the sentence concerns the death of the gold seekers, or argonauts. Their life path, or vector, ended in fire, destruction, and death, their souls devoured by the communal soul of the group that murdered them.

Expriest Tobin then steps in to offer his own conclusion as to the nature of the murder. He commits himself to the Calvinist idea of absolute predestination: "the expriest asked if some might not see the hand of a cynical god conducting with what austerity and what mock surprise so lethal a congruence. The posting of witnesses by a third and other path altogether might also be called in evidence as appearing to beggar chance" (McCarthy 159). Tobin sees the sight of the

murdered adventurers and extrapolates that the murder was designed by God. He sees an all-powerful God who is contemptuous of humanity, authoring a severe and harsh death for the forty-niners. He also brings in the idea of "mock-surprise," where God pretends, at least from the human perspective, that He is not the cause of suffering, making God even more cynical. The final sentence of the quotation argues that a third party witnessing the act (the Glanton Gang) undercuts chance's power because God designed the scene. Tobin is an expriest who holds onto a hatred for the God and predestination that he sees operating in the world.

The judge, however, then offers his perspective in opposition to Tobin's. In reference to Tobin's characterization of the tyranny of God, the judge says, "that in this was expressed the very nature of the witness and that his proximity was no third thing but rather the prime, for what could be said to occur unobserved" (McCarthy 159). He disagrees with Tobin, saying that what Tobin sees as the desolation of God is really just a reflection Tobin's own character. Yet he argues that the purpose of the murder was for the Glanton Gang to see. He believes that their witness was not some tangential aspect of the situation but rather the most important.

This is a puzzling episode, but it is necessary to dwell upon because it contains the response of *Blood Meridian* to *Moby-Dick's* formulation of the workings of fate, free will, and chance. The narrator dismisses the notions of chance and fate, and focuses only on what is visible, the dead argonauts, and he elevates human will above the other forces. Yet Tobin proffers the view of a Calvinist God, who authors all suffering and misery, as a tyrant contemptuous of his own creations. Then, the judge occupies another position altogether. He agrees with Tobin that the purpose of the massacre was for the witness of the Gang but that chance brought the Gang into contact with the dead caravan. In the end, the scene presents cases from the perspectives of free will and fate, with chance occupying a vital role, and the novel

refuses to decide what the actual dominant force is. Like Ishmael, the narrator presents ideas, and plays with them, considering the significance of each, but it will not be until the end that the story renders a final decision. McCarthy, like Melville, grounds his ideas in Calvin's theological framework without consenting to the theology itself.

Ishmael and the narrator of *Blood Meridian* may engage with the theology of Calvinism, especially the ideas of chance, fate, and free will, but they do so in an abstract manner. They embed this discussion in metaphors of weaving and dead gold seekers, and the ideas take precedence over any plot elements. However, characters in the stories, such as Father Mapple, Reverend Green, Starbuck, and Tobin, also embody the theological debates in their actions within the drama of the story. Father Mapple, and his inverted mirror in *Blood Meridian*, Reverend Green, each establish the primary theology that will occupy the rest of the novel.

In the two chapters in which he appears, Father Mapple, with his puritanical sternness and Calvinist commitment to salvation by grace alone, sets the primary cosmological foundation of the whole universe of *Moby-Dick*. While still in New Bedford, Ishmael decides to go to a church service during a rain storm. He chooses a well-known whalemen's chapel. It is a while before the chaplain appears, and when he does, he silently and powerfully walks in, with no umbrella. He shakes the water from his hat and takes the pulpit. Ishmael remarks on the pulpit extensively, particularly the rope ladder:

> Like most old fashioned pulpits, it was a very lofty one, and…the architect…finished the pulpit without a stairs, substituting a perpendicular side ladder, like those used in mounting a ship from a boat at sea…. The perpendicular parts of the side ladder, as is usually the case with swinging ones, were of cloth covered rope, only the rounds were of wood, so that at every step was a joint…. I

> was not prepared to see Father Mapple after gaining the height, slowly turned around, and stooping over the pulpit, deliberately drag up the ladder step by step, till the whole was deposited within, leaving him impregnable in his little Quebec. (Melville 43-44)

The pulpit for Ishmael is the prow of the whole world, yet Father Mapple's pulpit has several distinctions that Melville imbues with significance. It is remarkably tall, so that when standing on it, Father Mapple has a pronounced and heightened authority. The pulpit lends his sermon more terror and fervor. He is revered, as the preacher must be in the Calvinist tradition.[8]

The ladder up to that lofty pedestal is taken straight from a whaleship. There are no stone stairs, but rather a rope with rungs, blending the whaling world with the religious. Father Mapple seeks to extend his Calvinist leanings into the world of the open ocean in whose tempests and waves pagan nature reigns. He then goes further to drag the ladder up behind him so that he stands isolated from his congregation. The word "impregnable" suggests that Mapple stands in a position of power against other cosmic forces, and it also suggests a radical individualism. Father Mapple is no Catholic priest who must be accessible as the intermediary between the townspeople and the Almighty. Ultimately, Melville's faithful must bear their sins and fates alone.

