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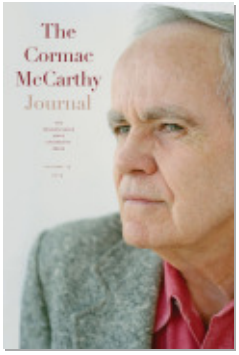

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On *Blood Meridian*'s Okenian Philosophy of Nature

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ABSTRACT: According to Jay Ellis (2006), the discrepancy between human intention and nature's indifference is the "central problem" of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985). It is formulated in an early passage on the novel's setting, the American Southwest: "[N]ot 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). While affirming Ellis's claim, this article reconsiders the ways in which the novel "answers" the question of ontological priority between man and nature, that is, product and productivity. The article's claim is that the philosophy of nature underlying the eminently metaphysical monologues of Judge Holden as well as the narrator's renderings of the barren landscape that John Joel Glanton's warring gang of scalp hunters traverses is that of the German nineteenth-century naturalist Lorenz Oken. Drawing on recent work put forward by the speculative realist philosopher Iain Hamilton Grant (2008), the article further argues that Oken's *Elements of Physiophilosophy* (1809–11) provides a fitting synthesis for *Blood Meridian*'s "central problem." KEYWORDS: Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, philosophy of nature, Judge Holden, Lorenz Oken

Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, Or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985), a novel that depicts the journey of a group of scalp hunters through the borderlands of the United States and Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century, contains a passage that deserves more critical attention. This passage considers the notions of fate and agency from the point of view of one of the two leaders of the group, John Joel Glanton. Late in the novel, many of Glanton's fellow mercenaries have already died together with their Native American scouts—"[t]he Delawares all slain" (McCarthy 243)—and the narrative voice renders Glanton's mindset with a peculiar mixture of resignation and affirmation:

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> 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. (243)

As Kirk Essary (278) has shown, this passage recalls Captain Ahab's standpoint on nature in general and the sun in particular in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), a novel which by McCarthy's own admission is his "favorite book" (Woodward, "Venomous"). The *Blood Meridian* passage depicts Glanton as he meets his seeming fate with a perspective that integrates indifference into absolute control and vice versa. While he concedes the givenness of everyone's fate, he paradoxically strives to master his own by trying to literally *make it his own*, "as if he'd ordered it all ages since," as if he had authored or decided it himself: his own fate and the cosmic fate of extinction pertaining to the sun. As Steven Shaviro puts it: "Glanton affirms his own agency through an identification with the whole of fate, so that it is as if he has willed even the event that destroys him" (Shaviro 115). It is, above all, McCarthy's phrasing that is of interest here and especially his representation of a sense of inevitability, of unavoidable determination. Glanton's claim to be an agent in the schemes of the order of the world is described as an attempt to "to contain within him all that he would ever be in the world and all that the world would be to him" (McCarthy 243), even if this containment of agency would actually be itself prefigured in those schemes and their ostensible teleology. To communicate this notion of prefiguration, McCarthy writes that Glanton's "charter [is] written in the *urstone* itself" (243; emphasis added). And so to my inquiry: what exactly is this "urstone" and what is this neologism's importance with respect to the rest of the novel?

While it would seem likely that the word itself might be one of McCarthy's archaic-sounding neologisms, its lexical source and meaning for the narrative is a complex matter. There are two possibilities for the source of and reason behind the author's use of the expression "urstone." First, the mythologies of some Native American tribes, such as the Seneca, the Ponca, or the Omaha, harbor the notion of a large stone that is somehow fruitful and from which smaller forms of life may thus issue forth. In *Landscapes of the Sacred* (1988), Belden C. Lane writes: "The Seneca Iroquois traveled often to a large hill at the head of Canandaigua Lake in Western New York.

Unremarkable in any outward way, they nevertheless saw it to be the great *Ur-Stone* of their people, the primitive place of emergence where life began" (65; emphasis added). Along similar lines, in a paper on the grammatical specificities of Ponca and Omaha, "two . . . highly endangered languages of the Missouri River Valley" (74), Bryan J. Gordon interprets a section from James O. Dorsey's collection of nineteenth-century Omaha stories—published in 1890 as *The Cegiha Language*—which reads, in Gordon's explication: "They say *the stone* cracked all over and was ground very finely by the fall. They say that from there *that one round stone* was ground and scattered far, and became all *the scattered stones* of all the lands everywhere" (78).[1] On Gordon's reading, the second phrase that is emphasized in the section—"*that one round stone*"—refers to what is called "the *Ur*stone, so large it blocked the sun" (78).

All of this sounds like material that McCarthy might have been engrossed in when researching his first Western. Yet however compelling these etymological references and inferences might be, The Cormac McCarthy Papers of the Wittliff Collections at Texas State University, San Marcos, shed a slightly different light on the hitherto unresolved issue of the "urstone," and thereby offer a second, more directly attributable possibility for the source of McCarthy's phrasing. Conceptually, the source for this word, which in *Blood Meridian* simultaneously refers to a space in which the individual fates of human beings are inscribed and to the very protean thing that Glanton strives to contain by sheer force of will, could very well be the Native American mythographies of the Seneca, Ponca, and Omaha tribes, but the McCarthy archive suggests instead a concept to be found in the writings of the German nineteenth-century naturalist Lorenz Oken. In notes that he used to draft *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy writes: "URSTONE (URSCHLEIN [*sic*]) OUT."[2] This is a misspelled but clear reference to a word used by Oken that Alfred Tulk's 1847 translation renders as "protoplasma." This word, itself a neologism, is "*Ur-Schleim*," which denotes the concept of a biologically primordial and formless sludge from which all forms of life and phenomena are issuing forth (Oken iii; xi).[3]

While it is not entirely certain whether McCarthy knew of the Native American notion of the "Ur-Stone" specifically, it cannot be ruled out. What is striking is that the notions of "Ur-Stone" and "*Ur-Schleim*" are in some ways conceptually coincident and even have a phonetic resonance between their German and English pronunciations; "Ur-stone" is "Ur-Stein" in German, which is remarkably close to Oken's "*Ur-Schleim*." McCarthy's note in the manuscript

suggests that he might have been aware of this resonance and that he used the word "urstone" to refer to Oken's concept, playfully concealing his source.

In any event, the *Ur-Schleim* in Oken's work *Elements of Physiophilosophy* (1809–11)[4] is figured, ontologically speaking, as the inexistent grounding for the world's phenomena, and is alternately termed the "Nature-Nothing [*Natur-Nichts*]" as well as likened to the zero in mathematics. This article argues that this obscure reference in McCarthy's manuscripts to a similarly obscure figure in the history of the philosophy of nature opens up a new way of reading *Blood Meridian*—namely, by determining the concept of nature underlying it. My claim is that Oken's "physiophilosophy," which is Tulk's translation of the idiosyncratic German term *Naturphilosophie*, can be traced in the narrative voice, the narrative dynamics, and the philosophical monologues of the scalp hunters' second leader, Judge Holden. In other words, the seemingly antinomic propositions in Oken's *Elements*—a strange hybrid of post-Kantian transcendental thought and the natural sciences of his day—are not only mirrored in the novel's most violent if "childlike" (McCarthy, *Blood*, 79) figure but also in descriptions, statements, and metaphysical speculations of the narrative voice itself. As the reference to the "urstone" and its Okenian source suggest, the question of fate versus agency, which is also that of determination versus freedom, or (nonhuman) nature versus (human) reason, is central to any understanding of the novel. What distinguishes my reading from the major interpretive frameworks in McCarthy scholarship, however, is the way in which the novel's question of fate versus agency, crystallized in the notion of the "urstone," is determined and set against critical accounts that identify a certain biocentrism or ecopastoralism, and also against postmodern readings that detect a literary subversion of Western rationality.

