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HEGEL, MODERNITY, AND TELOS IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S SOUTHWESTERN NOVELS: AN INQUIRY INTO MCCARTHY'S PHILOSOPHICAL POSITION

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Hegel, Modernity, and Telos in Cormac McCarthy's Southwestern Novels: An Inquiry into McCarthy's Philosophical Position

Chair: Brady A. Harrison

In this study, I examine the first four of Cormac McCarthy's Southwestern or Western novels. I begin with Blood Meridian and continue with the three Border novels: All the Pretty Horses, The Crossing, and Cities of the Plain, often referred to as the Border Trilogy.

McCarthy's erudite and sometimes inflorescent prose obscures attempts to decipher his philosophical viewpoint. I examine this viewpoint herein. In order to proceed with this project, I find value in G.W.F. Hegel's thought, as well as his philosophical architecture and preoccupations.

Following the Introduction, my first Chapter discusses Hegel's thought and our two-fold concern with it here. That is, in McCarthy's Western work we find a query of philosophical Euro-American modernity. In order to illustrate this, I discuss Hegel in relation to the problems of modernity. In addition to this heuristic use of Hegel's thought, I note that McCarthy appears to borrow directly from Hegel's ontological or metaphysical structure as the Border novels progress.

In Chapter 2, I turn to Blood Meridian and its enterprise of ordering. This section consists of a discussion of the enterprise of ordering and its relation to the subject/object problem of modernity and the idea of *telos*, particularly regarding McCarthy's coin imagery and its resemblance to a passage from Hegel. Following this, an examination of Judge Holden as a Hegelian "world-historical individual" ensues, and the Chapter culminates in a discovery of McCarthy's rejection of modern *telos*.

Chapter 3 first examines the Border Trilogy novels as revisions of the *bildungsroman*. This chapter shows the form's relation to Euro-American modernity, and delves into McCarthy's larger interrogation of modernity with his revision of this form. In the second section of Chapter 2, I look again to Hegel as McCarthy's fiction finally posits an alternative to the speculative ontology of modernity in the idea of the embedded tale. In the subsequent Conclusion, the prior points will be combined into a statement of McCarthy's philosophical worldview in these novels, and its relation to philosophical modernity.

Contents

-Introduction-

Beginning with Blood Meridian, Cormac McCarthy's Western novels—consisting of that work and the Border Trilogy (All the Pretty Horses, The Crossing, and Cities of the Plain)—are an intriguing and important body of work in contemporary American fiction. McCarthy's fiction shows him as stylist of the first order. Beyond his gifts as a technician, however, other aspects of the Western novels warrant investigation. While the critical consensus of McCarthy's work has become increasingly mixed with each novel after All the Pretty Horses—culminating in the decidedly lukewarm reviews of No Country for Old Men in 2005[1]—clearly, Blood Meridian and the Border Trilogy continue to merit examination. In this study, I look at these novels, particularly their concern with questions regarding some of the major ideas in Western philosophy in the modern era: the subject/object split, the self-defining subject, and *telos*. In the following, these ideas are referred to as the "speculative ontology of modernity."

As his Border Trilogy reached its finale, McCarthy's philosophical musings become increasingly apparent, and a recognizable position manifested itself. While the academic community has become increasingly familiar with McCarthy after the success of All the Pretty Horses—and the early acceptance at the university level of Blood Meridian—and at least half a dozen full book-length studies have been done on McCarthy's work, there is more yet to do. Heretofore, a comprehensive examination of McCarthy's philosophical position in these novels and its relation to modernity has not appeared. Herein, then, I will discuss some of McCarthy's recurring philosophical quandaries as a step toward disclosing the philosophical world-view present in the Western novels.

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[1] For example, the review aggregating website Metacritic.com gives No Country for Old Men a mean rating of "65" out of 100, noting primarily negative reviews from the "Christian Science Monitor," "Entertainment Weekly," "New Yorker," "New York Times," "Library Times," and "San Francisco Chronicle" ("Metacritic.com").

David Holloway's The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy is, to my mind, the most properly philosophical of the studies of McCarthy's work. In addition, there are many articles on the Western novels that take a line of philosophical inquiry: Vereen Bell, Nick Monk, Dwight Eddins, Dianne C. Luce, Rick Wallach, and others have made important contributions in this regard. The positions taken and arguments made by these scholars are not always in agreement to be sure, although it would seem upon review that the field of "McCarthy studies" is not a viciously adversarial one. Regardless, gaps exist in McCarthy scholarship. Principle among these is the dearth of a compelling isolation of McCarthy's unique philosophical position both as it manifests itself in the Western novels, and more specifically as it relates to modernity.

While the work of the scholars listed above (and others) has been both valuable and often ground-breaking, there has been—other than Holloway's book—no compelling attempt at a definitive interpretation of the philosophical issues McCarthy takes pains to address over and over again in the Western novels. Instead the scholarship consists largely of a series of articles that effectively address a particular aspect of one or more of the novels, and only implicitly are we given a wider reading. So while Monk and Luce mention Hegel, Wallach addresses Derridian *différance*, and Eddins offers a reading of aspects of Schopenhauer's thought in Blood Meridian, an important project remains to be attended; the isolation of the philosophical concerns present in the Western novels and their development as McCarthy's oeuvre has progressed. Such will be my task. What follows will—to a large extent—build on the work of other scholars, and should be read as an expansion of some common threads in McCarthy scholarship. Finally, this study offers a reading of the philosophical position taken in McCarthy's Western novels.

In order to isolate this position and to engage the speculative ontology of modernity, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's philosophy will figure prominently in the following. As

Charles Taylor argues, Hegel's questions concerning modernity are still vital today. Two particularly important such questions are: What has been the effect of the Enlightenment? Are we better off as we have moved from *mythos* to *logos?* A further inquiry which will prove deeply apropos, although not one posed by Hegel is: What is the nature of *telos* and teleological rhetoric in modernity? Not only are these questions still relevant to the contemporary social and cultural philosophy debate, but more specifically to this study, McCarthy's fiction deeply engages them as well.

We might fruitfully call these the persistent questions of Euro-American modernity. Under this rubric there are, no doubt, many issues that will not be addressed in this paper and which are not central in McCarthy's Western novels. McCarthy's work, however, clearly concerns itself with the implications of philosophical modernity. These implications deeply affected Hegel's thought as well, and as a result a discussion of Hegel's philosophy will assist us in identifying McCarthy's engagement with philosophical modernity (as opposed to modern life or modernism). In addition, we shall also see the influence of Hegel's philosophy itself in McCarthy's fiction. Thus Hegel's work offers two interpretive strategies that will assist us with McCarthy's Border novels; the first heuristic, and the second discloses McCarthy's obvious assumption of certain Hegelian ideas while rejecting others.

Hegel's diagnosis of the deep problems of philosophical modernity will prove of immense value in identifying similar concerns in McCarthy's fiction. In addition, I will also note what appears to be the influence of portions of Hegel's ontology or system on the last two novels of the Border Trilogy; The Crossing, and Cities of the Plain. As opposed to modernity, McCarthy offers an alternate approach to life and meaning which he presents in these novels, and which borrows directly from Hegel's mechanics and sense of ontological movement. Hegel's

cosmology and its progressive optimism are of course completely rejected in McCarthy's Western novels, as we shall see below.

> Concerning the concepts of the "modern" and "modernity," David Ray Griffin writes:
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> Whereas the word *modern* was almost always used until quite recently as a word of praise and as a synonym for *contemporary*, a growing sense is now evidenced that we can and should leave modernity behind—in fact we must if we are to avoid destroying ourselves and most of the life on the planet [. . .]. *Modernity*, rather than being regarded as the norm for human society which all history has been aiming and into which societies should be ushered—forcibly if necessary—is instead increasingly seen as an aberration. (Griffin xxi; Gier)

In this study I will use the terms "modern" and "modernity" in Griffin's sense. I believe we make an error if we see McCarthy's work as strictly anti-modern in the way that Nick Monk does in "'An Impulse to Action, an Undefined Want': Modernity, Flight, and Crisis in the Border Trilogy and Blood Meridian." My approach to McCarthy's Western novels will examine his querying of the speculative ontological grounding of modernity, rather a total rejection of it. This grounding deeply relies upon a teleological world view. Griffin illustrates this teleological worldview when he writes "*Modernity*, rather than being regarded as the norm for human society which all history has been aiming" (xxi). Such an idea of modern *telos* will figure prominently in this study. History aiming itself toward perfection is an idea that manifests itself in much, if not all, positive Enlightenment (i.e. modern) thought. Hegel's philosophy of history plainly but eloquently evinces this conception of *telos*. So while Hegel sought to re-think Enlightenment in order to rid it of its destructive and negative aspects, he held deeply to a teleological model.

Indeed Hegel formulated *telos* in a powerful and previously unconsidered way, and this formulation is an overwhelming aspect of his legacy.

At the base of many arguments against modernity is the conception of its foundation upon a particular group of assumptions about the world, about history, and about teleology. I shall examine this in much more depth in Chapters 1 and 2, but a quick glance will be useful here. In the diremption of humankind from its situated, placed-ness that followed in the wake of thinkers like Descartes and Francis Bacon, a new order of things was established. By placed-ness or situated-ness, I mean a deep sense of humanity's place in the world—or relation to the divine—that defined pre-modernity. Nicholas Gier refers to such a diremption as "a movement from *mythos* to *logos*" (40). This philosophical sea-change can be noted in the separation of mind and body, an increasing skepticism concerning religion, the flowering of scientific enquiry: in short the intellectual revolutions of the Renaissance. All of these developments contributed to human-centered, secular, scientific, and progressive philosophical picture of the world. This is the dawn of European modernity,[2] and along with its many benefits came an increasing sense of alienation and emptiness.

Beyond this spiritual loss of place, another unforeseen consequence of modernity became apparent. The destructive power of what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer called "instrumental reason" in Dialectic of Enlightenment showcases this consequence. Instrumental reason may be defined as the objectification of modernity, i.e. the transformation of the philosophical perception of the world from that which defined and controlled us into something

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[2] Although as Gier writes, "Furthermore, modernism [here Gier refers to what we are calling *modernity*, not modernism in the arts] is not something new and recent and pre-modernism something old and ancient. Modernism has been described as a movement from *mythos* to *logos*, and this replacement of myth by logic has been going on for at least 2,500 years. Almost simultaneously in India, China, and Greece, the strict separation of fact and value was proposed" (40). This is an important point, and one which must be kept in mind. For the purposes of this paper, however, we refer to the modernity beginning in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance.

else. The world becomes that which we can and must control, and indeed we define it in relation to ourselves, very much in opposition to the pre-modern idea of defining ourselves in our relationship to the divine or the world. Global imperialism, modern weaponry and warfare, and environmental degradation have been seen as exemplars this re-definition of humanity and its relation to the world.