After regarding Father Mapple and probing for meaning and significance in his image and actions, Ishmael relates the sermon. This sermon is classically Calvinist, holding to the depravity and powerlessness of humanity in the face of the Almighty. Father Mapple voices this sentiment as he preaches on the *Book of Jonah*. He begins with a condemnation of Jonah, who attempts to flee from the call of God and hide from His will. Mapple tells his flock, "As sinful

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[8] See Dawn Devries' "Calvin's Preaching" in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*.

men, [Jonah's tale] is a lesson to us all…. As with all sinners among men, the sin of this son of Amittai was in his willful disobedience of the command of God" (Melville 47). Father Mapple wants to stress the extreme consequences of disobeying God's divine plan, railing against Jonah's presumption to put his own desires above God's own will.

The sermon continues as Father Mapple retells the *Book of Jonah* while providing his own commentary upon it. God sends a storm to the ship Jonah sails out upon, and his shipmates, discovering that God's wrath is against the fugitive they have taken aboard, toss him overboard. As he is swallowed by the whale, Jonah prays for forgiveness. Here, Mapple makes another crucial notation: "[Jonah] feels that his punishment is just…. And here, shipmates, is true and faithful repentance; not clamorous for pardon, but grateful for punishment" (Melville 52). Father Mapple's focus on Jonah's eventual self-denial fits well with Guenther H. Haas' comments in "Calvin's Ethics" on how the proper Calvinist should behave writing: "All self-concern must be subordinated to the will and glory of God, and to the good of one's neighbor. Self-denial is the necessary remedy for the inordinate love of self" (Haas 95). This is precisely the lesson that Father Mapple argues that Jonah must discover before leaving the belly of the whale. Calvinists must become grateful for punishment. In Father Mapple's sermon, one can hear Calvin's ideas of human depravity and the need to be saved by nothing but the grace of God. Father Mapple's sermon, and the reverence with which Ishmael describes him, lends authority to Calvinist theology, but on the pagan seas, this authority and certainty holds less sway.

The analogue to Father Mapple in *Blood Meridian* is Reverend Green, who appears immediately after the prologue ends. Like McCarthy's inversions of Ishmael and Ahab into the kid and Glanton, Reverend Green is an inversion of Father Mapple. He does not have a sturdy

chapel with a fearsome pulpit but rather a tent, and his sermon is not a long and learned interpretation of the Bible:

> Neighbors…he couldnt stay out of these here hell, hell, hellholes right here in Nacogdoches. I said to him, said: You goin to take the son of God in there with ye? And he said: Oh no. No I aint. And I said: Dont you know that he said I will foller ye always even unto the end of the road?... Well, he said, I aint askin nobody to go nowhere. And I said: Neighbor, you dont need to ask. He's a goin to be there with ye every step of the way whether ye ask it or ye don't. I said: Neighbor, you caint get shed of him. Now. Are you goin to drag him, *him*, into that hellhole yonder? (McCarthy 6)

This is the extent of the Reverend's preaching, and it functions as a condensed version of Mapple's preaching on *Jonah*. The same Calvinist belief that God is always watching and that the individual can never get away from the destiny laid out for him is present. The man in the sermon is similar to Jonah, who fled from the duty with which God charged him and instead brought God into hell, whether that hell be the belly of the whale or the wastelands of the desert.

Father Mapple and Reverend Green occupy the same place in the structure of the narrative in each novel. They both preach their hardline Calvinism to the protagonist, before that protagonist has fallen into the group of exiles. Each provides the first discussion of the religion, which governs the world, and though that religion has initial authority, it quickly loses adherents.