In a sense, the question at hand mirrors what Jay Ellis has called the "central problem" (Ellis 85) of *Blood Meridian*, namely the discrepancy between man's intentions and nature's indifference, or in the terms of my analysis, reason's containment of the order of the world and the "urstone" that precedes it.[5] This article, therefore, affirms and further develops Ellis's articulation of what may be called the "clay issue" in McCarthy's first Western novel. According to Ellis, a by now often-cited passage in the book formulates the "central problem" (85) as it depicts the novel's setting, the American Southwest. The passage occurs shortly after the kid has been introduced: "[N]ot 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). Much later, the judge gives an answer to the problem (again, an often-cited passage): "If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay" (307).

The question and its ostensibly authoritative answer in many ways frame the plot, especially because of their respective positions in the course of the narrative and because of what they constitute and convey. While the question is established by asking "whether . . . or not" something is the case, its answer reflects this by rhetorically suggesting the divine nature of war whose negation would affirm that the heart of man is "another kind of clay." This seems like an either/or logic at work that echoes familiar debates both in the philosophy of nature and, by extension, in environmental criticism about the ontological priority between humans and nature—that is, product and productivity, or object and process. Yet, in a sense, McCarthy's negotiation and expression of the "clay issue" rejects both options and affirms them at the same time. There is no decision made between a nature subordinated by humans via "a caricatured Enlightenment" (Estes 107), on the one hand, and the antiscientific stance based on humanity's lack of agency in an irrational world, inherited from Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), on the other. The biocentrism of deep ecology and the subversive matrices of deconstruction are both evident in the novel, but they are insufficient to fulfill the grounding function as critical frameworks.[6] In effect, the novel seems to proclaim the divine nature of war *and* the nature of the human heart as immanent to the "[e]arthen causeways" (McCarthy 5) of the American West.

This reading of the novel is to be distinguished from ethically motivated accounts of the book that detect the literary vision of a reconciliation between humankind and its environment, such as Georg Guillemin's (87) and Andrew Keller Estes' (123) respective studies of McCarthy. These two critics proclaim a biocentric perspective as opposed to an anthropocentric or logocentric one to be essential for the understanding of *Blood Meridian*. For Guillemin, "the desert scenes" in the novel signify "the resistance of wilderness to the logocentric encoding of nature as a cultural artifact" (Guillemin 79). And as Estes argues, passages in McCarthy's book such as the one about an "optical democracy" that represents "a strange equality" between "all phenomena" (McCarthy 247) should be read as "biocentric maps" (Estes 131) whose message is that "the natural world possesses intrinsic rights and does not exist purely for the benefit of man" (131).

However, the affirmation of war as holy and of man as substantially made of clay—of a conglomerate of dust and liquids, in other words—necessitates an account of McCarthy's work that captures the novel's dramatization of the indifference of natural processes to humankind and, in turn, the indifference of the human characters to the order of nature. As Judge Holden claims when he and the kid reencounter each other after a long time, referring to the ignorance of the men that spend their time in the tavern: "They do not have to have

a reason [to be here]. But order is not set aside because of their indifference" (McCarthy 328).

Far from devaluating the specific ecology of the American Southwest as an important part within the narrative, what the present article shows, among other things, is that a mainly biocentric reading intended as a rebuttal of an anthropocentric or language-based perspective on the clay issue disregards the actual entanglement of both positions in the narrative. In McCarthy's rendering of living nature and its partial encapsulation within language, it is not so much the "intrinsic rights" (Estes 131) of the former that devaluate the adequacy of the latter; nor is the linguistic description of its outside all there is to the understanding of a novel—in which, after all, the importance of an argument concerning linguistics pales when compared to the brutal reality of a scalp hunter's everyday life. Rather, as the notion of the "urstone" suggests, nature *exceeds* the bounds of living organisms, at the same time that it *includes* the workings of language. In *Blood Meridian*, therefore, *bios* and *logos*, the immanence of living nature and the transcendence of human reason, are entwined in a way that is grounded in what could be called a physiocentric, rather than biocentric, perspective. (The "physio" in "physiocentric" refers to *phusis*, the Platonic conception of nature as material yet not necessarily corporeal.[7]) Based on McCarthy's reference to Oken's neologism and, as will be seen in what follows, the novelist's accordance with the philosopher's major ideas concerning the concept of nature, I claim that *Blood Meridian* resonates with a philosophy that ascribes to nature a generally dynamic and material character, encompassing both creatures and concepts—that is, both living organisms (*bios*) and their registration in linguistic inferences (*logos*). Put simply, nature is grounded in, or defined as, a primordial formlessness (*phusis*) that is itself indifferent to the bodies and ideas it generates.

This conceptual entwinement of *bios* and *logos* resembles many tendencies in nineteenth-century philosophical thought about nature and its processes and thus, as recent work put forward by the speculative realist philosopher Iain Hamilton Grant (2008) seems to suggest, Oken's *Elements of Physiophilosophy* provides a fitting synthesis for *Blood Meridian*'s "central problem"—even beyond the reference to Oken's concept of the *Ur-Schleim*: While man's ideality remains enclosed within the causal bounds of nature's potencies, it is in the practice of war that the event of the world's creation may be repeated. Or, as Oken has it: "By the process of destruction [*Tödtungsproceß*], the finite being seeks to become the universe itself [because] man is a complex of all that surrounds him, namely of element, mineral, plant and animal" (Oken 19, 20; 24, 25). In order to develop a new framework for the problem of natural determination regarding the novel's individual beings and their grim surroundings, the issue of the determining

"urstone" and the "charter[s] written" therein (McCarthy 243), I argue that Oken's philosophy of nature offers valuable clues to a certain *narrative continuity* that extends from the judge's monologues to the narrator's renderings of the barren landscape traversed by Glanton's warring gang of scalp hunters. Along the lines of recent work on McCarthy that identifies his strong relationship with (the history of) science,[8] then, this interpretation runs counter to both predominantly biocentric or ecopastoral readings and, above all, accounts of *Blood Meridian* that detect an outspokenly critical or even subversive tendency with respect to the evils of nineteenth-century imperialism and ideology in America.[9] In other words, the question of whether or not McCarthy's "new mythic vision presented in *Blood Meridian* offers a postmodern challenge to notions of essentialized ethnic and national identities and borders," as Sara L. Spurgeon has it (85–86), is less emphasized compared to the issues of contemporary philosophical and scientific inquiry.

Now that the critical stakes of the argument have been established, the following reading unfolds in two main steps in order to show how *Blood Meridian* expresses an Okenian philosophy of nature by narrative means. First, Oken's theories will be outlined, interspersed with phraseological parallels between Oken's *Elements* and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, chief among them the conceptual isomorphism between the "protoplasma" (Oken) and the "primal mud" (McCarthy), as well as that of the generative zero in mathematics and the quantification of life in acts of war. Second, another link between Oken and McCarthy will be elaborated, in addition to the "urstone" reference, namely the influence Oken had on Herman Melville, the author of "McCarthy's favorite book" (Woodward, "Venomous"), *Moby-Dick*. This elaboration entails an examination of the ways in which the sea imagery inherited from that novel evokes *Blood Meridian*'s Okenian "physiophilosophy" on an aesthetic level.