The philosophical structure required to support modernity is a teleological ontology. The philosophical world picture of modernity is one of progress, indeed of progressivism. The natural "way of things" was thought to be a historical flow toward perfection in human society. Thus, the speculative ontological groundwork for modernity was (and perhaps still is) the notion of a movement toward betterment, both of the self, and of society. This desacrilized, scientific, teleological picture of the metaphysical workings of the world, and of history, constitutes the hermeneutic of modernity. This hermeneutic has one glaring ethical gap, however. Simply put, it can act as an excuse for any sort of atrocity if this atrocity is in service of the movement toward progress and perfection.

I contend that Cormac McCarthy's Western novels are deeply involved in the project of exploring the consequences, both ethical and philosophical, of modernity. McCarthy queries the modern speculative ontology. I am aware of the possibility overstating my case here, so I note that McCarthy's work does not finally reject entirely the metaphysical model of modernity; instead he shows its consequences and *aporias*. As David Holloway argues, McCarthy takes these problems of modernity as factual, or ontologically descriptive. Holloway writes,

> Taken together, as we shall see, McCarthy's cycle of mature western novels advances a thoroughly elastic understanding of the possibilities and limitations of narrative, an

understanding that remains fluid and *potentially* dialectical to the last, in its reluctance to abandon either of these positions in favor of the other.

But it is also an understanding that seems unable to develop any new or third position from which these contradictions might indeed be synthesized and overcome. A further aim in the rest of this chapter will be to see whether a Marxian account of McCarthy's later fiction can then accomplish what the novels cannot. (17-18)

With the insight of historicizing, Holloway argues, the problems McCarthy addresses can be seen as problems of the epoch, not of a trans-historical condition. Such an analysis serves as a keystone in Holloway's Marxian analysis of McCarthy. I find Holloway's isolation of important aspects of McCarthy's philosophical position to be excellent. However, for Holloway, this discussion is only a first step in his Marxian reading of McCarthy's work. Holloway sees the problems of modernity through the lens of late capitalism, and in his reading McCarthy is unable to overcome the "inevitable subjectivity" (Blackburn 172) of the hermeneutic of late capitalism. For the purposes of this study, Holloway's isolation of the philosophical problems of modernity in McCarthy's work will take a position of higher importance than his Marxian conclusion.

The structure of this study will be somewhat unusual. Rather than addressing a full chapter to each of the four Western novels under consideration, I shall instead first engage in a brief discussion of Hegel, his milieu, and his thought, and then attend to Blood Meridian in Chapter 2, and the Border Trilogy novels in Chapter 3. The Hegel chapter serves two purposes. First, Hegel's thought deals with many of the same problems that McCarthy addresses in his Western novels. Hegel was both a seminal diagnostician of modernity, and also one of its primary theorists and developers. Much of Hegel's work sets its sights on what he saw as the false dichotomy of humanity over and above the world. His great project was to unite the modern

Enlightenment view of humanity as self-defining with both the world and spirit, in effect retaining self-definition while also situating humanity within a sort of cosmic whole. Interestingly, in doing so, he relied upon and, in fact, powerfully refined the teleological ontology of modernity.

McCarthy's Western work relies largely on the seemingly irresolvable gap between the human (more specifically, the human mind) and the world which Hegel so powerfully discusses in The Phenomenology of Mind. Hegel considered this gap to be one of the primary pitfalls of modernity (although a necessary one). In addition to this heuristic use of Hegel's work, we will find a further application. McCarthy directly engages Hegel's *telos* which, excepting the dialectic, has been considered to be Hegel's major contribution to philosophy. Finally, as well as being concerned with the same questions as Hegel and querying Hegel's philosophy, McCarthy adopts a Hegelian conception of dialectical interrelatedness in his views of history, stories, and human life, as we shall see when we examine the role of the story or tale in the Border Trilogy.

My first chapter will serve to lay a theoretical groundwork for the textual analysis which follows it. In Chapter 1 on Hegel, I will discuss the questions Hegel sought to answer. This section relies heavily on Charles Taylor's Hegel, and Hegel and Modern Society. My primary focus in this chapter will be modernity's severing of humankind from the world, and Hegel's attempts to address it. Following this will be a brief look at Hegel's philosophical system. The mechanism of Hegel's system provides two key concepts regarding McCarthy's work. First, McCarthy deals deeply with the nature of the seeming subject/object split. Second, McCarthy rejects modern *telos*, as it was crystallized by Hegel.

Following the discussion of Hegel, I turn to Blood Meridian. This analysis will turn largely on the words and deeds of Judge Holden[3] and what I call his "enterprise of ordering." The Judge is one of the great evil characters of contemporary fiction, and a source of endless speculation on the part of readers, critics, and scholars. It will be my argument that, as others have noted, the Judge does personify much of what we are calling modernity. He acts with an agenda, unlike the rest of the killers in Blood Meridian (with the possible exception of White's filibustering campaign). The Judge is modernity; he glories in the separation of mankind from the world, in domination, and ultimately in destruction. His enterprise of ordering is a project of codifying, objectifying, and assigning meaning to the world. In Blood Meridian, this project is one of utter violence and annihilation. Of course, Blood Meridian is McCarthy at his most nihilistic and angry, and in the novel no sort of hope or redemption is offered. Only in the Border Trilogy does McCarthy look beyond the "heathen rage" (Cities of the Plain 293) of destruction and finds some kind of meaning.

Beyond an analysis of the Judge, we shall look at Blood Meridian as a whole. McCarthy has written perhaps the great anti-Western, and this fact makes up much of the book's appeal in the university setting. I argue that Blood Meridian's evisceration of the myth of the West guts the teleological ontology of modernity, and exposes its tremendous ethical failure. McCarthy doggedly refuses the reader the chance to valorize some other way of being in the novel, of course. One of Blood Meridian's great strengths is this refusal; the novel instantiates the horror of what it is to be a human in the modern world picture, and does not proffer a solution. This idea will be vital for our examination of the Border Trilogy as well. Clearly, and counter to much critical assessment, a mistake is made if the later novels are read as primarily elegiac.

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[3] In the novel, McCarthy does not capitalize Holden's title; he is "the judge," just as the main character is not the Kid but "the kid." In this study, I will capitalize Judge and Kid for the sake of clarity.

The Judge then, *qua* character, and Blood Meridian's status as a revision or deconstruction of the American Western myth both serve the same literary and philosophical strategy: an engagement with modernity. This strategy allows McCarthy to delve deep into the dark heart of modernity; its *telos*, and its enterprise of ordering. I shall return to Hegel to elucidate the Western myth as one of the great historical examples of the ramifications of the modern teleological ontology, and indeed it will be my claim that McCarthy utilizes the setting of the West primarily for its ability to represent the worst in the teleological world view. The West stands in for America, America stands in for Europe, and Europe stands in for modernity in Blood Meridian. That is, the novel directly addresses the Enlightenment/modern teleological world picture in its setting.[4]

In the final Chapter of this paper, I will examine the Border Trilogy. For the purposes of this study, the Border Trilogy (consisting of All the Pretty Horses, The Crossing, and Cities of the Plain) will be considered as a unit. With this comes the hazard of over-simplification; however I believe this holistic approach to the works is not only defensible, but in fact deeply warranted. All three of the Border novels contain certain *leitmotifs*, some of which are continuations and refinements of issues broached in Blood Meridian, and others appear for the first time. The most obvious recurring theme is that of the young, de-fathered boy or young man engaging in a quest of sorts. In All the Pretty Horses, we have John Grady Cole, and to some extent Rawlins and Jimmy Blevins. The Crossing features the brothers Parham, Billy and Boyd,

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[4] As the quote from David Holloway above indicates, a valid reading may be that McCarthy confuses the problems of modernity with humankind's way of being. In other words, the Western novels offer a worldview that seems to be timeless, rather than of a particular epoch. No doubt this is the existential showing itself in McCarthy's work: a non-historical assumption of the human condition. There is no doubt that to read McCarthy as a Left-leaning historicist is simply wrong. As also noted above, however, I find it more fruitful to tackle McCarthy's work on its own ground than to take Holloway's tack of regarding McCarthy's philosophical positions as stemming solely from his time and place. As a clarification, then, when I write of modernity in this study—and McCarthy's approach to the problems of it— the reader must bear in mind that McCarthy's work portrays these problems as not only realized during the development of modernity, but in some cases resident in the human condition.

and in the concluding novel, Cities of the Plain, John Grady quests again. Both David Holloway and J. Douglas Canfield discuss this questing, and both rightly note that each of the quests fails in the end. These failures are absolutely key, and they further indicate McCarthy's query of modernity. I will typify the Border Trilogy as quest narratives in light of the *bildungsroman.* All the Pretty Horses will serve as the exemplar of this, that is, I shall examine it in particular as a *bildungsroman* which will serve as program piece for the following two novels, The Crossing and Cities of the Plain.

The Western novels (excluding No Country for Old Men, which is not part of this study) are all revisions of the *bildungsroman.* Franco Moretti's study of the form, The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture, develops the idea of the *bildungsroman* as a literary manifestation of the formation of the subject, and as such its flowering occupies a particular era in European history. The *bildungsroman*, then, may be seen to manifest philosophical issues of modernity in two ways. In the first case, it shows the formation of what Charles Taylor calls the "self-defining subject," that is the vision of each human as defining herself rather than being defined by a natural, divine, or social order. This conception was an imperative step in the definitive separation of *mythos* from *logos*, and of the separation between humanity and the world. Second, in a meta-sense, the *bildungsroman* exhibits a clear—and clearly modern—teleology. McCarthy's use of this form, or more correctly his revision of this form, are part of his larger critique of the modern philosophical world view. I will examine these quests, and their failures, thereby formulating a reading of the Border Trilogy novels, and specifically All the Pretty Horses, as revisions of the *bildungsroman.*

In keeping with the discussion of the *bildungsroman*, I shall address performative identity in the Border Trilogy novels. That is, while the so-called "cowboy ethos" may be read by some

as a kind of fatherly tradition in the Western novels, it remains clear that cowboy-ishness presents no answer. Thus, we have the clearly performative cowboy role that the "heroes" of the Border Trilogy participate in. The cowboy ethos in the Border Trilogy has been read by critics as hopelessly macho, conservative, and regressive. While these readings are not at all inaccurate, they often fail to account for the consistent failure of these cowboys. To consider McCarthy a social conservative after a fashion is, no doubt, obvious. This conservatism manifests itself in his focus on the past. In the final analysis, I show that McCarthy rues the loss of connection with the past in his work. He does not, however, valorize this past; in fact Blood Meridian seems to indubitably demonstrate this.