The episodes of Father Mapple and Reverend Green end quite differently. Father Mapple finishes his sermon and descends to pray, as the congregation gazes on him respectfully and reverently. He is the pillar of morality and religion in New Bedford, and he stands strong. Reverend Green's preaching does not finish. The judge steps into the tent and claims that

Reverend Green is no man of holy orders but rather an outlaw who engages in crimes as horrifying as pedophilia and bestiality. The citizens of Nacogdoches shoot him promptly, and when they find the judge at the local bar, they learn that all the charges were fabricated. This is a shocking inversion. The figure who stands for traditional religion is not idolized but murdered, and the judge, the great enigma of the novel, is to blame. Whereas Ishmael went to sea with the preaching of Father Mapple in his mind, Reverend Green's teachings are undercut and destroyed, and in doing so McCarthy sends the kid out into a wasteland where God will be absent, where the existence of destiny is never certain and evil runs free.

Within the Pequod and the Glanton Gang, one figure of Calvinism opposes the Satanic forces bound up in each singular group's quest. On board the Pequod, Starbuck is the sole voice of resistance to Ahab and his devilish preaching, while in the Glanton Gang the expriest, Tobin, constantly refuses to acquiesce to the judge's philosophy.

In "A Theory of Moby Dick," William S. Gleim reads Starbuck's interpretation of a gold doubloon to mean that the first mate is a figure of Platonism aboard the Pequod: "The readings of the symbols on the gold doubloon verify this identification. These Starbuck interpreted to mean: faith, hope, and righteousness, a slant towards Platonism" (Gleim 411). I extend Gleim's analysis, by suggesting that Starbuck is tied to religion as well as philosophy. Starbuck remains the sole bulwark of Christian thought in the Pequod's dread enterprise. Ishmael first describes him in Chapter 26, "Knights and Squires," which unfolds two personality traits that align perfectly with the classic Calvinist mode of living and that echo the ideals of Father Mapple: reverence of God's power in His creation and sensible courage in the face of that power.

Starbuck fears God's absolute might: "For, thought Starbuck, I am here in this critical ocean to kill whales for my living and not be killed by them for theirs; and that hundreds of men

have been so killed Starbuck well knew" (Melville 125). Starbuck displays his fear of God's awesome power. He also recognizes that to make a living in a business as dangerous and brutal as whaling, one needs courage tempered by responsibility and practical deference. Understanding Father Mapple's sermon, Starbuck defers to the laws that God sets out rather than try to be a heroic warrior. He expresses belief in fate and temperance, and he wants to stay on the path that God has written for his life in order to make it back to shore alive.

Starbuck embodies his religious faith early on when Ahab binds the crew to his singular will to slay the divine white whale. Ahab remarks that Starbuck is the only crew-member who resists his call, and exclaims, "art not game for Moby Dick?" Starbuck responds with his Protestant theology:

> I am game for his crooked jaw, and the jaws of death too, Captain Ahab, if it fairly comes in the way of the business we follow; but I came here to hunt whales, not my commander's vengeance…. Vengeance on a dumb brute...that simply smote thee from blindest instinct! Madness! To be enraged with a dumb thing, Captain Ahab seems blasphemous. (Melville 177-178)

Starbuck is not willing to ascribe any godlike qualities to Moby Dick. He wants to do his job, get paid, and go home. He refuses to assign any supernatural value to Moby Dick, seeing Ahab's willingness to do so as blasphemous and demented. Though he recognizes God's awesome power in the whale, the idea that it is a direct agent of God is reprehensible to him.

In the wastes of the open sea, Calvinist theology and morality, embodied in Starbuck, hold no sway. The first mate's moral code is tested repeatedly, and though he remains stalwart, his virtue does not persuade the crew to denounce Ahab's rhetoric. When he considers killing Ahab to free the Pequod from his demonic grip, he decides that he cannot: "Starbuck seemed

wrestling with an angel; but turning from the door, he placed the death tube in its rack, and left the place" (Melville 560). Starbuck refuses to bend his moral code. For all his moral fortitude, Starbuck cannot compete with the will of Ahab. He tries to free Ahab from a demonic purpose but can never convince him to see the hunt from his own Calvinist perspective. The citizens and whalers of New Bedford respect and believe in Father Mapple's Calvinist preaching, but its influence stops at the shore. Starbuck attempts to deploy Mapple's theology against Ahab's madness, but it is at best ineffective. Melville holds onto the terms of Calvin's thought, but dispenses with the content as Starbuck endures defeat after defeat.