The Primal Mud and the Nothing of Nature

McCarthy's novel begins with three epigraphs that portend what is to come in this extraordinarily violent narrative about issues ranging from scalphunting to cosmology. One of these is a quote from Jacob Boehme, a sixteenth-century German mystic, theologian, and philosopher who would become important for nineteenth-century idealists such as Friedrich W. J. Schelling and Oken.[10] As Shane Schimpf explains, Boehme had a "concept of the Ungrund or the Abyss . . . [—]an undifferentiated entity that was defined as the absence of everything. Creation, according to Boehme, arises from the Ungrund dividing from

itself via an internal will to self-understanding" (57). Schimpf, in his *Reader's Guide to Blood Meridian*, further notes that *Blood Meridian*'s subtitle, which is *Or the Evening Redness in the West*, can be interpreted as "a clever reference" to Boehme's first work *Aurora* (1612), the full title of which is: "*Aurora. That is, the Day Spring. Or Dawning of the Day in the Orient or Morning Redness in the Rising of the Sun. That is the Root or Mother of Philosophie, Astrologie, and Theologie from the true Ground. Or A Description of Nature*" (Schimpf 58).

Without trying to reiterate a reading of McCarthy's novel and its central figures as motivated by Boehmian Gnosticism,[11] I nevertheless want to emphasize *Blood Meridian*'s status as an indeed comprehensive or fundamental "*Description of Nature*" by means of narrative, and this, it seems to me, very much in accordance with Oken's ontological, that is to say *mathetic*, conception of an abyssal or void-like grounding of terrestrial forms of life. In his preface to the third edition of his *Elements of Physiophilosophy*, Oken, "the speculative scientist," as René Wellek (663) once described him, states "that all organic beings originate from and consist of [an] infusorial mass, or the protoplasma (*Ur-Schleim*) from whence all larger organisms fashion themselves or are evolved" (Oken iii; xi). The philosophical concept of this protoplasma is, similar to Schelling's "primal ground [*Urgrund*] of existence" or the "indivisible remainder" (44, 29) from his *Freiheitsschrift* (1809), a prime example of what Peirce Mullen has characterized as "Romantic science" (Mullen 382), the idea of an originary structure or archetype from which all forms of life would evolve. Oken goes on to state that "the Organism is none other than a combination of all the Universe's activities within a single individual body" (iv; xii), a proposition that is rephrased later as "the finite thing seeks to become the universe itself" (19; 24).

Already, we are reminded of Glanton's wish to "to contain within him all that he would ever be in the world" (McCarthy 243) and his desire to "drive the remorseless sun on to its final endarkenment" (243)—that is, his twin intentions of containment and destruction, so emblematic of Oken's thought. The reader of *Blood Meridian* might also be reminded of Judge Holden's remark that "every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world" (141). The "combinations" of nature's actions in this remark—focusing on humankind while also accounting for other lifeforms and phenomena, as I will discuss—are somehow immanent to each and every body as well as to the overall entanglement itself. Furthermore, the "complexity of being and witness" gives rise to the concept of a nature of which a part is self-aware, as it extends indefinitely. The interdependency of finite beings in the world according to both Oken and the judge here denotes something different, then, than any

semiotic or linguistic theory according to which meaning is to be generated by the co-constitution of differences. Oken's definition of "Organism" entails an ontological thesis that anticipates his paradoxical statement that finite beings are the results of an originary nothing or contingency that is both slimy and inexistent. The judge reflects this statement in his twisted anthropology, which both debases man and elevates him—or some elements of the human species—as nature's pinnacle: "For whoever makes a shelter of reeds and hides has joined his spirit to the common destiny of creatures and he will subside back into the primal mud with scarcely a cry. But who builds in stone seeks to alter the structure of the universe" (146). Accordingly, the reader of Oken's *Elements* will find similar formulations of the "primal mud" out of which the as yet unaltered "structure of the universe" emerges. It is this "primal mud" from which each finite thing originates, as Oken reasons in his philosophy of nature; a theoretical practice that he also terms "[m]athematics endowed with substance" (3; 4).

But why mathematics? And how can the void be coterminous with the protoplasma? Protoplasma is the Platonic template of which actual phenomena are only retardations and enjoy a merely "fallacious existence [*Trugexistenz*]" (11; 14). These phenomena, therefore, exist in contrast with yet are still immanent to what Oken calls "[t]he Eternal [or] the *nothing* of Nature," which is functionally coterminous with the template (7; 9). In parallel to the judge's preoccupation with the taxonomy of natural and cultural forms, as seen in his quantification of their properties and sketching of their shapes (McCarthy 140), Oken's notion of a *creatio ex nihilo*, of the emergence of something out of nothing, has as its foundation the christening of mathematics as the royal science upon whose structure any philosophical and scientific inference is built. Oken conceptualizes the continuous generation of the necessary out of the contingent—or, in Platonic terms, the persistence of *that which is not* in *that which is*—like this:

> The principle of nature, or of the universe, must be of one and the same kind with the principle of mathematics. For there cannot be two kinds of monades, nor of eternities, nor of certainties. The highest unity of the universe is thus the Eternal. The Eternal is one and the same with the zero of mathematics. The Eternal and zero are only denominations differing in accordance with their respective sciences, but which are essentially one. . . . The Eternal is the *nothing* of Nature. As the whole of mathematics emerges out of zero, so must everything which is a Singular have emerged from the Eternal or the *Nature-Nothing*. (7; 9, second emphasis added and translation modified)[12]

The zero of mathematics, then, on a formal level, is the absence of the phenomena with which that discipline operates, and which is thereby present in each and every instance of a number or the act of numbering. As will also be the case in Cantorian set theory developed at the beginning of the twentieth century, the zero subsists in each and every group of numbers or magnitudes. Every act of counting tacitly recounts the zero as the condition of possibility for the numbers generated. As Grant explains: "Oken's account of zero's generative potential can be rendered in the form of the generation of natural numbers from the empty set" (Grant, *Philosophies* 94). *Before* the count, "[t]he empty set Ø, on its own, contains nothing; wrap a set around it, however {Ø}, and this second set allows the empty set to 'emerge out of itself as number,' since the set containing the empty set contains thereby one member {Ø} = 1. An infinite number of sets can be added in like fashion" (94). In much the same way, the genesis of a given plant or animal species is recapitulated in the individual development of a given proponent of that species. Put differently, in Oken's physiophilosophy there is a consistent parallelism between the formal or abstract, on the one hand, and the real or concrete, on the other. The importance of the mathematical zero for ontology is constitutive of the necessity of natural nothingness—the "Nature-Nothing"—for biology, and vice versa. The recapitulation of the zero in each number, or (in the language of axiomatic set theory) of the empty set in each set of numbers, in this sense correlates with the repetition in each human being of the slimy ascendancy of humankind's entire species.[13]