In the second section of Chapter 3, I disclose McCarthy's long delayed alternative to the ontological picture of modernity: the embedded tale and human remembering. In particular, I will examine some passages featuring McCarthy's trademarked *deus ex machina* characters.[5] The purpose of this second section of Chapter 3 will be to locate in McCarthy's response to his own pessimism; that is his proposed alternate understanding of the world which opposes modernity—the embedded tale.

Finally then, after I have looked at McCarthy's Western novels, I will examine the philosophical position posited in them. This may not prove to be entirely revelatory, as we can fairly cast McCarthy as an author of fiction and not necessarily a philosopher. A particular philosophical point of view can be isolated in the Western novels, however. This approach is, roughly, that humanity and the world are forcibly and forever separate. Attempts to bridge this

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[5] As an aside, we may find that some of McCarthy's questions correspond with questions posed by the (primarily) French postmodernists and poststructuralists. To assume, however, that McCarthy directly addresses these thinkers may be over-stepping a bit. The questions dealt with by postmodern philosophers largely stem from earlier philosophical problems, notably the implications of the thought of Descartes and Kant. In my view, it is more accurate to read McCarthy as engaging with modern philosophy rather than with postmodern.

gap will always fail; meaning is never to found in the unknowable thing in itself. Indeed, in the novels in question, human activity plays out as a kind of empty freedom wherein the players believe they can remake the world in their own image, that they can defy history and causation and the ceaseless movement of the universe. Of course, at least in McCarthy's world, they cannot do this. McCarthy sees this *aporia* of modernity, viz. the subject/object split, not as a symptom of flawed thinking, or being, but rather as the ground-state of human existence. Thus his work relies on ontological conflict and the irresolvable split between human and world.

In this, McCarthy follows Kant, and no doubt the sympathy to Schopenhauer's thought which Eddins notes in "Everything a Hunter" can be traced at least in part to this Kantian dead-end between *noumenon* and *phenomenon*. But, if Schopenhauer's pessimistic derivation of Kant is evident in Blood Meridian, it has passed by the end of Cities of the Plain. While McCarthy's pessimism never reforms, an evolving sense of meaning and perhaps even beauty in often tragic existence manifests itself in the Border Trilogy as it goes on. Philosophical *aporias* and the endless horrible mistakes of humanity—both when we take ourselves as godheads and when we are subject to the crushing power of all moments past—are indeed the grounding of McCarthy's fiction. But there seems to be a place for doing good, even if it fails, and even if it will always fail. And for McCarthy death is not the end, instead forgetting the dead is the end. There is movement in McCarthy's philosophical world, but it has nothing to do with perfection or damnation. Movement, but not progress, is the state of things. So while in his fiction, the teleological model is rejected as a philosophical error, this does not imply an ontologically static world. Movement and change does not usher in a better world, only a different one. But McCarthy does advocate a new point of view against the modern hermeneutic, one which valorizes the narrative act.

Perhaps McCarthy's refusal to think of pre-modern existence as Edenic[6] is the keystone of his pessimism, and the source of its effectiveness. While there is no doubt that McCarthy's Western fiction deeply critiques modern teleological thinking and is fascinated by the diremption between humanity and the world, he retains Hegel's sense of conflict as an ontological fact of life. This allows McCarthy to formulate a world view in which the horrors of modernity are accounted for but which does not, at its core, espouse a return to pre-modern being. Instead McCarthy finds value in witnessing, in not forgetting, and in human tradition. Tradition must not be read as restrictive here, that is to say that McCarthy's work certainly does not imply that change should not occur.

Instead, McCarthy's work argues (somewhat weakly, it must be noted) for the strengthening of bonds between humanity and the past, and common stories. To isolate ourselves completely from what came before is to commit a perhaps fatal error in McCarthy's eyes. Like Hegel, and like Martin Heidegger, McCarthy argues that we must be situated in addition to being radically free. We must be situated in human history, and despite the fact that we are always already lost in the world, only with forgetting does true loss occurs. Finally, one of the primary themes of McCarthy's later fiction is the frightening power of a teleological model of metaphysics and human society. McCarthy's most direct and trenchant critique of modernity's speculative ontology rests firmly on his inquiry into and distrust of *telos*.

In opposition to this, McCarthy argues for a narrative or story-based understanding of life and history. While he does not imply that such an understanding will solve the problem of humankind forever separate from the world, he does think that an alternative approach to the world can result in less preventable horror. While we can read this interest in the narrative act as

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[6] As we see in his portrayal of the Natives in Blood Meridian.

a valorization of McCarthy's own life work, and we may find it somewhat lacking, it does exhibit his answer to some of the problems of modernity.

Chapter 1

-Hegel and Modernity-

Hegel inaugurated the discourse of modernity. He introduced the theme – the self-critical reassurance of modernity. He established the rules within which the theme can be varied – the dialectic of enlightenment. By elevating contemporary history to the rank of philosophy, he put the eternal in touch with the transitory, the atemporal with what is actually going on. He thereby transformed the character of philosophy in a way that was hitherto unheard of. -Jurgen Habermas (51)

Hegel's work was both a product of Enlightenment modernity and a deep criticism of it. While his philosophy is resolutely modern in its overall sweep, Hegel also yearned for a situated humankind; a vision not only of the perfection of human society through progress, but also of a unification of humankind with nature and the divine. In short, Hegel longed for a return to a modified understanding of the human being's place in the order of things. In its progressivist aspect, Hegel's thought is a pinnacle of the triumph of reason. In his philosophy, Reason binds all together; humanity, *Geist* (God or Spirit), and nature. This, as Charles Taylor argues, was Hegel's synthesis of both Enlightenment rational modernity and its opposing intellectual reaction, expressive Romanticism. For Hegel, then, Reason and progress would result in a re-unification of man with the divine and social orders of pre-modernity.

In this way, Hegel's philosophy is of great value to our study of Cormac McCarthy's Western novels. Not only did Hegel diagnose modernity—in fact Taylor notes that "Hegel was one of the first to develop a theory of alienation" (Hegel and Modern Society 88)—in a way that will assist us to note the problems that McCarthy's work concerns itself with, but Hegel was also one of modernity's great architects. Might we judge Hegel to have been the first "constructive

postmodernist"[7] then? Regardless, Hegel's thought provides us with much that is useful to the following discussion of McCarthy's Western novels. In the following, we will look at Hegel's thought and milieu, and begin to set the stage for an examination of McCarthy's Border tetralogy, as some have called it.

I. *A Review of Hegel's Milieu and Thought*

In his later years, Hegel was the star of the German Academy and in his time was widely considered to have completed the task of philosophy. He was thought to be (and thought himself to be) the last philosopher. Students flocked to his lectures—much to the chagrin of his contemporary Schopenhauer—and he was, without doubt, the "State philosopher" of Germany. His particular brands of metaphysical optimism and progressivism have marked him to some contemporary scholars as one of the great philosophers of modernity. However, placing Hegel in the history of philosophical modernity is not quite so simple. Hegel's progressive, teleological metaphysics sought, in part, to regain pre-modern unity and human situated-ness. Nonetheless, we must see Hegel's thought as a categorical constituent of Euro-American modernity as well. Even if we do not necessarily accept Ernst Cassirer's claim that "no other philosophical system has exerted such a strong and enduring influence on political life as the metaphysics of Hegel [. . .]. There has hardly been a single great political system that has resisted its influence" (qtd. in Hartman ix), clearly Hegel's ideals reflect and refine much of the project of the early Enlightenment—to wit, modernity.

Regarding Hegel's milieu, Taylor writes,

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[7] Cf. Griffin, (xxi-xxvi).

> Perhaps the most economical way of sketching this climate, or those aspects of it which will most help us in understanding Hegel, is to delineate a central problem, which insistently demanded solution from the thinkers of its time. It concerned the nature of human subjectivity and its relation to the world. It was a problem of uniting two seemingly indispensable images of man, which on one level had deep affinities with each other, and yet could not but appear utterly incompatible. (Hegel 3)

The first of these two images of humankind is the Enlightenment or modern image. Taylor calls this the "self-defining subject." We may think of this self-defining subject as simply the way in which the everyday person conceives of her agency or subjectivity today. That is, the way we define ourselves as free agents in our world, and that at the very base of our image of what it is to live in this world is the notion that we can choose to be who we want to be, rather than having our identity assigned to us. This, then, in Taylor's words, is the "modern notion of the self" (Hegel 3).

The idea of the self-defining subject, also referred to as the modern notion of self, can be seen as stemming from the bifurcation of humanity from its world and from higher orders of being. Taylor notes that, "manipulability of the world confirms the new self-defining identity, as it were: the proper relation of man to meaningful order is to put himself in tune with it; by contrast nothing sets the seal more clearly on the rejection of this vision than successfully treating the world as a object of control"(Hegel 8).[8] So, from the intellectual and religious upheavals of the Renaissance comes this idea of manipulability; the setting above of humanity against the world. And as Taylor shows, this is rooted in the subject/object break of modern philosophy. The basic understanding of the world that resulted was one in which humans can

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[8] Cf. Adorno and Horkheimer's "instrumental reason" in Dialectic of Enlightenment.

make of the world what they wish, and from this comes the realization that we can make of ourselves what we wish. To put a finer point on it, Taylor writes concerning the two images of self, pre-modern and modern, "the essential difference can perhaps be put in this way: the modern subject is self-defining, where on previous views the subject is defined in relation to a cosmic order" (Hegel 6).

Clearly the positive results of such thought evidence themselves. Liberal democracy can largely be traced to this onset of modernity, and the very notion of individual freedom as we now understand it resulted from this philosophical sea-change as well. Negative aspects of modernity, though, have been noted by many. While Hegel was not the first to see the deep alienation and destruction resulting from the modern image of the self—and he has certainly not been the last word on the subject—his insights are important. What became increasingly obvious in Hegel's time—particularly spurred on by German Romanticism—was that the loss of situated-ness in this new image of humanity was a great loss indeed.