In *Blood Meridian*, the expriest Tobin, like the rest of McCarthy's inversions of Melville's crew, occupies Starbuck's place structurally, but has a darker character. Where Starbuck is a paragon of virtue and sensibility, the expriest is a murderer for hire. He engages in the slaughter of peaceful Native Americans and Mexicans for cash, and he shows few scruples in this pursuit. Yet, compared to the rest of the Gang, he comes across as a moral figure when he opposes the judge.

Tobin first demonstrates his religious beliefs as he narrates to the kid how the judge came to be amongst the Glanton Gang. Before launching into the story, he speaks of the Almighty to the kid:

> [the Almighty has] an uncommon love for the common man and godly wisdom resides in the least of things so that it may well be that the voice of the Almighty speaks most profoundly in such beings as lives in silence themselves…. For let it go as how it will…. God speaks in the least of creatures…. No man is give leave of that voice.… When it stops…you'll know you've heard it all your life. (McCarthy 130)

Tobin echoes Reverend Green in the same manner that Starbuck echoes Father Mapple. The Reverend's central point is that God's presence is inescapable, and at this moment Tobin tells the kid the same thing. In the godless desert, Tobin holds to some notion of a God, however quiet, apathetic, or cynical that deity may seem.

The expriest denies the judge's philosophical statements on violence while still engaging in the bloody behavior, just as Starbuck verbally refuses to commit to Ahab's quest and still participates in the hunt of the white whale. In Chapter XVII of *Blood Meridian*, the judge delivers his longest philosophical tirade. The topic is war. He asserts that "war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god" (McCarthy 261). After raising war to a theological register, he delivers a statement regarding morality: "Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn" (McCarthy 261). The judge ends his lesson, and asks Tobin what he thinks, but the expriest dissents.

In McCarthy's allusion to the moment on the quarterdeck where Ahab asks Starbuck if he is game for Moby Dick, Tobin is less eloquent than his correlate. The language of Ahab overpowers Starbuck, and the rhetoric of the judge overwhelms Tobin. When the judge asks what the expriest says of the theory, Tobin responds only that, "The priest does not say" (McCarthy 261). This elicits a response from the judge: "The priest does not say…. Nihil Dicit. But the priest has said. For the priest has put by the robes of his craft and taken up the tools of that higher calling which all men honor. The priest also would be no godserver but a god himself" (McCarthy 262). The judge reveals some of his own motives here. He seeks status as a

being that can rule and author destinies, but he also makes the pragmatic point that, by Tobin's actions, the expriest has subscribed to the judge's beliefs even if he says he has not. Tobin then accuses the judge of the same charge of blasphemy that Starbuck puts to Ahab: "You've a blasphemous tongue, Holden…. I'll not secondsay you in your notions…. Dont ask it." And the judge, instead of bursting out in rage like Ahab, replies quietly, "Ah Priest…. What could I ask of you that you've not already given" (McCarthy 262). While Ahab is able to subdue the threat caused by Starbuck's dissent, the judge denies that Tobin is dissenting at all. He argues that by leaving the religious order and Calvinist morality behind to engage in murder, Tobin is confirmation of his theory. He assimilates Tobin into his own purpose, and he empties the expriest of any real moral fortitude, undercutting the one source of Calvinist morality in the Glanton Gang.

Melville and McCarthy imbue their characters with religious ideas. Starbuck and Father Mapple's commitment to the Calvinist worldview gets defeated upon the open ocean as Ahab's monomaniacal quest overpowers and destroys it. The judge's chaos chases out and kills Reverend Green and his preaching, and Tobin vanishes at the end of the story. Both novels foreground Calvinist teachings but then subvert them, retaining notions such as predestination and free will but dispensing with the characters who act out the theology in the world.

III. Denouement: The Final Dramatic Actions of *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian*

As we have seen, *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* share a Calvinist framework for interpreting the tension between free will and necessity. Together, these two novels search for an explanation of the question: can the individual human will escape from transcendent destiny? Each novel presents its own answer in its denouement. The main actors in this final drama are Ishmael and the kid, Ahab and Glanton, and Moby Dick and Judge Holden. These pairs each embody different parts of the tension. Ishmael and the kid take on the role of free agents who deny the supremacy of fate. Ahab and Glanton acknowledge the power of fate but purposefully act against it. Moby Dick and Judge Holden are fate embodied, and each seeks to crush the free spirit in humanity.