Oken understands the incipient discipline of modern biology as premised on the principles of a mathematized ontology, in which the concept of the zero, or the "*nothing* of Nature," somehow lives on (or, in literary terms, *is cited*) in each and every occurrence of a phenomenon or form of life.[14] In biological terms, "*ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny*" (Grant, *Philosophies* 129). Although this phrase was coined by Ernst Haeckel in the second half of the nineteenth century, the concept has a long history that was shaped considerably by the work of Oken and his fellow *Naturphilosophen* (Peden). Put differently, the "'biogenetic' or 'Meckel-Serres law'" (Grant, *Philosophies* 120), as it is also called, is the result of a general understanding in the circles that practiced Romantic science, starting at least as early as 1793.[15]

It should be noted that the account of recapitulation in the *Elements* has at least two directions, due to its structurally reciprocating polarities of "mathematics" and "substance," in the words of Oken. The parallelism exists, on the one hand, between these polarities and their individual developments and, on the other, between the developments of single organisms with respect to the evolution of their phyla (animals) and divisions (plants). In addition to this, however,

is the principle dictated by "the highest unity of the universe," namely that all phenomena are generally related in the sense that they are finite expressions of an infinite process. They are the ornamental retardations of the formless yet generative zero, the "Nature-Nothing." In other words, Okenian recapitulation works both vertically and horizontally, on a formal as well as on a real level, *and* it must allow for diagonal, that is to say, transitional relationships across the ceaseless continuum of nature.[16]

Regarding *Blood Meridian*'s clay issue—that is, whether or not humankind is subordinated to nature, whether or not it is part of it in the first place—Oken is quick to affirm that "nature is antecedent to the human spirit" (2; 2). Yet, while nature is ontologically prior to mankind, the latter is nevertheless part and parcel of the former, as can be concluded from the identity of the respective "principle[s] of nature, or of the universe" and those of mathematics (7; 9). "On Oken's evidence, then, number is inseparable from animal precisely because *animals are the numbers of nature*" (Grant, "Being" 315). In turn, numbers are the formalizations or abstractions of singular beings, including animals but also the plants, rocks, and dust that are part of the empirical world. Further, it is possible to conclude nature's ontological priority from Oken's thesis about the combination of universal elements in each and every singular being, the striving of each singularity "to become the universe itself" (Oken 19; 24). According to Oken, this act of attempting to incorporate the whole of the universe, that which exists without into that which lies within, pertains to all singular beings in the world but is best exercised in the manifestation of man. This is because "Man is the summit, the crown of nature's development, and must comprehend everything that has preceded him, even as the fruit includes within itself all the earlier developed parts of the plant. In a word, Man must represent the whole world in miniature" (2; 2). While mankind appears to be the summit of the natural domain, it is grounded upon that which has preceded it and is itself the ground for future generations of forms of life that will supercede it. This is because "the field of the eternal or nature is continuous [in] an unbroken field of transition" (Negarestani 295), given that "[e]volution is nothing but a concatenation of zeros" (296), as Reza Negarestani paraphrases Oken's account.

All of this establishes one of Oken's antinomic propositions: that man is both nature's pinnacle, the creature that "builds in stone [in order] to alter the structure of the universe" (McCarthy 146), and simultaneously nothing other than a manifestation or positing of "the primal mud," of the zero, or nothing of nature. In McCarthy's words, man is indeed "another kind of clay." To repeat Judge Holden's solution to the clay issue: "If war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay" (307). Navigating the larger narrative of *Blood Meridian*, as well

as Oken's account of the partial in- and exclusion of mankind to the material universe that surrounds it, war is holy—*and* the substance of man is coincident with that of other materials. McCarthy's novel depicts again and again how the group of scalp hunters is both embedded in the darkness of the surrounding desertscapes and alien to it. Further, what Grant has called the "antecedence criterion" ("Antecedence" 69) is elaborated narratively in passages that depict the monotonous yet bloody voyage of Glanton's gang. According to this criterion, and the theoretical standpoint it entails, the fact "[t]hat ground may not be substantial does not mean that it cedes priority with respect to the grounded, which is [neither] the totality of the actual" (69). In effect, this understanding of the dynamics of the antecedent and that which succeeds it is conveyed in Oken's own ontological prioritization of the nonhuman grounding of nature vis-à-vis the groundedness of the human spirit.

Consider, for instance, *Blood Meridian*'s elaboration of such a standpoint: "They rode on. They rode like men invested with a purpose whose origins were antecedent to them, like blood legatees of an order both imperative and remote" (McCarthy 152). This is not a teleological purpose, however, but the partial fulfillment or *recapitulation* of the long line of warring individuals that preceded them. The scalp hunters act according to an "order both imperative and remote"—that is, both unconditional and nonrecoverable, because they cannot fully grasp *what it is* that gives rise to their existence in the first place. They could never exhaustively grasp this grounding condition, since in that case the process of generation of finite bodies and ideas on the basis of the antecedent *phusis* would cease to be ontologically prior with regard to its products. The eternal and the Nature-Nothing would consequently switch places with the ephemeral and the singular within nature. Conversely, if war is "the ultimate trade" as the judge proclaims, the tradition of its art is what "its ultimate practitioner" (248) must honor. As a band of "ultimate practitioner[s]," then, of which he and Glanton are the leaders, "[t]hey moved like migrants under a drifting star and their track across the land reflected in its faint arcature the movements of the earth itself" (153). These movements of dust and rain, of blood and dirt, are repeated in the motions and deadly activities of the scalp hunters who are consequently one with the "primal mud," the clay of which they are built.

This warring group of murderers is just that: an assembly intended to kill, thereby fulfilling the noblest act performed by the summit of nature, which is man, according to Oken, Judge Holden, and the narrative voice itself (even though the latter is not to be neatly conflated with the author's own). If, as Chris Dacus reasons, there is an "obvious penchant for number symbolism" in McCarthy that "can be interpreted as something like Plato's definition of

time as the moving image of eternity" (11), this can be seen particularly in the sections of the novel that deal with war-like sceneries and the descriptions of related settings. For instance, when the kid joins the army of filibusters under the command of Captain White we read that their "camp was upriver at the edge of the town. A tent patched up from old wagon canvas, a few wikiups made of brush and beyond them a corral in the form of a figure eight likewise made from brush where a few small painted ponies stood sulking in the sun" (McCarthy 36). The passage forebodes the impending and inevitable doom of the filibusters by alluding to the infinite, the divine nature of war. After all, if you turn the number eight on its side it displays the symbol for the eternal (∞).

The divine nature of war reveals the implications of understanding the positing of numbers *out of and within* the primary zero in the formal realm of mathematics and understanding the manifestation of forms, or morphogenesis, *out of and within* the eternally contingent in the realm of physiophilosophy. The formal and real actualization of forms juxtaposes the realm of the infinite zero, which ideally exists, with the realm of finitude, which actually exists. In tandem with the act of positing, then, another act comes to pass, namely that of negating—either of the single being itself or of other finite singularities, other humans, animals or plants. While it is the numbering act of scientific discourse that quantifies the world and exposes the indifference of antecedent nature with regard to its human populace, it is the killing act of war, "the process of destruction [*Tödtungsproceß*]" (Oken 19, 20; 24, 25) that rationalizes or equalizes a life as "another kind of clay"—"the human mind itself being but a fact among others" (McCarthy 245) as the judge states in a later passage of *Blood Meridian*.