While Taylor writes of "cosmic order," we may well see this idea of the individual subject being defined by her place in an order as occurring within social and "natural" orders as well. God's order may have been the highest one, but within that order, other orders existed; orders as the social hierarchy and environmental constraints. With modernity these orders and constraints came to be seen as limitations of the subject's potential. In a way, all of (European) humanity became philosophically "upwardly mobile," in theory if not in practice. But even today some 500 to 600 years after modernity fully set in, the loss of the higher order and our place in it has not only spiritually tormented humanity, but has resulted in the rapacious destruction of modernity.

To return to Hegel, the Romantic movement of 18th century Germany, which opposed negative aspects of modernity, was an expressivist one in Taylor's reading. He writes, "The expression theory breaks with the Enlightenment dichotomy between meaning and being, at least as far as human life is concerned. Human life is both fact and meaningful expression; and its being expression does not reside in a subjective relation of reference to something else; it expresses the idea which it realizes" (Hegel 17). This rethinking or rejection of the modern dichotomy of meaning and being saw itself as a solution to the seeming spiritual emptiness of the Enlightenment self-defining subject. The expressive model was not entirely a rejection of self-definition, however, as the above passage illustrates. Indeed the expressivist Romantic ideal still allowed for agency, and it was not simply a return to pre-modern placed-ness of the human subject. Taylor remarks, "The expressivist anthropology was a response to the mechanistic, atomist, utilitarian picture of human life. If we can think of the Enlightenment anthropology as recommending itself through the sense of freedom, even exhilaration, of self-definition, the reaction to it experienced this picture of man as dry, dead, as destroying life" (Hegel 22). The world of expressivist Romanticism saw the modern worldview as "god-forsaken." In Hegel's view, expressivism lacked any meaningful teleology, or larger understanding of the meaning of things.

Hegel's project, then, was to resolve these two conflicting, and yet imperative, philosophical world views. He began this project in The Phenomenology of Mind, and finished it in what are now called his Logics, The Science of Logic and the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences. Of these three major works, I will deal only with The Phenomenology of

Mind.[9] Before we begin a closer look at what Hegel considered to be his solution to the problem of philosophy in his day, a brief outline of his system might be useful.

In Taylor's formulation, Hegel combined the expressivist view with the Enlightenment view. Very basically, humanity was the expressive vehicle for Spirit or *Geist*. There is an Idea of the world, a *telos* of fulfillment as we unify with *Geist* (Spirit or God). Both humanity and *Geist* itself are "self-positing" in Taylor's words, and both rely upon each other to become complete. *Geist* is not a separate Lord ruling over the cosmos, but it is embodied in all the cosmos, and a kind of World Spirit. *Geist* is most powerfully embodied in humanity, however. This means that while *Geist* is embodied in everything, humans can be said to hold the privileged position at the top of the order of things. This results from Reason, which Hegel saw as the divine attribute. Humans, as the reasoning animal, are endowed with what we may vulgarly refer to as more of *Geist*. Here, Hegel breaks most strongly with expressive Romanticism. Reason is not to be despised, but celebrated. For Hegel, Reason is not a destructive human invention as it was for Expressive Romanticism, but rather the very proof of *Geist*'s existence in the world.

Geist, though, is not whole or perfect in its existence like the traditional monotheistic God. In fact, it relies upon human expression to fulfill it, just as humanity relies on *Geist* to fulfill itself. Hegel saw the breakdown of what was seen to be the perfect expressivist and situated state, the pre-Socratic Greek *polis*, as the basic break between *Geist* and humanity. While he did not see the *polis* as the ultimate fulfillment of human potential—indeed the lack of a place for Enlightenment Reason indicated that the *polis* was expressively perfect but not fulfilled—Hegel did think that *telos* would involve a similar type of society as that of the ancient Greeks. Regardless, since the time of the Greeks—and particularly through the Enlightenment

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[9] A few of Hegel's lesser works will also be discussed, Reason in History foremost among them.

(and thus modernity)—humanity and *Geist*, through what Hegel calls the Idea, are in the process of uniting in fulfilled, expressive unity.

As humanity progresses, and with the development and use of Reason, we express *Geist*. *Geist* is not whole without humanity's expression of Reason; indeed *Geist* requires human expression in order to be fulfilled. This then, in very basic form, was Hegel's resolution of the modern separation of the self-defining subject from her world. Taylor sums up German Romantic expressivism in Herder's (a prime thinker of the movement) thought when he writes, "the ideal [expressive] realization is one which not only conforms to the idea, but is also internally generated; indeed these two requirements are inseparable in that the proper form of a man incorporates the notion of free subjectivity" (Hegel 15). We can see that both humanity and *Geist* are expressive in Hegel's thought, then, but in contrast to Herder, Reason allows for free subjectivity, i.e. the self-defining subject in Hegel's philosophy.

Geist then is a sort of God—Hegel claimed to be a Lutheran, but is often called a pantheist—or Divine, or World, Spirit. This Spirit, however, is not anything like the Catholic Holy Spirit; rather it is way of talking about what Hegel believed to be the Spirit of the universe. *Geist* is holistic, yet dirempted. Taylor notes that Hegel felt humanity had broken away from a holistic existence, a sort of matrix of nature, *Geist*, and man when the Greeks moved from what Taylor calls "supposed expressivist perfection" into thinking subjects, e.g. philosophers. This was the view of Hegel's Romantic predecessors, but Hegel held it as well, and it deeply informed his philosophy of history. Taylor argues that Hegel attempted to build a system wherein a synthesis between oppositions of the necessity of human freedom—which was the reason for this diremption between man and nature—and unity with nature, and *Geist*, can be attained.

This unity is at the top of the spiral of history;[10] it is the great *telos* toward which humankind progresses. *Geist* is constituent of everything including humanity. *Geist* cannot be whole until it achieves this unity, and the only way it can achieve unity is with embodied subjects that use reason, i.e. humanity. Hegel posits that there is an Idea to history (and to everything), and this Idea can only be fulfilled by the use of human reason to attain unity with *Geist* and nature. But human freedom must be preserved because it leads to a unity with *Geist* and to perfection, and the end of history. This process is achieved through stages, epochs, and eras in a dialectical fashion. Hegel's philosophy is fundamentally progressivistic and optimistic then, as every step through the march of history is a step on the way to perfection. This march is a dialectical one. So, each historical movement dialectically overcomes its antecedent, subsumes it, and every previous moment forms a piece of the dialectical whole. As Hegel states, "this implies that the present stage of [history] contains all previous stages within itself" (Phenomenology 95). Such a model applies directly to McCarthy's idea of the narrative, and the embedded tale, as we shall see in Chapter 3.

Taylor refers to Hegel's *Geist* as "a self positing God" (Hegel and Modern Society 37), "who eternally makes the conditions of his own existence" (39). This idea is central to Hegel's philosophy; *Geist* and its Reason are a necessity for Hegel. Taylor writes, "But what is fundamental in Hegel's conception is not the existence of some reality, but rather a requirement, that *Geist* be" (39). The existing world is not contingent then; it is not a world of many possible worlds. Instead the world as it is exists as a positing of *Geist* and is the only possible world.[11] Necessity has created this world; necessity or *Geist* comes before the actually existing world and

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[10] I paraphrase Taylor here.
[11] This shows Hegel's debt to Leibniz. The world is not contingent, it follows from rational deduction. Hegel did allow for contingency in his philosophy but saw contingency as "necessarily" existing.

serves as its deep structure or ontological truth. As noted above, though, *Geist* is not complete; it needs the reasoning animal, i.e. humankind, to rise into expressive unity with nature and *Geist* itself to be completed. This is the metaphysical and ontological model of progress in Hegel's philosophy.

Hegel's idea of the necessity of *Geist* deeply integrates with his idea of history and philosophy's task. Hegel's "owl of Minerva"[12] famously flies only at "night" or "dusk." In order to philosophize, Hegel writes, we must look at history. The actual existing world and its development, to Hegel, disclose ontology. The quote from Habermas at the beginning of this chapter expresses this. But we must not simply look at history and find a progressive model; we must first take *Geist* as a necessity. Reason, which is divine, stems from *Geist*. If we take *Geist* as the first principle of the universe, and *Geist* is good and posits itself with Reason, then history itself must reflect this. As a result, positive historical progress is inevitable. Reason, the divine Reason of *Geist*, guides history toward perfection. We can know this only by looking to history and noting its inevitable progress toward the greater good. Hegel thought this to be the task of philosophy. His owl of Minerva flies only at night, looking back to understand what kind of universe we live in. In Hegel's words, "The sole thought which philosophy brings to the treatment of history is the simple concept of *Reason:* that Reason is the law of the world and that, therefore, in world history, things have come about rationally" (Reason in History 11).

Certainly, the idea of progress was not new in Hegel's time: Hegel himself writes, "historical change, seen abstractly, has long been understood generally as involving a progress toward the better, the more perfect" (Reason in History 68). But his philosophical and teleological model of history contains within a mechanistic tone that exemplifies much of

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[12] The owl of Athena (Minerva in Roman cosmology) has long represented wisdom and, in Hegel's meaning, philosophy.

modernity. While Hegel's conception of history was clearly based on his cosmology and metaphysics, the basic model also served as the impetus of Marx's historical materialism. Marx translated Hegel's philosophy of history, via the Young Hegelian revolt, into what he saw as a deterministic, perhaps even scientific model. While we are not concerned with Marx in this study, we are deeply concerned with Hegel's idea of history and the fine line it walks between a mechanistic fatalism and an expressive freedom. To return briefly to David Griffin, if we see modernity as "being regarded as the norm for human society which all history has been aiming and into which societies should be ushered" (xxi), we must note that the idea of history aiming toward perfection is exactly what Hegel theorizes. Hegel's teleological philosophy of history is a major influence in McCarthy's Western fiction. As addressed below regarding the subject/object break, however, McCarthy simply does not see betterment as occurring: he rejects teleology.

II. *Self-Consciousness, Hegel's Philosophical Architecture, and its Relation to McCarthy's Border Novels*

Hegel attempted to combine freedom and situated-ness, he wanted to retain the gains of Enlightenment (such as social reform and the self-defining subject), but it was imperative for him to do so without reverting to pre-modernism. In short, Hegel wished to unite—or reunite—meaning and being. These questions of meaning and being, of subject and object, of the world and the human are the paramount issues for McCarthy's Western fiction. Over and above McCarthy's concern with these issues, there exists two more specific aspects of Hegel's thought that manifest in McCarthy's later work. As we shall see, not only does Hegel's larger idea of progressive teleological history find itself queried in McCarthy's Western novels, but in fact McCarthy adopts some of the mechanism Hegel conceived of. We find this both in the

ontological conflict of Blood Meridian, and in the treatment of stories, history, and witnessing in The Crossing and Cities of the Plain.