Both novels focus on a group bound to a common purpose. In this binding, individual wills join together and trap themselves to create a common will. In "The Quarter-Deck," Ahab subverts the contracted purpose of the Pequod from killing whales in general to killing one whale in particular. Ahab acts out a ceremony to reify this new purpose. Ishmael narrates Ahab's ritual: "Then ranging [the harpooneers] before him near the capstan, with their harpoons in their hands, while his three mates stood at his side with their lances, and the rest of the ship's company formed a circle round the group" (Melville 179). The whole crew then goes on to drink out of a pewter flagon in a perversion of the communion ceremony. Ahab's ritual is an explicit binding of many free agents to his one singular will.

The final three chapters of *Moby-Dick* constitute the chase of the white whale, where the conflict between the disembodied forces of free will and necessity take on dramatic form. Ahab, in defiance of fate, lashes out against the agent of God with hopes of expunging it from existence. Ahab believes that he can destroy the tyranny of destiny impressing itself upon his

life, as if he could kill a metaphysical principle with a physical act. This sentiment comes to full-froth when Ahab reveals his quest to the crew. In his diatribe against Starbuck's charge of blasphemy, he yells, "be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him…. Who's over me?" (Melville 178). Ahab does not know the exact nature of Moby Dick's relation to the deity, yet he still defies him. Ishmael ponders the nature of Ahab's quest to kill the whale and arrives at the following conclusion:

> The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them…. All that most maddens and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks and sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified, and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it. (Melville 200)

In the white whale is the being of the Calvinist God, who has written a fate for Ahab. With the presence of Moby Dick, everything about Calvin's God that Ahab has come to hate exists in the physical world. Perhaps by killing the whale, he can free himself from the tyranny of God, including that God's authored destiny?

In "Calvinism and Cosmic Evil in *Moby-Dick*," Herbert examines Ahab's Calvinism valuably. He argues that Ahab represents the reprobate in Calvin's theology, and he argues that "if God created men with the intention to damn the greater part of them, then the creation was 'not an act of love but of hatred'" (Herbert 1614). Ahab wants to fight back against Calvin's

God, and this knowledge helps to explain why he has such enmity towards Starbuck. Herbert goes further: “Ahab’s revolt is the revolt of one who is ‘bound to hell.’ Ahab’s conviction of God’s hatred and his response to it become the regnant factors in his being; he is obsessed with what he believes, so much so that it absorbs his entire nature” (Herbert 1616). Ahab’s character is that of a man who acknowledges his damned place in Calvin’s theological schema, and responds with rage.

Ahab remains a paradoxical figure because in nearly the same breath he utters his desire to both slay the embodiment of fate and to enlist its power. He speaks as if he knows that he is trapped in one course of life, and that he will never overcome it. Sometimes he uses this fatalistic thinking to bolster his resolve, as in the chapter “Sunset,” when he soliloquizes, “Swerve me? The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails, whereon my soul is grooved to run, Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents’ beds, unerringly I rush” (Melville 183). The metaphor of his soul on iron rails to his fixed purpose implies that he cannot do anything other than follow those rails. He still thinks in terms of fate, even when he is seeking to kill fate itself.

Ahab’s commitment to fate again rears its head when he is in the midst of the chase to kill Moby Dick. At the end of the second day of the chase, when Moby Dick has already stove his boat twice, Ahab recommits himself to the course of action, rather than abandon the apocalyptic chase. He uses fate as a justification to continue raging on, even though he rages at fate. He yells at Starbuck, “Ahab is forever Ahab, man. This whole act’s immutably decreed. 'Twas rehearsed by me and thee a billion years before this ocean rolled. Fool! I am the fate’s lieutenant; I act under orders” (Melville 611). He does not believe that he acts of his own volition. Ahab is an enigma. He employs fate both to justify the path he sails and to destroy the

incarnation of a deity who decrees fate. In his fatalism, Ahab defies fate. This leads him and his crew to utter destruction by the very incarnation of the idea he thought he could kill.

William Glasser studies the Pequod's chase to hunt Moby Dick immediately after discussing Ishmael's loom as the embodiment of metaphysical forces. Glasser, too, reads these final chapters as the dramatic embodiment of the ideas of fate and free will. His analysis links the Trade Winds with the doctrine of necessity: "It is suggestively established…that whenever anything travels to leeward (with the wind), it may be considered as moving in accordance with necessity, and that free will is operating when anything moves across or against the wind" (Glasser 482). During the first day, Moby Dick swims with the wind, and the Pequod moves against it, implying that the whale moves with necessity and that Ahab acts out his free will. At the end of each day, both the whale and the ship move with the wind, asserting necessity's triumph. Glasser's interpretation fits with Ahab's paradoxical relation to fate, both defiant of it and submissive to it. Though Ahab at times sails against the wind with free will, he always ends up moving with it. His defiant attitude does not allow him to escape fate.