Finally, a dual process that Oken variously calls "individualizing" and "universalizing" (19; 24), or "positing and negating" (9; 11), or "presentation" (13; 16) and "retrogression" (13; 15), respectively, makes intelligible the sacred character of the triumvirate of mathematics, philosophy, and war, which is not only echoed in the judge's claims that "War is god", and its art "the truest form of divination," which comprises "[a]ll other trades" of human conduct (McCarthy 249), but also on the last page of the *Elements of Physiophilosophy*. For Oken, "[t]he art of War is the highest, most exalted art; the art of freedom and of right" (523; 665). It combines the characteristics of "all sciences and all arts" (523; 665) in that it repeats the primal act of numbering, the emergent realization of the Nature-Nothing in the struggle of will against will, with each individual will moving toward the retrogression back to the zero. Ontology in Oken's sense, then, is the self-consciousness of the act of positing and negating by philosophical means, whereas the calculus of war is the nearest approximation of the contingency

within which forms of life emerge. Or, as Grant has it: "Philosophy is the *formal* repetition of cosmogony, while war is its *essential* repetition" ("Being" 321).

It is at this point that I turn to Oken's definition of God and the divine. Curiously, this definition is almost exactly reiterated in one of Judge Holden's metaphysically inclined speeches. In one of the many instances that the judge examines the landscape surrounding the band of scalp hunters after they have set up a camp, a remarkable dialogue takes place that is not only emblematic of the judge's philosophy of nature but arguably of the whole novel's underlying presumption vis-à-vis the identity and extensity of natural process. After the judge has been "breaking ore samples with a hammer," thereby adding to his taxonomy of material forms and phenomena in his ledger book—refining, that is, "his ordering up of eons out of the ancient chaos" (McCarthy 116)—his audience of murderers, adventurers and half-wits confronts him by objecting to his reasoning by citing passages from the Bible. Holden remains unaffected and depreciative as usual:

> The judge smiled.
>
> Books lie, he said.
>
> God dont lie.
>
> No, he does not. And these are his words.
>
> He held up a chunk of rock.
>
> He speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things. (116)

His reaction resonates uncannily with Oken's *Naturphilosophie*. After having added his numbers and schemata into his register of plants, animals, and other objects, the judge debates with a man in the audience about a given book's status of veracity and falsehood, and the content of his argument seems nothing other than a paraphrasing of Oken's conception of God and his divine language. When the judge affirms the word-like character of "stones and trees, the bones of things" (116), he means God's words, utterances whose most approximating practice is the art of war. In turn, Oken defines God as the "self-consciousness [and] ceaseless presentation" of the zero (13; 16), the "self-manifestation of the primary act" (13; 16) in which and through which the zero is counted and the slime is molded. The following passage may very well have been the blueprint for Holden's speech in front of his fellow scalp hunters:

> The presentations are, however, manifested or attain only reality through *expression*. The world is therefore the language of God; the creation of the world the speaking of God. . . . This is the created, realized system of

> thought. The thought is only the idea of the world, but speech is the idea actualized. . . . As thought differs from speaking, so does God from the world. Our world consists in our apparent thoughts, namely, the words. The universe is the *language* of God. (13; 16)

Apart from giving philosophical context to the judge's argument, this paragraph, which combines a theodicy, an account of creation, and a theory of language in just a few sentences, also evokes the notion of a genuinely *expressive* character inherent in "presentation." Presentation can be understood as, on the one hand, the actualization of the eternally formless into mortal forms and phenomena, and, on the other, the construction of phenomena from the perspective of singulars, such as human beings. Put differently, while "[w]ords are things," and while "[t]heir authority transcends his ignorance of their meaning" (McCarthy 85) whoever is unable to decipher them, it is still the experiential horizon of each and every human being that defines his or her world—otherwise, again, the ontological priority between product and process would be inverted. In line with the antecedence criterion, which posits a perpetually unequal relationship between the ground and the grounded, between the eternal and the singular, the judge argues, "the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way. For existence has its own order and that no man's mind can compass, that mind itself being but a fact among others" (245).

Oken's theory of language as well as the greater naturephilosophical framework of Romantic science can thus be found in a novel published in 1985. *Blood Meridian* is thereby at odds with the general cultural tendencies of literary postmodernism that tried to unmask scientific and religious master narratives. Instead of criticizing the destructive character of scientific progress and religious regress, *Blood Meridian* evokes a post-Kantian mindset that is itself built on the notion of a fundamental gap, or contingency—a conception of a dark ground whose creator, Jacob Boehme, unknowingly became one of the major sources in McCarthy's writing process.[17] Rather than postulating the relative and arbitrary character of language and its fictional denotation of physical objects such as stones or trees, *Blood Meridian*'s most violent character proclaims the coincidence of spoken words and these objects in a recapitulation of what Oken terms the "primary act" by which singular and finite forms of life come into being.

Yet apart from postmodernism's preoccupation with linguistic and textual matters, broadly conceived, *Blood Meridian* is equally at odds with the straightforwardly biocentric orientation that has been ascribed to it. The question at the heart of the clay issue in the novel—whether war is holy and concomitant

with a commitment to rational and scientific inquiry or whether man is wholly embedded in the irrational fabric of nature like any other animal, rational or not—is treated in a way that affirms both options or none, rather than indicating a choice of the one or the other. Further, and against all appearances, Grant argues,

> [b]iocentrism does not . . . define nature- against languagephilosophy, as we might think, but rather defines the moment beyond which the phenomenological envelope will not extend, precisely because life is thought not in itself, but *for consciousness*. "Biocentrism" marks the point, that is, where a *phenomenology* of nature . . . turns back from nature itself, through "life," and towards the consciousness that life vehiculates. ("Bond" 51)

Unlike *Suttree* (1979), the work that preceded McCarthy's 1985 novel, or perhaps *The Road* (2006), there is no evidence for a phenomenological introspection by means of narrative in *Blood Meridian*. Since "biocentrism and logocentrism . . . both hinge around an essentially phenomenological approach to nature" (57), either must be affirmed with regard to an analysis of the novel or neither used. According to the present argument, the logic behind any subversion of the rational in the name of a nonanthropocentric nature as imagined by vitalist strands of literary ecology runs counter to McCarthy's narrative about the indifference of the deserts and plains toward its nomadic marauders, on the one hand, and the indifference of the judge's practice of a scientific naturalism with regard to the natural and cultural objects he scrutinizes and subsequently destroys, on the other. Neither bio- nor logocentrism seem to be sufficiently equipped to escape the horizon of phenomenal consciousness, the perspective of lived experience. Neither a discourse based on life nor one based on discourse itself enters into the realm of indifference that *Blood Meridian* evokes. In actual fact, the novel depicts a double indifference, which juxtaposes the immanence of living nature and the transcendence of practical reason with the transcendence of death-in-nature and the immanence of theoretical reason. In order to unpack this doubling we could say, in Cormackian diction, that it is precisely because "[m]en are made of the dust of the earth" (McCarthy 297), and because there is "a strange equality" between "spider," "stone," and "blade of grass" (247), that the judge's conception of science as indifferent to its objects of inquiry equals the indifference of nature with respect to mankind. Okenian physiophilosophy is a framework that succinctly explicates this double indifference, mirrored in the entanglement of man and dust, of practical human reason in discursive form, and of living nature in the forms of singular organisms. Recalling Oken's statement that

the zero and the eternal are one, that the empty set and the Nature-Nothing are functionally equivalent, given the identity of the respective "principle[s] of nature, or of the universe" and those of mathematics, then $\emptyset = \infty$. In the same way, the spoken word is on a par with the physical object or, better still, *coincides with it*, according to the philosophy of nature underlying *Blood Meridian*.

