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OF JUDGE HOLDEN'S HATS; OR, THE PALINDROME
IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *BLOOD MERIDIAN*

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BOOKEND CHAPTERS

After reading *Blood Meridian* several times, two hats and a pile of coins in front of Judge Holden at the bar in Nacogdoches, just after he's verbally destroyed Reverend Green's tent meeting, stopped me with the question of the second hat (8). But an item in *Blood Meridian*'s final chapter can provide an interesting insight into this question, the presence of the Tyrolean collecting coins for his dancing-bear show into his own hat (325). The second hat on the bar in chapter one, the pile of coins, may well be the collection "plate" from Greene's now-collapsed meeting, bookended by the Tyrolean showman's collection. Indeed, such mirror patterns, palindrome patterns, exist in remarkable number in *Blood Meridian*.

By way of method, I ball-point pen numbered a copy of *Blood Meridian*'s last page, the Epilogue at 337, with a zero, until on the novel's earliest page, of epigraphs, I wrote 337. All page-pairs that sum to 337 are exact mirrors (all copies of the novel, Random House, Ecco Press, Modern Library, Vintage Random, have identical pages). McCarthy wrote the novel but did not lay out the printed copy: these mirrors are allowed within two pages of any exact match. I find fifteen items in *Blood Meridian*'s twelve-page first chapter to be mirrors. Consider that:

- ❖ The Leonid meteors (3) are described as the story opens, and that "Stars were falling across the sky myriad and random" on the man's night in Fort Griffin (333).
- ❖ The kid is introduced with the words "See the child. He is pale" (3). Similarly, the judge is described as being "huge and pale and hairless, like an enormous infant." (335) the last time we encounter him. Even the order of the details (child, pale / pale, infant) is reversed to be a correct mirror image.

- ❖ Early, the kid's father "lies in drink" (3), while at the novel's end "Many among the dancers were staggering drunk" (334).
- ❖ The kid's father "quotes from poets whose names are now lost" (3), and in the mirror "a caller" of rhyming cadences "stood to the front and called out the dance" (334-5).
- ❖ The kid's mother died giving birth (3), and the judge refers to the kid as "son" (306, 327), and in these inverse relationships is destruction (333-34).
- ❖ A "kitchenhouse," a free-standing structure (3-4), mirrors another stand-alone shed, the jakes (333), and in both instances the air is cold.
- ❖ The kid is shot twice and is turning (4), and the dancing bear is shot twice as it turns (326) as the bear "twirled strangely" while dancing (324). The kid who "comes down at night like some fairybook beast to fight with the sailors" (4) can also be inversely paired with the dancing "bear in a crinoline" (324), as both are barroom entertainments, the one serious, the other laughable.
- ❖ The shooting of the kid (4) and of the bear (326) also mirror two of the book's main themes: the kid is shot presumably because of his fighting, and the bear shot while dancing, and so this mirror links fighting or war with dance.
- ❖ Twice in the book the kid is looked after in upstairs rooms by women (the tavernkeeper's wife (4), the whore (332)), and the word *cot* only occurs in the novel in these contexts, on these pages.
- ❖ The judge enters Reverend Green's tent and turns the crowd against him, leading to a larger disturbance in the tent (6-7). In the Beehive, just prior to the shooting of the bear, the judge has, too, been in conversation with the men who do the shooting (325).
- ❖ The word *opinion* occurs only twice in the book and is mirrored (6 / 330).
- ❖ The word *childlike* occurs only three times (6 / 332, also 79), and two are mirrors. The judge is described at Reverend Green's tent meeting as "serene and strangely childlike" (6), while at Fort Griffin whores are "childlike and lewd" (332).
- ❖ When the kid comes back to consciousness after their fight, Toadvine asks him, "I said are you quits?" (10), and when the judge first speaks to the man at the Beehive, he asks "Do you believe it's all over, son?" (327).

- ❖ That McCarthy names the Fort Griffin saloon “The Beehive” (316), the establishment (324-33) does have an “enormous whore” for an over-sized queen, and what must be taken as neuter drones and workers in the mixed-up dress of soldiers and whores. Mirrored are the first chapter’s acts of smoking Old Sidney out of his room (12).
- ❖ The judge sits on his horse watching the Nacogdoches hotel burn, then turns to watch the kid (14). In the Beehive, “Watching him across the layered smoke in the yellow light was the judge” (325).

WORKING TOWARD A PALINDROME’S MIDDLE

In addition to reflecting on the book, I also examined word usage based on computer programming a list only of the words that are mirrored in *Blood Meridian*. Certainly, some words are so frequently used that they will show as naturally mirrored, such words as “horse,” or “fired” (as in “fired” a gun), Nevertheless, words less common to *Blood Meridian* than these, such as “autonomous,” “blindly,” “Coyame,” “crooned,” “destination,” “daily,” “galled,” “hammers,” “haunted,” “hindquarters,” “laggards,” “load,” “marionette,” “nicely,” “opinion,” “outsized,” “packhorses,” “palings,” “rapped,” and “recrossed” all occur only two, or at most three, times in the book, and do exist as mirrors, and exist in remarkably similar contexts. For example:

- ❖ When the kid spends the night with the hermit, he is told to bring his saddle inside to prevent it from being eaten by animals because “This is hungry country” (17). On the mirror page we hear “the yammer and yap of the starving wolves” (318), in another phrase embodying hunger.
- ❖ The hermit shows the kid a dried, blackened heart (18). The man shows David Brown’s necklace of dried, blackened ears to the young buffalo hunters (319-20).
- ❖ The hermit (19) and the adolescent buffalo hunters (318) both ask the kid/man for tobacco. In both cases he does not have any to share.
- ❖ The word *meanness* occurs only three times (two uses are on the same page). “You can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man the devil was at his elbow” (19). While talking to the young buffalo hunters the man learns that in

Fort Griffin is “About any kind of meanness you can name” (319). On this same page the man asks the youths “You all like meanness?” (319).