Glasser does not factor Ishmael into his analysis of the final chase, since Ishmael has no real activity in the fight. He is on Ahab's boat, but he throws no harpoons and simply helps sail the whaleboat. Ishmael takes on significance only when the whale has destroyed the Pequod and slain Ahab. Ishmael is important because he survives. Though he has bound his fate to that of Ahab, he survives where no other crewmate does. Moby Dick's implementation of divine necessity over human will does not apply to Ishmael. It could be that the third factor of Ishmael's loom, chance, asserts its own power to allow him to survive; however, he has also been associated with free will rather than random chance.

When Ishmael outlines the relation between necessity, free will, and chance with the loom, he is using the shuttle, which represents free will. Melville positions him to be the actor of free will, and so his survival opens space for a possible reading that allows for an individual's will to escape from destiny. Chance may be the ruling factor in Ishmael's escape, but even this conclusion still denies necessity absolute control over existence. Whether it is by free will or by chance, Ishmael's escape shows that there are cracks in the predestination of all events.

Melville answers the question, can an individual human will escape from a preordained destiny, in Ishmael's survival. Ahab's fate is to die in the pursuit of Moby Dick, and as he usurps the voyage of the Pequod to accomplish this task, Ishmael, too, wraps himself into Ahab's quest. *Moby-Dick* ends with the Pequod's destruction and Ahab's death, and it is only with an epilogue that Ishmael resurfaces. Melville emphasizes the fact that Ishmael is the only survivor.[9] Yet Ishmael does escape from destiny. The white whale enforces transcendent destiny, yet it cannot destroy the will of Ishmael.

Just as the Pequod sinks at the hand of its quarry, so, too, does the Glanton Gang perish by those they hunt. Yet the process by which this comes to pass has several alterations nestled in the commonalities. Ahab and Glanton both recognize the supremacy of fate, and struggle against it. The narrator, in a rare moment of psychological interiority in *Blood Meridian*, reveals Glanton's views on fate:

> 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

[9] Melville begins the epilogue with a quote from The King James Translation of *Job* 1:15: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee."

> 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. (McCarthy 254)

Glanton allows "that men's destinies are given." His belief is similar to Ahab's exclamation that fate drives him on, and neither cannot deny that necessity operates. Glanton moves beyond this acknowledgement to contain the whole world within his own destiny. He seeks the ability and the authority to claim the agency to drive the sun on its path; he wants to control destiny, or, in the judge's words, to be "no godserver but a god himself" (McCarthy 262).

Like Ahab and his crew, the Glanton Gang binds themselves into one communal soul and destiny. The members have no ritual that binds their souls to one path like the crew of the Pequod; instead, they accomplish the union with their actions. In their depraved acts of collective murder, they cleave together to form a common destiny. The narrator relates:

> They rode like men invested with a purpose whose origins were antecedent to them, like blood legatees of an order both imperative and remote. For although each man among them was discrete unto himself, conjoined they made a thing that had not been there before and in that communal soul were wastes hardly reckonable more than those whited regions on old maps where monsters do live. (McCarthy 158)

The individuals are present, but, in their bloodshed, they create a communal soul with only one purpose: killing. The members of the Gang dispense with their individuality to take part in Glanton's will to murder. Eventually, the telos of these groups comes to destroy the whole common will. The Pequod is destroyed by the white whale they choose to pursue in the same way that Yuma Native Americans destroy all but four of the Gang.

Glanton's narrative position with regard to fate differs from Ahab's. Though they both seek to gain some supremacy over fate, Ahab is the antagonist of fate in *Moby-Dick*, but in *Blood Meridian* Glanton is an ally to it. Tobin says of Glanton and the judge: "They've a secret commerce. Some terrible covenant…. Soon they were conversin like brothers" (McCarthy 132). Glanton's desire to control not just his destiny, but the destiny of the sun, and therefore the destiny of world, can help to explain his alliance with Judge Holden. Glanton is not the romantic antihero like Ahab, and he has no desire to destroy the operation of fate in the world. Instead, he seeks merely to wrest control of the mechanisms by which fate is dictated, and in this pursuit he has allied his own murderous purpose with the judge.