The line of reasoning concerning the embeddedness of humanity in its physical environment is recounted for the last time in the epilogue. In these last sentences of the novel's "post-script" we read of "*a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground*" (McCarthy 337), with two groups of wanderers behind him, one of which collects the bones lying on the ground while the other group might consist of cartographers or "surveyors," as Ellis names them (92). The petrified remains probably belong to the dead buffalo that are mentioned toward the end of the novel (91), but possibly also to the men, women, and children who have died in the course of the many massacres that have taken place in the book and in the brutal history of the American West itself. *Pace* Ellis, it is arguably both groups of nameless wanderers who "*cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it there on that prairie*" (McCarthy 337). The italicization of this last passage, its placement in the novel as coda, as well as its almost transhistorical and mystic tone suggest that the epilogue refers to more than simply the cruelties of westward expansion and the political consequences of the very idea of progress. Arguably, the "*progress*" described as "*a validation of sequence and causality*" also figures as an apt delineation of what is so central to the logic of Oken's philosophy of nature: the deductive method of constructing speculative inferences, in which each argumentative sequence is built on the one that preceded it, point by point, "*hole by hole*," very much like the generation of forms in the natural realm, including animal species and plants, all the way to the protoplasma from which each of these phyla and divisions emerged in the first place.[18] Cartography—the measuring of the world—and the collecting of bones (which presupposes the dynamics of what Oken termed the *Tödtungsproceß*) go hand in hand, at least in *Blood Meridian*'s epilogue. As Manuel DeLanda writes in *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (1997), a book that may be seen in the tradition of works such as Oken's *Elements* inasmuch as it mixes historical with philosophical, physical, biological, economic, and linguistic perspectives on world history: "[W]hile bone allowed the complexification of the animal phylum to which we, as vertebrates, belong, it never forgot its mineral origins: it is the living material that most easily petrifies, that

most readily crosses the threshold back into the world of rocks. For that reason, much of the geological record is written with fossil bone" (DeLanda 27).

A German Conceit

There are indeed many organic materials in the novel that are in the transition "back into the world of rocks," the world of raw matter, due to the all-pervasive practice of war. This transitional space—part solid and part slimy—is indeed *the realm of clay*, between the organic and the inorganic, and in the tradition of depicting this space in literature another link between Oken and McCarthy may be established. This connection is *Moby-Dick*, a novel that Richard Woodward noted McCarthy called his "favorite book" (Woodward, "Venomous"); and many scholars have noted the significance of Melville as an influence on McCarthy's work.[19] In her article "Melville, Lorenz Oken, and Biology: Engaging the 'Long Now,'" Jill Barnum shows the connections between the Romantic scientist and his *Ur-Schleim*, on the one hand, and the creator of the literary leviathan, on the other. What is more, she cites historical evidence that while Herman Melville, like his contemporaries Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, "owed a debt to German Romantic thought in general," it was "Oken in particular" that he was interested in (Barnum 44). "He was reading Oken's *Elements of Physiophilosophy* while composing *Moby-Dick*. In 1854 he presented a copy of *The Whale* to John C. Hoadley inscribed with these lines from Oken's *Elements*: 'All life is from the sea; none from the continent. Man also is a child of the warm and shallow parts of the sea in the neighborhood of the land'" (44). As Barnum further shows, apart from the mention of generative protoplasma as "sea," *Moby-Dick* even contains a reference to the early version of the biogenetic law, namely that ontogeny recapitulates the development of the entire species. She writes, "the phenomenon that most securely binds Oken to Melville centers on a discovery claimed by Oken . . . that the cranial bones in the skull were mirror-images of an animal's spinal vertebrae. This discovery thrilled Oken because he had long been searching for a primordial unity in nature that could at the same time account for particularities of individual organisms" (44). In Chapter 80 of Melville's novel, when Ishmael is "[r]eferring to the image of a strung skull necklace, [the narrative voice] declares flat out: 'It is a German conceit, that the vertebræ are absolutely undeveloped skulls' [382], an incontestable endorsement of Oken" (45).[20] Here again, and via Melville, we see the resonance between McCarthy and Oken's foundational, if rudimentary, version of the recapitulation thesis. Perhaps Bathcat's "necklace of human ears" that the narrator

compares to "a string of dried black figs" (McCarthy 87) points specifically to this resonance and is not merely an allusion to the brutal practices of American imperialism in general and the Vietnam War in particular.[21]

In connection with the "German conceit," as the author of *Moby-Dick* called Oken's discovery of the unifying image of natural forms on occasion of the morphological similarities between the skull and the vertebral column, another recent find in the McCarthy archive indicates McCarthy's knowledge of the nineteenth-century theory of recapitulation. McCarthy's unpublished screenplay "Whales and Men," which, according to Stacey Peebles has figured as a philosophical source text of sorts for McCarthy's novelistic outputs,[22] demonstrates that the author does not just know about Oken—as evidenced by his reference to the *Ur-Schleim* in the early manuscripts for *Blood Meridian*—but is even well versed in the main aspects of the biogenetic law, of which Oken was an early theorist. That understanding can be seen in a dialogue between the screenplay's two main characters, John and Guy. John asks if Guy has ever seen a whale fetus, and Guy answers that he's seen photos of them. "Yes," John responds. "You know the theory that ontology recapitulates phylogeny." Guy calls this a "pseudo-theory," but John affirms it, noting that early in the process of development a human fetus has what certainly appear to be "vestigial gills." He adds that a whale fetus "looks alarmingly like a human fetus," with hindfeet, fingers, nostrils, and ears. At the Oceanographic Institute, John looked at one in a vial, and "had an uncanny sense that we were somehow included in the whale's history. That we were what the whale might have been. And that he was what we would never be."[23]

What is peculiar here is not just that the example McCarthy chooses to discuss the recapitulation thesis is the relationship between whales and men, in yet another echo of Melville's reading of Oken, but that he writes "ontology" when it should have been "ontogeny." While there are undoubtedly many different ways to interpret McCarthy's—intentional or unintentional—misspelling, the phrase "ontology recapitulates phylogeny" is a rather ingenious juxtaposition of the linguistic realm and that of organic matter. This is because the theory of recapitulation was not only influential in the life sciences of the nineteenth century but also resulted in the phrase "ontology recapitulates philology"—a motto credited to James Grier Miller by the twentieth-century American philosopher of language Willard V. O. Quine.[24] In light of this analysis, moreover, McCarthy's combination of both traditions that have used the notion of recapitulation as a motif to imagine a generative dynamic between the whole and the part, between systems and their individuals, this combination displays exactly what I earlier described as the entanglement of *bios* and *logos* in the novel.