Let us briefly examine some of The Phenomenology of Mind in order to examine Hegel's philosophy of history and its relevance to McCarthy's fiction. The Phenomenology of Mind lays out Hegel's philosophical system in its infancy. The Phenomenology's first movement (Chapters A, B, and C) deals with the dialectical development of consciousness and self-consciousness. In these chapters, Hegel first endeavors to analyze consciousness, he formulates his criticism of Kant's famous ideas of *noumenon* and *phenomenon*, and he addresses the seeming dead-ends of subject/object philosophy. Hegel writes,

> The object, it is true, appears only to be in such wise for consciousness as consciousness knows it. Consciousness does not seem able to get, so to say, behind it *as it is* (emphasis added), not for consciousness, but *in itself* (emphasis added), and consequently seems also unable to test knowledge by it. But just because consciousness has, in general, knowledge of an object, there is already present the distinction that the *inherent nature, what the object is in itself* (emphasis added), is one thing for consciousness, while knowledge [. . .] is another moment. Upon this distinction [. . .] the examination turns. Should both, when thus compared, not correspond, consciousness seems bound to alter its knowledge, in order to make it fit the object. But in the alteration of knowledge, *the object itself also, in point of fact, is altered* [. . .]. (emphasis added) Hence consciousness comes to find that what formerly to it was the essence is not what is *per se*, or what was *per se* was only *per se* for consciousness.[13] (Phenomenology 51)

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[13] I have italicized reference Hegel makes to Kant. Although he does not mention Kant's name, Hegel clearly responds to Kant's idea of "the thing in itself" here.

Hegel tries to show that the separation between world and consciousness, which Kant formulated, is a false one. Consciousness defines itself by what it is not, this is true, but consciousness and what it is not are not *aporias* to Hegel, but rather part of a unified whole. While Hegel thought that this diremption between *noumenon* and *phenomenon* was a false one, he also conceived of it as necessary, as we shall see below.

Such a diremption is at the heart of McCarthy's Western novels. In the body of the present work, we shall see that while McCarthy does not accept Hegel's holistic vision—indeed the separation of world and human, which is the core of the *noumenon* and *phenomenon* conception, is taken as an ontological ground state by McCarthy—his formulation of the problem is strikingly similar. The value for this study in Hegel's attempt to do away with this problem, however, lies not in his actual solution but in his awareness of the problems at hand; problems with which Kant did not conclusively engage.[14]

The second chapter of The Phenomenology of Mind devotes itself to self-consciousness. Here, Hegel begins to elaborate his philosophy of history. While not saying as much, Hegel traces the development of self-consciousness in the form of the self-defining subject of modernity, and with this analysis he delves deeply into the negative or destructive aspects of Enlightenment modernity. The strongest Hegelian influence on McCarthy's fiction evidences itself in this strain of Hegel's thought. In order to define itself, self-consciousness must, as we saw with consciousness, do so against something which it is not. While in the case of consciousness, Hegel identifies the world or objects as this other, in self-consciousness both the world and other consciousnesses become the criterion against which we realize ourselves. The

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[14] We must note that portraying this issue as between Kant and Hegel alone is certainly too simple. Kant was not the first philosopher to concern himself with the thing in itself against conscious apperception, but his influence on these questions and upon Hegel's thought is redoubtable.

fruition of self-consciousness, then, comes to be during the Enlightenment, during modernity. This epoch ushers in what we might call the human mania for control, i.e. the attempt to claim agency via the domination or destruction of that which is not ourselves. Hegel writes,

> Consciousness of an other, of an object in general, is in indeed itself necessarily self-consciousness, reflected into self, consciousness of itself in otherness. The necessary advance from the previous attitudes of consciousness, which found their true content to be a thing, something other than themselves, brings to light this very fact that not merely is consciousness of a thing only possible for a self-consciousness, but that this self-consciousness alone is the truth of those attitudes. But it is only for us [who trace this process] that this truth is actually present; it is not yet so for the consciousness immersed in the experience. (Phenomenology 96)

So self-consciousness is necessary for consciousness, but the actual *awareness* of self-consciousness is not necessarily present in it. The merely conscious mind may be seen as not aware its own self-consciousness despite the fact that it does posses self-consciousness.

Hegel typifies the first stage of self-consciousness with an initially rather obscure dialectic. Self-consciousness realizes itself through the process of identifying that which it is not, i.e. an object or the world. This movement is directed away from what we might call "cosmic unity." That is, it separates out not only the self-consciousness from the other, and thus defines what it is to be self-conscious, but self-consciousness then begins to see the world as series of separate things, things with independence like the independence that self-consciousness possesses. This conception, however, collapses on itself because self-consciousness realizes that unity exists as a unity of all these independent things, all of which define themselves as

independent things by other independent things which they are not. Hegel calls this "the unity of what is distinguished" (Phenomenology 99). In Hegel's words,

> If we distinguish more exactly the moments contained here, we see that we have as first moment the subsistence of the independent forms, or the suppression of what distinction inherently involves, viz. that the forms have no being *per se*, and no subsistence. The second moment, however, is the subjection of that subsistence to the infinitude of distinction [. . .]. What is consumed is the essential reality; the Individuality, which preserves itself at the expense of the universal and gives itself the feeling of its unity *within itself* (emphasis added), precisely thereby cancels its contrast with the other, by means of which it exists for itself. The unity with self, which it gives itself, is just the fluent continuity of differences, or universal dissolution. (Phenomenology 101)

This is a difficult passage, not only in its wording but in its concepts. However, this passage somewhat reformulated becomes one of Hegel's most famous passages in the "master/slave" or "lord/bondsman" model. What self-consciousness seeks, its "Desire" in Hegel's words, is to be whole within itself, and in order to do this it must give up "the universal" by dividing up the world. But in doing so, self-consciousness finds another unity, "the infinitude of distinction." So then, the rejection of unity which Hegel claims is self-consciousness's program contains within it dialectically its opposition. Like the master, self-consciousness cannot achieve the freedom it so desires through the subjugation of the other or the world.[15]

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[15] In "The Stonemason," Cormac McCarthy makes mention of master/slave dialectic. In the passage in question, the master/slave dialectic is used by McCarthy as it pertains to work, rather than in Hegel's sense. In Hegel's formulation, the master/slave dialectic is used to flesh out the thought process of the passage quoted above. It shows dependence as being contained within the self-conscious desire for independence, while Ben Telfair in "The Stonemason" sees this dialectic in a different fashion. So, when McCarthy writes, "Reading Marx in my last year of school only sent me to Hegel and there I found his paradigm of servant and master in which the master comes to suffer the inner impoverishment of the idle while the servant, by his labors grows daily in skill and wisdom" (31), we must see this interpretation as a gloss rather than an accurate interpretation of Hegel's concept. While the

Let us examine what Hegel sees as one of self-consciousness's primary problems. Hegel writes, "Self-consciousness is thus only assured of itself through sublating this other, which is presented to self-consciousness as an independent life; self-consciousness is *Desire*" (Hegel Phenomenology 102). As discussed above, this is a stage in a dialectic process, not an end of any sort. Indeed,

> Desire and the certainty of its self obtained in the gratification of desire, are conditioned by the object; for the certainty exists through cancelling this; in order that this cancelling may be effected, there must be this other. Self-consciousness *is thus unable by its negative relation to the object to abolish it; because of that relation it rather produces it again, as well as the desire.* (emphasis added) (Phenomenology 103)

In Hegel's thought the "cancelling of the other" is part of a process; a progressive process. Hegel develops this idea further as "Life" playing out in such a process of ever renewing desires. But rather than echoing Schopenhauer's conclusion of ceaseless striving and endless desire, Hegel reads each overcoming of the other as a subsumption rather than a consumption. So, each overcoming enriches. In a way, "Life" is a flux or process that enriches itself with every subsumption. The same architecture will form the structure of Hegel's philosophy of history. Regardless, McCarthy addresses only the first step of the dialectic, *before* the subsumption or consumption in Blood Meridian. In the Border novels, this idea of subsumption becomes a fundament of the embedded tale.

Concerning Hegel's dialectic subsumption, Taylor writes,

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master/slave dialectic can be read in this way, in the context of The Phenomenology of Mind the dialectic is metaphorical; it indicates the self-conscious's desire to control, and what this control reveals about the nature of self-consciousness. We needn't see Ben Telfair's perhaps simplistic reading of the master/slave dialectic as McCarthy's only understanding of the concept, however.

> For Hegel the drive for integrity is evident even in lower forms of life in the fact that they seek out what they need from the external world, and devour it, that is, the actually incorporate it into themselves. In doing so they "cancel its otherness." This process is essential (causally) to their continued existence. But Hegel assimilates this casual necessity to the *ontological predicament of all subjects who to be must cancel the otherness of an external embodiment.* And once we accept total integrity as the goal, then this assimilation is right, because I cannot be said to be really at home in my bodily existence if this in turn is dependent on foreign reality. Thus desire reflects not just the factual need for an object, but also the fundamental drive for integrity. (emphasis added) (Hegel 150-151)

As we shall see, McCarthy accepts this "ontological predicament" as factual. He does not, however, accept any sense of the "right-ness" Taylor mentions. McCarthy denies teleological integrity. Total integrity is not an option in his fiction, in fact the teleology of what Taylor calls integrity and what Hegel calls unity is precisely what McCarthy troubles. McCarthy's Western novels are preoccupied with the deep ethical failure that seems embedded in the teleological view of this integrity or unity, a topic we will examine at length in Chapter 3. McCarthy's work exhibits an ontological process that is striking familiar to Hegel's in the Western novels, however. In short, McCarthy sees the world as working in the way Hegel defines it, i.e. with conflict as its ontological basis, but with no Reason, no *telos*, no *Geist*.

Hegelian ideas present themselves most obviously in The Crossing and Cities of the Plain. In these two novels, McCarthy seems to begin to answer his own nihilistic critique of progress and the human condition as posed in Blood Meridian. The story, or narrative act, supplies and perhaps creates meaning and value in life. How it does so, though, is strikingly

Hegelian in its formulation. The *corridos* of The Crossing, as well as the many stories within stories related by anchorites in the novel, indicate McCarthy's Hegelian influence. Ideas of subsumption and dialectical interrelatedness appear again and again in regards to the narrative act in these novels. McCarthy presses his notion of Hegelian movement from the purely historical—and entirely negative—in Blood Meridian to one that offers some meaning and value to human life via the narrative act. In the end, McCarthy's Western work valorizes the story or narrative as finally the most meaningful. It does so, however, through a Hegelian lens. The concepts discussed above, the process of Hegel's dialectic thought, are directly adopted and adapted by McCarthy regarding his formulation of the power of stories and the narrative act.