Another difference between the Pequod and the Glanton Gang exists in the way the figure of fate assumes significance. Herbert's analysis sees Ahab imbuing Moby Dick with the symbolic representation of fate through Ahab's own hatred of Calvin's God. Judge Holden, in contrast, consciously fashions himself into the proponent of fate in the deserts of *Blood Meridian*. At the beginning of the novel, the judge destroys Reverend Green, showing that the world of *Blood Meridian* is one where the influence of Calvin's God has been chased out. Characters grapple with the possibility that there may be no God—quite a different problem from that of Ahab, with his hatred of God's authority. In the absence of God, the judge steps in to author fate. He speaks with language connoting fate, including "autonomy," "destiny," and "paths." As the Glanton Gang roam the southeast, the judge draws various plants, animals, and stones in his ledger book before he kills the organic matter and destroys the inanimate objects. Toadvine asks why he does this, and the judge responds, "Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent" (McCarthy 207). He claims authority over all existence and expresses his desire to be a suzerain of the world. The narrator then relates,

> The judge placed his hands on the ground. He looked at his inquisitor. This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing can be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation…. That man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate. (McCarthy 207-208)

With this information in mind, we may see why the judge hates the kid's free agency: it worked against his desire to control all aspects of the world. In "*Blood Meridian*, a Critique of Determinism," Dennis Sansom argues a similar point: "In the world of *Blood Meridian*, the kid blasphemes and thus has to be destroyed…. In the blood meridian there cannot be a place for doubting providence, and the judge is the *Blood Meridian*'s grand inquisitor" (Sansom 8-9). The kid's existence is a metaphysical problem to the judge's ultimate project of conquest, and the kid comes into direct combat with the judge after the Yuma massacre.

When the Yuma Native Americans rout the Glanton Gang, only a few members survive: the judge, the kid, Toadvine, and Tobin. Toadvine leaves the group, which brings the number down to three. From this point, the judge becomes the antagonist of the kid and Tobin. They meet at a well in the desert. Tobin and the kid are weary of the judge, who says, "Weigh your counsel, Priest…. We are all here together." Tobin responds, "I'm no priest and I've no counsel…. The lad is a free agent." The judge responds simply and menacingly, "quite so" (McCarthy 296). In this short exchange, Tobin and the judge imbue the kid with the significance of free agency. Judge Holden still uses the language of community. He wants the expriest to know that they are in the desert together, and holds that the communal soul of the Glanton Gang

still survives in them. Yet, he acknowledges that the kid can act as he chooses. It is for the kid's tiny speck of resistance to the common destiny that the judge desires to slay him.

The kid and Tobin flee the well with the judge in pursuit. Their flight from the judge inverts the chase at the end of *Moby-Dick*, as now the giant albino creature of fate hunts the escaped members of the Gang. As they escape, they reach a moment where Tobin can no longer continue. He has been shot and collapses from exhaustion. Before having to decide whether to leave Tobin or stay with him, the kid notices a change in the wind. Instead of flowing in a way that preservs the tracks in the sand, the wind blows them away. Glasser's approach to reading the wind as emblematic of a metaphysical force works here as well, but in this case it occupies the role of chance. McCarthy's chapter heading titles this moment "The wind takes a side," implying that chance, which operates independently of necessity and free will in Ishmael's loom, sides with the kid (McCarthy 307). McCarthy's version of Ishmael also survives annihilation in the climactic chase scene, but *Blood Meridian* does not end immediately after the escape.

As the kid and Tobin are hiding from the judge's pursuit in the desert, the judge calls out to the kid, saying, "There's a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. Do you think that I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your soul some corner of clemency for the heathen" (McCarthy 311-312). This is his charge. By clutching to a shred of mercy, he betrays the common soul of the Glanton Gang, thereby acting as a free agent against the group's goal. When the judge visits the kid in jail in the next chapter, he references this charge again:

> You came forward…to take part in a work. But you were a witness against yourself. You sat in judgement on your own deeds. You put your allowances before the judgements of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise. Hear me, man. I spoke in the

> desert for you and you only and you turned a deaf ear to me…. For it was required of no man to give more than he possessed nor was any man's share compared to another's. Only each was called upon to empty out his heart into the common and one did not. Can you tell me who that was? (McCarthy 319)

The judge hates the kid and wants to kills him because the judge despises the kid's exercise of free will. The judge is the figure of destiny in *Blood Meridian*, and as such he speaks in terms of the collective destiny and purpose of the Glanton Gang. The kid acts as an individual with his own will, and this itself represents an assault on the judge's project.