Thus, while it is as yet unclear whether or not McCarthy was aware of the indebtedness of Melville to Oken when he was writing *Blood Meridian*, it is nevertheless striking how McCarthy's work figures as a literary example of the biological idea of recapitulation in particular, and how *Blood Meridian*'s philosophy of nature appears as a literary expression of Oken's Romantic science.[25] Given the strong link between Melville's and McCarthy's respective works, it should not surprise the reader to find passages that refer back to the (Melvillean) "sea" and its monsters, even when they are, in fact, describing the desert spaces, forests or Mexican towns through which the scalp hunters roam. And indeed, there are a number of occasions in which Melville's literary transformation of Oken's *Ur-Schleim* seems to be the "unconscious" of McCarthy's text, looming in the background, repeated while being transformed itself whenever the word "sea" is used.

For example, when the Glanton gang rides past a cathedral early in their blood-soaked journey, McCarthy describes the building as it is decorated with "the dried scalps of slaughtered indians strung on cords, the long dull hair swinging like the filaments of *certain seaforms* and the dry hides clapping against the stones" (McCarthy 72; emphasis added); a few pages later, there is a "church where old Spanish bells *seagreen with age* hung from a pole between low mud dolmens" (97; emphasis added). When a bear mutilates one of the Delaware Indians that for a time accompany the scalp hunters, "the bear swung with the indian dangling from its mouth like a doll and passed over him in a *sea* of honey-colored hair smeared with blood and a reek of carrion and the rooty smell of the creature itself" (137; emphasis added). Another scene in the desert provides a more focused analogy: "They were riding in pure sand and the horses labored so hugely that the men were obliged to dismount and lead them, toiling up steep eskers where the wind blew the white pumice from the crests *like the spume from sea swells* and the sand was scalloped and fraily shaped and *nothing else was there save random polished bones*" (175; emphasis added), while "adamantine ranges" are "rising *out of nothing like the backs of seabeasts* in a devonian dawn" (187; emphasis added) when the band of murderers is "[passing] through a highland meadow" (187). A more lengthy passage, which also grotesquely combines the sea- and bone-imagery as well as the motif of "the mathematical certainty of death" (McCarthy, *Suttree* 295), is also set in the desert. It describes a still life, or what Guillemin calls "*nature morte*" (92):

> The riders looked off to the north. They rode on. Beyond a shallow rise in cold ash lay the blackened wreckage of a pair of wagons and the nude torsos of the party. The wind had shifted the ashes and *the iron axletrees*

> *marked the shapes of the wagons as keelsons do the bones of ships on the sea's floors*. The bodies had been partly eaten and rooks flew up as the riders approached and a pair of buzzards began to trot off across the sand with their wings outheld like soiled chorines, their boiled-looking heads jerking obscenely." (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 220; emphasis added)

This still life projects the Nature-Nothing that is so central to *Blood Meridian* and, to a certain extent, its older relative *Moby-Dick*, onto the plain floor of dust that is the desert, the most indifferent ecology imaginable. It is not just the body parts of those who once traveled in the wagons that are now broken, but also the vehicles themselves. Given to the decay of that life-threatening ecology, their remains are likened to the "bones of ships on the sea's floors." It is as if not only supposedly living nature is susceptible to the petrifaction of which DeLanda writes, the transit "back into the world of rocks" (27), but *all* that is corporeal in the world eventually strives toward its point of manufacture—even if this goal must remain unattainable, the process of disintegration notwithstanding.

The last and arguably most powerful image that serves to demonstrate the strong link between Melville's version of the *Ur-Schleim* and McCarthy's narrative explication of it is found in the closing paragraph of Chapter 21. At this point, the kid and the expriest have been rescued by Native Americans of the Digueño tribe from certain death in the Californian desert and have reached the Western shore of San Diego. In the evening, while Tobin has "turned off to find them a doctor" (McCarthy 303), the kid wanders toward the beach and watches a horse and its colt there, as "the sun dipped hissing in the swells" (303). Like the dialogue between John and Guy from "Whales and Men," the following passage captures the simultaneous kinship and alterity between humankind and the animal kingdom:

> He rose and turned toward the lights of the town. The tide-pools bright as smelterpots among the dark rocks where the phosphorescent seacrabs clambered back. Passing through the salt grass he looked back. The horse had not moved. A ship's light winked in the swells. The colt stood against the horse with its head down and the horse was watching, out there past men's knowing, where the stars are drowning and whales ferry their vast souls through the black and seamless sea. (304)

In summary, if we consider the references to "the primal mud" and the simultaneously progressive and destructive character of Judge Holden's scientific

theory and practice; the latter's as well as Oken's characterization of war as the "highest act" of humankind; and the possibility of an implicit channeling of Okenian Romanticism through the subtle but explicit references to McCarthy's "favorite book" in *Blood Meridian*'s narrative, it is possible to state that *Blood Meridian* indeed reveals an Okenian philosophy of nature. With regard to the book's "central problem," therefore, McCarthy's narrative rendering of Okenian thought affirms man's substance as "another kind of clay" and reiterates the idea that this species recapitulates the natural history of plant and animal life that preceded it. *Blood Meridian* evokes Oken's idea that the sacred nature of mathematics, of philosophy, and—above all—of war depicts the approximation of *that which is not* in the addition and subtraction of finite beings in the world.

All of this, however, does not mean that the link between Oken's ideas and McCarthy's poetics is a somehow "definite" reading that disproves other predominantly philosophical interpretations of *Blood Meridian*, even if it affirms that physiophilosophy is indeed a helpful framework for any analysis of the novel's underlying philosophy of nature.[26] Nor does the established connection between Oken's, the judge's, and the narrative voice's respective views on the nature of war entail a straightforward endorsement of their politics. Instead, this connection problematizes the assumption that McCarthy's novel is a simple denunciation of the practices of war, American imperialism, and bloodshed in general, and it challenges the standpoint according to which the novel's characterization of humanity as "another kind of clay" is a postmodern rebuttal of the *logos* of rationality. Oken's concept of the Nature-Nothing (*Natur-Nichts*), of the acknowledgement of a generative negativity, or primordial formlessness, at work in both human and nonhuman phenomena and forms of life existent in the worlds of McCarthy's novels, provides a new perspective on the concept of nature construed in the latter. Not only a "historical romance," then, "in which characters move in intertextual regions between fiction and myth," as John Sepich has noted (III), *Blood Meridian* can also be understood as the novelistic expression of a speculative kind of Romanticism that navigates between science and philosophy.

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NOTES

1. The underlinings of the emphasized phrases in Gordon's paper have been changed here into italicizations for the sake of consistency.

2. These notes are to be found in Box 35, Folder 4 of The Cormac McCarthy Papers.

3. All of the Oken citations will include the specific page numbers of the German original *Lehrbuch der Naturphilosophie* (3rd ed. from 1843) and additionally—after the semicolon, that is—those of Alfred Tulk's English translation *Elements of Physiophilosophy*, which is actually based on the 1843 edition, not on the first one. On occasion, Tulk's translation will be modified.

4. This is the title of Tulk's (1847) English translation of Oken's original *Lehrbuch der Naturphilosophie* (1809–11). The present article will refer to *Elements* throughout the text.

It should be noted that Oken coins the word *Ur-Schleim* in his 1805 essay *Von der Zeugung* for the first time and not in his *Elements*.

5. In order to be consistent with the original phrasing in McCarthy's and Oken's texts, I will use the word "man" synonymously with "human." Whenever mentioning humanity without directly elaborating on a quoted passage, I will refer to it as such rather than just including "*man*kind."

6. See, for a representative analysis of McCarthy's work that homes in on the latter's linguistic intricacies, Snyder and Snyder (31, 36).