In evidence of this, Dianne C. Luce writes, "McCarthy was thinking about the role of narrative in our lives and had done some reading in Hegel that seems to have influenced his ideas by at least Fall 1991" (202). I will argue that passages strongly resembling Hegel's analysis of self-consciousness in The Phenomenology of Mind seem to have appeared in McCarthy's work at least by the time of Blood Meridian. Indeed, while it is far too speculative to say that Hegel's philosophy directly informed Blood Meridian, Judge Holden seems to speak in terms of Hegel, if not espousing his philosophy *per se*. I will explore three aspects of this Hegelian discourse in the next chapter. First, the Judge seems to echo in word and in deed Hegel's discussion of self-consciousness. Second, the Judge's teleological bent appears to be, as Monk notes, Hegelian. In fact, I argue that Judge Holden can be seen not only as an "evil Archon" (Wallach), but as an entirely negative Hegelian "world historical figure." Finally, in my analysis, the deep vexing of the "Western mythos" present in Blood Meridian, meaning the novel as a whole, along with its mix of the modern subject that seeks to be "complete at every hour" (McCarthy Blood Meridian

243) and the ethical excuse offered by modern teleology are, if not directly influenced by Hegel's thought, certainly running along the same tracks.

In conclusion, Hegel's thought presents three templates that may be fruitfully applied to McCarthy's Western fiction. First, Hegel's hugely influential philosophy of history is omnipresent in McCarthy's Western fiction. The very modern ideas of progress toward perfection, both on a societal and on a personal level are deeply examined by McCarthy. Much like Hegel's critique of the Romantics, however, certain aspects of the model are accepted in McCarthy's fiction. McCarthy, then, accepts Hegel's diagnosis but not his *telos*. In the second case, the break between human and world/the divine, i.e. the subject/object paradigm is one of McCarthy's great fascinations, and Hegel is one of the primary philosophers to deal with this problem, as per Taylor. Finally, as Dianne Luce argues in "The World as Tale in The Crossing," McCarthy adopts a distinctly Hegelian model for his ideas of narrative and witnessing in the final two novels of the Border Trilogy.

Chapter 2

-Blood Meridian: Order, Modernity and Violence-

America is therefore the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us the burden of the World's History shall reveal itself [. . .]. It is a land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical lumber-room of old Europe. – G.W.F. Hegel (The Philosophy of History 86)

I. *Introduction*

Little doubt exists that Blood Meridian is McCarthy's most important work. While All the Pretty Horses received wide-spread acclaim and won McCarthy the National Book Award, and Suttree can rightly be seen as both the pinnacle of his story-telling and the most subtle of his novels, Blood Meridian has had the greatest impact. In it, McCarthy forged a strikingly original and horrifying vision.[16] Savaging the American myth of Westward expansion and the heroic outlaw, Blood Meridian drags the reader into a world of meaningless and horrible violence, hallucinatory prose, and sheer negation.

Much scholarly work has been done on Blood Meridian, but the novel allows, both in its style and in its content, for much future work. The work's utter strangeness, its alienness, assaults the reader and calls for some sort of interpretation. In this chapter, I shall have occasion to refer to other scholars, all of whom have done important work. Vereen Bell published the first book length study of McCarthy's work covering the Southern fiction and Blood Meridian, and his shadow looms large over the ensuing scholarship. Among other scholars, Patrick W. Shaw, Barclay Owens, Robert L. Jarrett, Rick Wallach, Leo Daugherty, Dianne Luce, Dwight Eddins, Steven Shaviro and others contributes notable pieces.

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[16] McCarthy's earlier novel Outer Dark does have some notable similarities to Blood Meridian however.

Most of these scholars see Blood Meridian as a rebuke of European/American imperialism, a debunking of the myth of the American West. Neil Campbell, in his "'Beyond Reckoning': Cormac McCarthy's Version of the West in Blood Meridian or Evening Redness in the West" makes an excellent case for Blood Meridian as a revision of Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier hypothesis"[17] (cf. G. R. Taylor). This is the idea of the American West as a proving ground which, due to the struggles that its conquering engenders, strengthened the stock and character of the American people. Campbell writes that "Judge Holden [. . .] sees the West as a testing-ground for himself" (57), as does the Kid when the narrative voice of Blood Meridian comments: "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" (Blood Meridian 4-5). Campbell argues that McCarthy's larger project is to "strip the urge West of all its mythic glamour" (57), and he sees the Judge as "a vision of America *in extremis*" (61). Blood Meridian then, in Campbell's reading, shows "the true brutality behind the myths of American regeneration in the West" (62) and in writing it McCarthy revises Western mythos.

Campbell addresses an important point. McCarthy takes on the myths of the West, and particularly F.J. Turner's ideas and their acceptance among Americans. Some critics argue as to the meaning of "revisionism" (cf. Pitts) and claim that McCarthy's project is similar to but not the same as a revisionist one. But regardless of the choice of words one uses, one cannot deny that Blood Meridian serves to illustrate the carnage that such myths have refused to acknowledge. With its archetypes and characters that seemingly reflect genre Western films, Blood Meridian takes on this foundational, perhaps definitive, myth of the United States of America.

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[17] This is also known as the Frontier Thesis, Turner Thesis, etc.

And yet, as critics more concerned with McCarthy's philosophical questions point out, this upbraiding of Turner and the myths of the West serve a larger line of inquiry. While both Bell and Campbell argue that the West is seen as a proving ground in Blood Meridian, they disagree on the predominant philosophical themes of the novel. To make the case for Blood Meridian as first and foremost a critique of American or European imperialism or capitalism presents difficulties. Indeed McCarthy's fiction manifests a "concern with the most vexing of metaphysical questions" (Pilkington 312), and this concern is not primarily with hegemony. While Campbell, Monk and Holloway all make excellent points and find ample evidence that McCarthy is taking on American mythology and imperialism (and by proxy the European versions of the same), all of them admit tacitly that there are other concerns in the novel—philosophical concerns.

Monk and Holloway do, in fact, address these concerns. Monk discusses McCarthy's apparent rejection of modernity, and Holloway argues that McCarthy addresses the philosophical problems of the late-capitalist Euro-American world without being able to see beyond them. Though both scholars do an outstanding job of isolating and investigating the philosophical questions posed in the Western novels, Monk's reading mistakes McCarthy's deep skepticism of the speculative teleological ontology of modernity for an utter rejection of its mechanics. Holloway, on the other hand, offers a more accurate interpretation of the Western novels' primary themes. If Holloway errs, he does so only by applying the postmodern debate to McCarthy's works. Clearly, McCarthy deals with similar issues, but his work does not betray an obvious familiarity with postmodern thinking. My other, lesser, disagreement with Holloway centers on his Marxian/Jamesonian thesis that the philosophical speculations of McCarthy's

Western novels serve primarily to illustrate the dead ends of late-capitalism which can be overcome by Marxian praxis.

American expansion and hegemony or imperialism are certainly major themes in Blood Meridian. In my argument, however, we must see the critique of these pernicious facts of the history (and present) of this country on a broader scale, as does Monk. The novel is not just social criticism; it illustrates larger, looming philosophical problems of modernity. Foremost among these problems are the separation of humanity and world via the modern worldview, i.e. subject/object philosophy, and modern *telos*. The destructive results of this separation, particularly as it comes to be given form by the particularly modern idea of teleological progress, are the philosophical concerns of Blood Meridian, and indeed the Border Trilogy novels as well. In short, to read the Western novels as only a discussion of the horrible failures of Euro-American ideology is to misread them. McCarthy uses American Westward expansion as an instantiation of larger philosophical problems, much as Hegel used the French Revolution as an example of the horrors of self-defining subject taken to its extreme.

The philosophical problems we will address in Blood Meridian are three-fold, but all three are resident under the rubric of the enterprise of ordering. This enterprise is the human project of "singling out the thread of order" (Blood Meridian 199) in the world, and it is a recurring theme in McCarthy's Western fiction. The question of meaning is the first of our philosophical problems. This reflects the diremption of human from world and divine order, and that very diremption itself is the second issue at hand. Finally, the enterprise of ordering is a teleological one, at least as it is expounded by the Judge. *Telos*, then, is the third problem. Hegel's thought will not only assist us in examining these problems on a heuristic level, but will also show that McCarthy adopts certain Hegelian ideas, while skewering others. Indeed, Hegel's

notion of "ontological conflict,"[18] (C. Taylor Hegel 106) shows itself in Blood Meridian, and such conflict underlies the world in the novel. Thus, McCarthy espouses a Hegelian structure in Blood Meridian. So, while Hegel's ideas of teleology and Reason—two hallmarks of modernity—are rejected in the world of Blood Meridian, McCarthy seems to accept a Hegelian, modern picture of ontological movement.

To return to the enterprise of ordering, this enterprise may be fruitfully seen in the light of two philosophical schools. The most obvious in Blood Meridian is what we may call the "existential" school (cf. Bell).[19] While existential themes are prominent in McCarthy's Western fiction, we will find that McCarthy invokes these themes largely as manifestations of other, more socio-historical ideas. Other scholars have delved deep into existential readings, and while these readings are valuable, they will not be of great import here.

Investigations of these socio-historical ideas in McCarthy's fiction can be been in the work of scholars such as Monk, Holloway, and others. From what does existential alienation stem in McCarthy's world? Here, we find the importance of Holloway's and Monk's work. Modernity, the Enlightenment, and the problems of the subject/object philosophical tradition, can be read as the root cause of the endless alienation of McCarthy's main characters. In Hegel's formulation, alienation results from the diremption of humanity from world and from the divine order. This break defines the existential problem of modernity and is one of McCarthy's persistent concerns.

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[18] An idea with which Taylor notes "Hegel missed a trick in not espousing a theory of evolution a half century before Darwin" (Hegel 91).

[19] Since I will not follow this line inquiry in the present work, only a brief note is necessary here. Vereen Bell wrote the seminal existential reading of Blood Meridian in his The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy, which we may summarize as the idea of the characters of the novel raging against the apparent meaninglessness of the world. This interpretation is no doubt valid, but I think we may delve deeper than this reading.