- ❖ The kid tells the cattle drovers he has no outfit (20). He is asked “Where’s ye outfit” by the adolescent buffalo hunters (318).
- ❖ There is discussion of the whores in Bexar when a drover tells the kid “I’ll bet old Lonnie’s done topped ever whore in town.” (21), and there is talk with the young buffalo hunters of Fort Griffin being “full of whores” (319).
- ❖ Cattle drovers talk of drinking in Bexar, saying, “I’ll bet them old boys is in Bexar drinkin they brains out” (21). The man is also asked by the youthful buffalo hunters if he “Like[s] to drink whiskey” (319).
- ❖ The cattle drovers leave a knife, beans and peppers for the kid to find (21). In a similar gesture of hospitality, a buffalo hunter shares his tobacco with the man (316).
- ❖ In this mirror the kid gets water for himself and his mule (22), and finds water for himself and his horse (314).
- ❖ The kid witnesses two processions on this set of mirrored pages: he hears guitars and horns, sees men wearing white night shirts (22), to match a procession led by a piping reed and tambourines with “a hooded man in a white robe” (313-14).
- ❖ In this pairing the kid “waded out into the river like some wholly wretched baptismal candidate” (27), and, while held in jail, “a Spanish priest had come to baptize him and had flung water at him through the bars like a priest casting out spirits” (308).
- ❖ A recruiter negotiates with the kid by promising riches (28-30), which results in the kid signing on with Captain White. Later the jailed kid tempts his jailer with stories of “a horde of gold and silver coins hid in the mountains,” wanting to gain his release from jail (308).
- ❖ Captain White stands “for a measured minute” (32), after which the kid’s time with the Captain begins. When the judge visits the kid in jail, and the judge is finished talking, he looks at his watch and says it is “Time to be going” (307-308). In proper mirrored order, White measures the time at the beginning of his meeting, while the judge measures time at the end of his.
- ❖ Both Captain White (32) and the judge (306) refer to the kid as “son.”

- ❖ Leaving tracks is in this mirror, as a sutler's "lean horse and his lean cart leave no track" (44), and, when the kid and Tobin try hiding from the judge they discuss the leaving of tracks: "You think he cant follow your track? The wind's taking it. It's gone from the slope yonder. Gone? Ever trace" (296).
- ❖ In three occurrences, *palings* forms two mirrors, as "Bone palings ruled the small and dusty purlieus here and death seemed the most prevalent feature of the landscape" (48), which mirrors "Thousands of sheep had perished here," "yellowed bones and carcasses" (287) and "yellowed palings" (288).
- ❖ On mirrored pages, the kid is arrested (69), and Brown is arrested and wakes in a cell (268).
- ❖ The word *outsized* occurs only twice in the book, and its description of the judge (79) mirrors its later use describing a shirt put on the fool (258).
- ❖ In a discussion between Bathcat and Toadvine, Toadvine is "offered to wager as to which Jackson would kill which" (86). Mirrored to this is a portion of the judge's speech that includes his "Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives" (249).
- ❖ "He was naked save for skin boots and a pair of wide Mexican drawers" (110) mirrors McCarthy's "Even with the sun up it was not above freezing and yet they sat their horses half naked, naught but boots and breechclouts" (228).
- ❖ The word *harness* forms a mirror, as "The first cries of birds in the trees along the river and the clink of harness and the snuffle of horses and the gentle sound of their cropping" (104), and "Save for their guns and buckles and a few pieces of metal in the harness of the animals there was nothing about these arrivals to suggest even the discovery of the wheel" (232).
- ❖ The word *destination* occurs only three times. Two create mirrors (112 / 225, also 245). "Letters penned for any destination save here began to skitter and drift away down the canyon" (112-13). In the mirror a dying man, after falling, points "at the height from which he had fallen or to his destination in eternity they did not know. Then he died." In this relationship both the letters and the man go on to open-ended destinations.

- ❖ The kid sits “with his legs crossed mending a strap with an awl” (122), and later sits “tailorwise” (215).
- ❖ Remarkably, a drawing of lots to send men out as scouts during Tobin’s gunpowder story (130-31), mirrors the novel’s lottery of arrows to kill its wounded (205-206).
- ❖ The word *recrossed* occurs twice (139 / 197). Both times it is used in conjunction with *crossed*. In describing sand in the valley floor, “it was crossed and recrossed with the tracks of deer and other animals” (139). The mirror states “The trail followed a river and the river was up and muddy and there were many fords and they crossed and recrossed the river continually” (197).
- ❖ The judge explores “all day,” and records his observations in his journal (140). Questions to him about his journal lead to a campfire discussion of it (141). On mirror pages the judge collects and preserves birds and specimens, and records his findings (198). The judge is also, again, questioned about his journal, and a campfire discussion also ensues (198-99).
- ❖ Glanton “shot [McGill] through the head” (157), and later Holden shoots a man “through the middle of the forehead” (178).
- ❖ On the novel’s middle page Holden’s hat is “a panama hat spliced together from two such lesser hat by such painstaking work that the joinery did scarcely show at all” (169).

HATS AS METAPHOR

At the gang’s return as heroes to Chihuahua City to be paid in gold, that Judge Holden enters Governor Angel Trias’ banquet carrying such a perfectly-spliced hat (169), the judge’s hat is metaphorically the novel, and this is the gang’s—the kid’s—meridian, a highest-status moment. If the novel is a palindrome, this is a central image, and is in some metaphorical relation to Holden’s two hats and money on the Nacogdoches’ bar (8) and to the Tyrolean showman’s hat of coins (325).