Like Ishmael, the kid escapes from the huge albino monster; however, McCarthy goes a step further. *Moby-Dick* ends with Ishmael's survival, which suggests that an individual can escape from destiny, but after the kid survives, *Blood Meridian* still has one more chapter. In this last chapter, the narrative skips forward several decades, and the kid (now "the man") travels to the Texan town of Fort Griffin. It is as if McCarthy asks and answers the question, what happened to Ishmael after he made it back to land? The man enters a saloon, orders a drink, and turns around to see the judge. The man has aged thirty years, but the judge has not aged a second. The judge walks over to the man, and they engage in a dialogue in which the judge reasserts himself as the author of destiny and alleges that the man had a free will.

The judge asks the man why he is in the saloon, and the man defers, saying that nobody needs a reason to be some place. The judge replies, "That's so…. They do not have to have a reason. But order is not set aside because of their indifference" (McCarthy 342). Subtly, the judge acknowledges that the man need not be in the saloon because of some preordained path, but he then asserts that the "order" (or destiny) does not take this into account. The man is confused, and the judge continues: "Let me put it this way…. If it is so that they themselves have

no reason and yet are indeed here must they not be here by reason of some other? And if this is so can you guess who that other might be" (McCarthy 342). In the absence of a reason for the man's presence, the judge argues that they must be there by his orchestration. He fills the role left by the absent, destiny-authoring God in *Moby-Dick*.

The judge stops speaking cryptically, and he begins to philosophize. He tells the man, "A man seeks his own destiny and no other" (McCarthy 344). The judge continues to diminish the power of human will, redefining it to be simply a search for a proper destiny. According to the judge, free will is nothing more than the ability to seek one's fate. Could a person choose to pursue a different fate? The judge answers, no: "Any man who could discover his own fate and elect therefore some opposite course could only come at last to that selfsame reckoning at the same appointed time, for each man's destiny is as large as the world he inhabits and contains within it all opposites as well" (McCarthy 344). If a human somehow discovered the fate that they had to follow, and chose the opposite course of action, that human would still arrive at the same end that fate dictated.

The judge then delivers one final comment regarding the supremacy of destiny that he controls. He tells the man, "Drink up…. We have dancing nightly and this night is no exception. The straight and the winding way are one and now that you are here what do the years count since last we two met together? Men's memories are uncertain and the past that was differs little from the past that was not" (McCarthy 344-345). The "straight way" is the direct path authored by fate, and the "winding way" is that same path with interventions by human will. One can hear Ishmael's idea of the loom here, with the unchanging threads of necessity modulated by the shuttle of free will. The judge asserts that there is no difference between the life governed totally

by fate and the life that had human will exerting power throughout. Fate swallows up human will completely.

In the final pages of the novel, the judge acts out this philosophical analysis in dramatic form. The man is the human who sought to exert his own will. He is the free agent who dissented from the common destiny of the Glanton Gang, and this dissent is destroyed by destiny. After the judge finishes his sermon, the man leaves and eventually makes his way to an outhouse. McCarthy is quite careful to withhold information, and the narrator says only, "The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose smiling and gathered [the man] in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him" (McCarthy 347). The narrator gives us no details as to what exactly happens to the man, but one can guess that it is something particularly gruesome, as a hard-hearted frontiersman opens the door to the outhouse, and says only, "Good God almighty" (McCarthy 348). The scene then pivots to the judge back in the saloon, where he is demonically dancing. The narrator ends the story: "His feet are light and nimble. He never sleeps. He says that he will never die. He dances in light and in shadow and he is a great favorite. He never sleeps, the judge. He is dancing, dancing. He says that he will never die" (McCarthy 349). *Blood Meridian* ends with the absolute destruction of the figure of free agency at the hands of the judge, the figure of fate, and the judge celebrates merrily, claiming supremacy, immortality, and ubiquity. Fate asserts itself and crushes the spirit of human will.

Moby-Dick ends with the escape and survival of Ishmael from a physical and monstrous embodiment of the metaphysical. Moby Dick does not have the final judgement over Ishmael's will. *Blood Meridian* mirrors the final chase of the whale in his southwest desert, and, like Ishmael, the kid survives the assault of fate. McCarthy's novel pushes forward into the life of the

kid and reveals that the cosmic force of fate reasserts itself as the judge extols his philosophy and destroys the kid. Seen this way, *Blood Meridian*'s answer as to whether a human will can escape fate is the darker counterpart to the answer in *Moby-Dick*. In *Moby-Dick*, free will and chance conspire to overcome the force of necessity, but in *Blood Meridian*, destiny has the final say.

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