Not only does Hegel explore this break, but he goes through a rigorous analysis of the ontological and historical development of self-consciousness and its resulting alienation. Alienation, then, results from the separation of human from the world, larger orders, and *Geist*. It manifests itself in the worldview of subject over and above object. The struggle of the subject to know, to understand, and to gain control are multiple aspects of the same problem in Hegel. This problem, which we have summed up above as Kant's irresolvable idea of the *phenomenon* and the *noumenon*, is of utmost import in McCarthy's Western novels and particularly so in Blood Meridian. In short, we cannot know the outside world or the thing in itself, they are separate by definition. But in order to develop self-consciousness, there must be a perception of a "real world" that is not us. In Hegel's formulation, human violence results partly from this problem. We seek to cancel otherness, to consume it.

Cancelling and consumption result from the understanding of the world as alien to us. Blood Meridian's enterprise of ordering deals directly with this idea. In the first section of this chapter, then, I examine the enterprise of ordering as formulated in Hegelian terms. By this I mean that McCarthy attends to the same problems as Hegel, and even seems to adopt the idea of what Taylor notes in Hegel as ontological conflict. That is, in Blood Meridian, conflict is the ontological groundwork of movement in the world. In addition, McCarthy's isolation of the conflict between human and world and the resulting desire for sublation, as personified in Judge Holden, echoes Hegel as well. McCarthy clearly rejects the drive toward integrity or perfection, i.e. Hegel's teleology, or the teleology of modernity. We may fruitfully see Hegel's *telos* as stemming directly from his concept of *Geist*, or God, or Spirit. As Taylor writes, "what is fundamental in Hegel's conception is not the existence of some reality, but rather a requirement,

that *Geist* be" (Hegel and Modern Society 39). While Hegel does not assume *Geist per se*,[20] *Geist* proves to be necessary to allow for a positive meaning to Hegel's dialectic; the progressive vision of history as a teleological process. That is, *Geist*, through Reason, gives meaning to ontological conflict as means toward unification or integrity.

Reason—however—in Blood Meridian, is in notably short supply. In fact, many readers note a Nietzschean aspect to the novel in that Blood Meridian shows Reason as entirely destructive, particularly through the character of the Judge. Although this strain of thought will not be a subject of this study, no doubt McCarthy has some familiarity with Nietzsche. However, a more accurate reading of Blood Meridian shows that McCarthy accepts Hegel's dialectical movement, but redacts from it Hegel's modern, Enlightenment *telos*, and as a result *Geist* is removed as well.

The enterprise of ordering is McCarthy's instantiation of what Hegel saw as the result of human realization of self-consciousness, i.e. the modern self-defining subject. The Judge, noted as he has been as the ultimate Enlightenment figure of modernity, makes this enterprise his work. He seeks to create order out of the world; a project McCarthy regards as not only destructive, but hopeless as well. Again we must note that in McCarthy's work, this desire to have control over the world is inherent in humanity. Like Hegel, McCarthy does not simply default to the lure of pre-modern life as more meaningful and less destructive. His pessimism runs too deep for this.

In this chapter, I shall examine the enterprise of ordering, particularly as it relates to imagery of books and coins in the text of the novel. Prior to this however, I will do a very brief review of some scholarly literature on Blood Meridian and particularly the role of the Judge. Next, I directly address the enterprise of ordering and it's relation to the self-defining subject as

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[20] Meaning that Hegel sought to logically prove *Geist*'s existence, rather than making it an unexamined starting place.

it appears in Hegel. This requires an excursus on Hegel's discussion of self-consciousness in The Phenomenology of Mind which allows for a close interpretation of much of what Judge Holden has to say in Blood Meridian particularly concerning war. From there, we move on to teleology and the related idea of Judge Holden as a Hegelian "world-historical individual."

II. *The Enterprise of Ordering*

A. Review of the Literature and Interpretations

Let us briefly return to the idea of Blood Meridian as primarily a critique of American hegemony and imperialism. Clearly, McCarthy addresses this. However, the horror and bloodshed of Blood Meridian show the violence of the enterprise of ordering, not just the violence of American history. While the novel exhibits an indisputable trans-historical sense of ontological conflict, the character of the Judge illustrates the unleashing of this conflict via the speculative ontology of modernity. Thus, while the Natives are not lovingly described as peaceful, Edenic noble savages in Blood Meridian in contrast to the evils of the American expansion, McCarthy implies more than the permanence of ontological violence. When the Judge triumphs at the end of the novel, McCarthy's fascination with the ethical failures of modernity comes to the fore.

The Judge embodies the many ironies and contradictions in Blood Meridian. McCarthy's complex prose entangles with sophistry, misdirection, and philosophical concerns in the Judge's words. In the attempt to decode Blood Meridian, we must parse out the Judge's modus operandi. Bell claims that the novel itself serves as art making a meta-claim against the Judge's anti-mystery/pro-rational knowledge agenda, as does Holloway in this passage: "If Holden aims to totalize all existence within himself by controlling the act of representation, that control is

cumulatively undone by the deconstructive rhetoric of the text itself" (193). We may see this valorization of art interpretation as an intimation of Romanticism in Blood Meridian.[21] Such an interpretation applies better to the novels of the Border Trilogy than it does to Blood Meridian, although it may have some validity. Even if we agree to this validity, however, we are forced to read the artifact of the book against what it says, and I find this exercise unsatisfactory.

Pitts discusses "the apparent randomness of the narrative [of Blood Meridian], its indifference to or denial of any reflection, morality, interiority" (23). He argues that by the odd devices of narrative in Blood Meridian, McCarthy finally in the Epilogue concludes "that it is that the traditional vision of meaning as progressive and evolving is equally a sort of violence because of the totality of its orientation toward the future" (23). Pitts is exactly correct. The particular violence of Blood Meridian can be directly traced to this teleological viewpoint, and here Hegel's philosophy is of great interest. Indeed *telos* will be one of our overriding concerns in the following.

Neil Campbell considers the Judge "a vision of America *in extremis*" (61) as noted earlier, and in this paper this interpretation is used as emblematic of the school of criticism on Blood Meridian that identifies the Judge as a sort personification of Enlightenment rationality taken to its extreme. Monk follows this, as will I. In fact, in his excellent article, "'An Impulse to Action, an Undefined Want': Modernity, Flight, and Crisis in the Border Trilogy and Blood Meridian," Monk conceives of the Judge as "the supreme avatar" of "the European

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[21] According to such a reading, art and nature offer an alternative to the enterprise of ordering and the seeming dead-ends of subject/object thought. We might see a relationship to the early Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy here. (Not coincidentally, The Birth of Tragedy strongly exhibits the early and formative influence of Schopenhauer's thought on Nietzsche [cf. Eddins].) In support of the interpretation of McCarthy's Western novels as deeply influenced by Romanticism, textual evidence seems to bear this out. Perhaps this is most clear in the title of McCarthy's most recent novel, No Country for Old Men, which plays on Yeats. Scholars have also noted similarities to Wordsworth in the Dedication at the closing of Cities of the Plain and in The Orchard Keeper (cf. Bell 10), and the line "the child father of the man" (Blood Meridian 1, cf. Wordsworth's "CCLXXXVI" alternately titled "My Heart Weeps When I Behold").

Enlightenment" (83). Rick Wallach does not precisely fall into this camp, although his reading is germane to such an idea. In the case of Wallach, while Campbell and Monk see the Judge as an exemplar of modern synthesis gone wrong, Wallach interprets the Judge's purpose as one of creating destruction rather than a sort of negative resolution. Wallach writes, "behind his valorization of science and disavowals of mystery, then, the Judge is an obfuscator who drives matters into cul-de-sacs both literal and figurative where he can substitute obliteration by violence for resolution" ("Judge Holden, Blood Meridian's Evil Archon" 9). Monk, like Pitts, correctly identifies the pervading suspicion of the speculative ontology of modernity in McCarthy's Western novels; however his isolation of the Judge as representing synthesis (and the further step of arguing that McCarthy denounces synthesis *per se*) errs. I align my reading of the Judge closer to Wallach's. That is, Pitts, Campbell, and Monk correctly identity McCarthy's investigation of modernity in Blood Meridian, but Wallach gets nearer to the Judge's role than they do.

To wit, the Judge says:

> The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear [. . .]. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order [. . .] 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. (Blood Meridian 199)

I read this as a clear statement of purpose for the Judge as exists in the novel. McCarthy rejects the idea that there is order in the universe, but rather the very enterprise of creating ordering allows man to "dictate the terms of his own fate."

So here we have the Judge who, looking into the face of the incomprehensible, finds meaning in the act of finding meaning; this is the enterprise of ordering. And this enterprise

stems from subject/object philosophy, i.e. what we are referring to modernity here. The Judge, of course, typifies Enlightenment modernity with his negative objectification and manipulation of the world. Objectification and domination are acts which serve to establish what Hegel identifies as total or radical independence. For Hegel this step is only the first in a dialectical process, while for McCarthy there is no resolution or *telos* toward which the world is moving. The Judge seeks to control the world, and indeed this stems from an existential emptiness. However we must read his existential quest—the enterprise of ordering— in the same way we must read American imperialism in Blood Meridian, as a symptom rather than a cause.

The enterprise of ordering in Blood Meridian contains within it the powerful philosophical questions McCarthy poses regarding the speculative ontology of modernity. Ordering and its consequences play out in extremis. But how so, and to what end? In the following section I will discuss the enterprise of ordering particularly as it pertains to the idea of truth and falsity in Blood Meridian. Two specific metaphorical objects connote this in the novel, books and coins. McCarthy uses both symbols to interrogate ideas of value, truth, and falsity. Coins "true and false"[22] are central to illustrating our enterprise of ordering, particularly as they appear in the famous coldforger or graver passage late in Blood Meridian. In the following section, I will examine these symbols, focusing largely on coins, to explicate further. The centerpiece of my analysis of coin imagery in Blood Meridian will be the justly famous "coldforger" or "graver" passage. My examination of this passage brings forth much that is of interest regarding McCarthy's larger philosophical position.

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[22] This is a paraphrase of Leo Daugherty.