7. I take this definition of *phusis* from Iain Hamilton Grant's work on what he calls "Platonic physics," and which he traces, above all in Friedrich W. J. Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. See, for instance, Grant, "Chemical" 60–61; *Philosophies* 6, 30–45, 111. What is here mentioned as a physiocentric perspective is not congruent with Klaus-Meyer Abich's version of it, which seems to be leaning too much toward the ethico-vitalist tendencies to be found in biocentrism. For a detailed explanation of Abich's stance, see Vilkka 74.

8. See, above all Wierschem (2013) and Dowd (2013).

9. See, for example, Estes 115; Skibsrud 3, 4; Spurgeon 85.

10. Boehme provided the central epigram that prefigures the plot: "It is not to be thought that the life of darkness is sunk in misery and lost as if in sorrowing. There is no sorrowing. For sorrow is a thing that is swallowed up in death, and death and dying are the very life of the darkness" (Boehme in McCarthy, *Blood* n.p.).

For the close relation between Schelling and Oken, see Ghiselin 291 and Grant, *Philosophies* 12, 45. It should be noted in this regard that Oken dedicates the first edition of the *Elements* in part to Schelling.

11. See, for Gnostic readings of *Blood Meridian*: Daugherty 125 and Mundik 198–219.

12. Tulk translates the phrase "*aus dem Ewigen oder dem Natur-Nichts hervorgegangen*" in the last sentence of this passage as "emerged from the Eternal or nothing of Nature," that is, in the same way as he translates "*Nichts* der Natur" as "*nothing* of Nature" in the sentence before. From the point of view of the present argument, it seems more in accordance with Oken's understanding of the generative zero—namely, that it is *part of* nature, not its negation—to translate literally instead and write "emerged from the Eternal or the *Nature-Nothing*," in keeping with the philosopher's own neologism. It is of course up for discussion, which option is in fact more faithful to what Oken himself intended when writing this passage.

13. Grant has pointed out today's revival of Oken's generative zero in the work Alain Badiou (Grant, "Being" 314). What separates Badiou's from Oken's account, however, is that for Badiou the concept of nature has no real philosophical purchase (318). As he writes in his major work *Being and Event*, which elaborates a new ontology according to the principles and axioms of set theory: "Naturalness is [simply] the intrinsic normality of a situation" (Badiou 128). "Nature," for Badiou, in fact "has no sayable being" (140).

Note also, in terms of the connection between Cantorian set-theory and nineteenth-century forms of biology, Fernando Zalamea's remark that "Cantor himself is [well] situated in terms of a general *organicism* (with considerable and surprising hopes that his *alephs* would help us understand both the living realm and the world around us), where analytic and synthetic considerations relate to one another" (Zalamea 121).

14. Incidentally, this is also the way I read McCarthy's statement that "books are made out of books" (Woodward, "Venomous"), that "[t]he novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written."

15. The definite historical origin of the recapitulation thesis is, of course, debatable. Grant takes the naturalist Carl Friedrich Kielmeyer to be the one to come up with "the first proposal of the Me[c]kel-Serres law"—"[i]n 1793" ("Chemical" 49). For a succinct reiteration of the law's history as conceived by the German *Naturphilosophen*, see Gould 35–47, and Knox Peden's concise article "Alkaline Recapitulation: Haeckel's Hypothesis and the Afterlife of a Concept."

16. Compare with Zalamea's taxonomy of *eidal*, *quiddital*, and *archeal* mathematics, respectively, in his *Synthetic Philosophy of Contemporary Mathematics* (2009): "We will call movements of ascent eidal (from *eidos* [idea]), movements of descent quiddital (from *quidditas* [what there is]), and the search for conceptual variants in the various forms of transit archeal (from *arkhê* [principal])" (174).

17. The novel's concern for one of the chief problems in German philosophy after Kant, namely the rift between the two realms of nature and freedom and the existence thereof, is detectable in the preoccupation of *Blood Meridian* with the dialectical relationship between (nonhuman) fate and (human) agency. Whether or not nature and freedom are to be thought of as irreconcilably separate is one of *the* questions that troubled the likes of Johann G. Fichte, Schelling, and Georg W. F. Hegel (see Grant, "Genetic" 129–30; *Philosophies* 199 on this and related points).

18. Holmes elaborates on the general tendency of the philosophers of nature in German romanticism "to encourage the employment of a priori speculations in attempts to deduce the order of nature from assumed general ideas. The methods employed led to much fanciful and extravagant theorizing which later brought the movement into discredit in the scientific world. In the biological sciences, however, its influence cannot be said to have been wholly bad. It led its votaries to seek for principles of order and rational connection in the manifold phenomena of organic life" (Holmes, "Baer" 8).

19. See, for recent assessments of the connection between Melville and McCarthy: Polasek 82–94 and Link 159, 160.

20. I quote at length the passage where Ishmael tries to describe the skull of the "Sperm Whale" (Melville 381): "But if from the comparative dimensions of the whale's proper brain, you deem it incapable of being adequately charted, then I have another idea for you. If you attentively regard almost any quadruped's spine, you will be struck with the resemblance of its vertebræ to a strung necklace of dwarfed skulls, all bearing rudimental resemblance to the skull proper. It is a German conceit, that the vertebræ are absolutely undeveloped skulls" (382).

21. On Vietnam as a theme in *Blood Meridian*, see, above all, Brewton 129–32. On the motif of the human ear necklace as indicative of the practical perversities of manifest destiny, Spurgeon states: "[I]ndeed the native people to whom those ears belonged are viewed by the

scalphunters more as natural resources than human beings, just another part of an infinitely exploitable landscape" (94). Regarding the practice of collecting human ears in Vietnam in connection to McCarthy's work, see Peter Josyph's recent comparison of passages from Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977) with *Blood Meridian* (Josyph 258).

22. From a private conversation at the 2014 McCarthy conference "Borders and Landscapes" in Sydney, Australia.

23. This passage is cited from the final draft of "Whales and Men" (Box 97, Folder 5), p. 95.

24. See, for instance, John C. Malone's eulogy for Quine (63, 67).

25. In terms of the present article and its argument's partial reliance on McCarthy's allusion to the biogenetic law in his "Whales and Men," it must be conceded that McCarthy might have very well not been thinking of Oken at all when writing the section of dialogue cited above; instead he could have alluded to other philosophers of nature from that period, or even to Haeckel, which is even more likely (since the latter is the best known of all naturalists that conceived of recapitulation in biological terms). However, in light of the many instances where *Blood Meridian*, *Moby-Dick*, and the *Elements of Physiophilosophy* have been shown to resonate in striking ways, the argument holds that it is indeed Oken who serves as the model for McCarthy's understanding of recapitulation thesis.

26. Indeed, the Okenian reading of the present article is to an extent compatible with Nietzsche-inspired approaches of a certain kind; a perspective that has been very popular in the scholarship of *Blood Meridian*. In this regard, Christian J. Emden's recent study *Nietzsche's Naturalism: Philosophy and the Life Sciences in the Nineteenth Century* (2014) is of particular interest, as it demonstrates Nietzsche's commitment to a view that sees human reason and living nature in one continuum (Emden 45). Furthermore, Emden notes, "Oken's publications appear on Nietzsche's reading lists during the 1860s" (46).

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