B. False Books, False Coins: The Enterprise of Ordering

Before we approach the coin of the realm in Blood Meridian, let us note a metaphor concerning books, this will set the stage for my examination of coin imagery to follow. "Books lie" says Judge Holden, referring to the Bible (Blood Meridian 116). Only pages later however in a discussion with the rather ironically named Webster,[23] a different sentiment is expressed regarding the Judge's own notebook. Webster says, "No man can put all the world in a book. No more than everything drawed in a book is so" (Blood Meridian 141). "Well said," responds the Judge but "My book or some other book [. . .]. What is to be deviates no jot from the book wherein it's writ. How could it? It would be a false book and a false book is no book at all" (Blood Meridian 141). Clearly the Judge refers to fate, but the metaphor has another meaning. In this passage, we see the beginning of McCarthy's ongoing fascination with truth and falsity in Blood Meridian. The book, especially a sacred book like the Bible, has a meaning. Like coins (as we shall see), books are artifacts that possess value. How then can a book be false? How can it lie? Where does its meaning or value come from? Can meaning or value be said to come from human action, or is there a transcendental kind of value or truth? So while in the discussion of books the Judge may allude to life, and fate, and history, thus making a claim for the extant as truth, his position is more complex than this. We give the book meaning, we place meaning on top of the inaccessible thing in itself.

This is the manufacture of meaning, of truth, of value: what we have called the enterprise of ordering. Such manufacturing is the Judge's project. The finding of the thread of order in the world, the negation of mystery: this is the enterprise of ordering. The enterprise plays out throughout the novel, not simply in the Judge's words and actions. The existential reading of

[23] The name evokes Noah Webster.

Blood Meridian shows this. Violence as control, as domination, as agency in John Joel Glanton's thought,[24] can be read as an attempt to lash out against the meaninglessness of life. Regardless, I seek to explore the enterprise of ordering as an engagement of Enlightenment modernity, not as existential. McCarthy's use of coin imagery further illustrates the enterprise of ordering, and its relation to Hegel's thought, for Hegel too uses this image. In fact, value or meaning and the way we create it are the very problems that Hegel inherits from Kant and seeks to solve, i.e. the problem of the thing in itself.

McCarthy manifests his interest in meaning and truth/falsity again with coin imagery. After the Judge lectures on order, he illustrates the power of illusion with a conjurer's trick with a coin on (perhaps) on some sort of tether (Blood Meridian 246). At the conclusion of his trick, we are told that, "he [the Judge] said himself as he put the coin away what all men knew that there are coins and false coins" (Blood Meridian 246). This coin trick serves a prelude to or a foreshadowing of the bizarre, and central, coldforger passage.

In the case of a coin, an embossing by the appropriate person allows a blank piece of metal to take on value, and here value represents truth. So the coin, in this passage, paralleling the discussion of books above, takes on a particular symbolic meaning in Blood Meridian. With this coin image, McCarthy draws together the threads of his primary philosophical engagement with the enterprise of ordering, and the subject/object break. How does human value cross over into the world and how does it get assigned? These are the questions resident in McCarthy's

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[24] McCarthy writes, "He [Glanton] would live to look upon the Western sea and he was equal to whatever might follow for he was complete at every hour [. . .]. 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" (Blood Meridian 243).

recurring coin imagery. Interestingly, Hegel addresses much the same problem in the context of coins in The Phenomenology of Mind. Hegel writes,

> Truth and falsehood as commonly understood belong to those sharply defined ideas which claim a completely fixed nature of their own, one standing in solid isolation on this side, the other on that, without any community between them. Against that view it must be pointed out, that truth is *not like a stamped coin that is issued ready from the mint and so can be taken up and used.* (emphasis added) (Phenomenology 22)

This passage from Hegel will prove valuable concerning the coldforger incident in Blood Meridian. The coldforger passage, and its mirroring of Hegel's words, offers an entryway into McCarthy's prime concern with ordering, modernity, and the subject/object split.

Blood Meridian's coldforger or graver passage is an intriguing and difficult one that can be regarded as of central importance to a discussion of the novel.[25] Permit me to excerpt the passage at length:

> The fool was no longer there but another man and this other man [. . .] seemed like an artisan and a worker in metal [. . .] he was a coldforger who worked with hammer and die, perhaps under some indictment and an exile from men's fires, hammering out like his own conjectural destiny all through the night of his becoming some coinage for a dawn that would not be. It is this false moneyer with his gravers and burins who seeks favor with the judge and he is at contriving from cold slag brute in the crucible a face that will pass, an image that will render this residual specie current in the markets where men barter. Of this is the judge judge and the night does not end. (Blood Meridian 310)

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[25] Leo Daugherty's article "Blood Meridian as Gnostic Tragedy" examines this passage deeply.

The textual similarity to the brief passage from Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind above is evident. Coins in Blood Meridian, as well as books, symbolize a meaning of truth, of value. The process of creating a coin places meaning and value on a meaningless object. We add truth onto a blank piece of material, just as we add order to the world, as we add *telos* to history. The coldforger's work is the enterprise of ordering and his counterfeit is of the currency of truth, the attempt of humanity to make meaning of the world by imposing order.

The above passage sums up the larger philosophical strategy of the novel. It illustrates that, as Hegel notes, "truth is not like a stamped coin that is issued ready from the mint and so can be taken up and used." Again, the reference is to Kant here. The plain real world, the cold brute slag, and the seemingly magical application of meaning upon it are of concern. Hegel deals with this using the very same imagery, as we saw. Hegel with his coin counters Kant's world of *noumenon* and *phenomenon*: the cold brute slag of *noumenon*, the value of a coin as *phenomenon*. McCarthy's preoccupation with similar questions of human and world, *phenomenon* and *noumenon* appear in the coldforger passage.

The passage centers on a play on the word "specie." The "residual specie" here has a double meaning which serves not only to finally address the Judge's project directly but also to indicate the novel's take on our enterprise of ordering. First, we can use the word specie in the sense of "money in coin." The coldforger is a counterfeiter, creating false currency which we may read as false meaning. We can also read "specie" in the sense of "species," viz. humankind. Rendering "this residual species current," in my interpretation, doubles exactly the enterprise of ordering in both meanings of the word specie. The coldforger attempts to "contrive" meaning and order out of the cold brute slag of the universe and this is the false currency. In addition, the work of making the human species "current" is the same sort of ordering, it is the attempt to

make sense of human behavior—we might think of philosophy, and religions, and psychology: those disciplines which seek to give meaning to our actions.[26] If we focus on the word "residual," this parallels what the Judge has to say about war preceding us in a passage we shall soon turn to. Naturalistic violence is an ontological condition of the world in Blood Meridian, it is residual and like the coldforger and the Judge, we attempt to contrive meaning and order out of it in history, much as Hegel did. In the coin passage from The Phenomenology of Mind, Hegel deployed this simile to jab at Kant. However, Hegel does precisely the same thing with history as Kant did with *noumenon* and *phenomenon*; he applied meaning to its cold, brute slag. McCarthy's attack on *telos* shows itself here; that is history is passive, it has no inherent, transcendent meaning and by attempting to interpret history through the modern hermeneutic we assign counterfeit value to what has passed. McCarthy appears to use Hegel's own example against him, Blood Meridian's coin criticizes both Kant and Hegel's position.

So in the passage in question, McCarthy uses the idea of the coin to interrogate modernity, particularly its focus on the manipulability of the world as per Taylor. As we have seen, this results from the subject/object tradition of thought. Of vital importance is the use of the word counterfeit above. The coins are all false in this passage. This parallels the larger scope of the novel and its concern with ordering. To boil McCarthy's complex prose down, all attempts to apply meaning to the world are counterfeit, they have no transcendental value. Whereas in Hegel's use of the coin as truth symbol, the transcendent Idea contains truth rather than the stamped out coin, in McCarthy's worldview, all meaning and value are counterfeit at least on the level of transcendent meaning. That is, our interpretations of the world do not stamp truth on to cold, brute slag like value is stamped on a coin.

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[26] This bears a comparison to Hegel's idea of the progression from Art to Religion to Philosophy.

Here in the coldforger passage, McCarthy's prose bears out what Monk and Holloway, in particular, have noted in his work; that is the fruitlessness, and indeed danger, of the human desire to contrive meaning that we are calling the enterprise of ordering. And this enterprise, this contrivance, exhibits what McCarthy sees as the unbridgeable gap between human and world. This gap defines modernity. The split between human and world (perhaps most famously formulated in Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*), and the ensuing vision of the world as fully manipuable are illustrated here. McCarthy takes this split for ontological truth and this is his existential side, meaning he accepts ontological conflict. However, violence can be, and is, amplified by philosophical modernity in McCarthy's work, as we shall see.

Similar ideas and symbolism returns again as coin and coiner imagery in All the Pretty Horses. The cryptic Dueña Alphonsa concludes her monologue in Chapter IV of that novel by saying, "Sometimes I think we are all like that myopic coiner at his press, taking the blind slugs one by one from the tray, all of us bent so jealously at our work, determined that not even chaos be outside of our own making" (McCarthy All the Pretty Horses 241). Here again, the image of the coiner parallels the idea of creating order and value out of the "blind slugs" provided by the world, or perhaps more correctly by History. The topic of the Dueña's speech is history and the attempt to make meaning of the world through it. The making of a coin directly implies the placing of a certain agreed upon value "on top of" the thing itself, a mere piece of metal. Unmistakably, in Blood Meridian, and in the Dueña's words, doing so is fundamentally destructive in McCarthy's Western fiction. And, as we have stated, this enterprise of ordering, our "making," ties directly into what we are calling the speculative ontology of modernity. That is to say that the modern self-defining subject—the creator of her own being who is over and

above the world—is, by the very nature of this notion of self-definition, destructive. Hegel directly deals with this problem in The Phenomenology of Mind.

C. Hegel and Self-Consciousness: Self-Definition and Destruction

We return now to Hegel, particularly his discussion of self-consciousness in The Phenomenology of Mind, i.e. the beginnings of the modern self-defining subject. Early in the chapter on self-consciousness in The Phenomenology of Mind, Hegel may seem to contradict what McCarthy has the Judge exhibit when Hegel writes, "Self-consciousness, which is absolutely *for itself*, and characterizes its object directly as negative, or is primarily desire, will really therefore, find through experience the object's independence" (Phenomenology 100). This statement prefigures Hegel's argument for the unity of the distinguished; the idea that in seeking to consume, or destroy, or gain power over that which is not us, we will dialectically fail to find the solitary independence we seek. Again, in Blood Meridian we do not have the dialectical solution or resolution that Hegel sees, that is the *telos* of our conception of self-consciousness. Instead, I will focus on the opening portion of the passage above, "Self-consciousness, which is absolutely *for itself*, and characterizes its object directly as negative." The Judge means this exactly when he says, "the smallest crumb can devour us" (Blood Meridian 198). The Judge characterizes all objects other than himself as negative, even the smallest crumb, and their independence is a threat to him. Permit a lengthy quote from the passage:

> The judge had taken to riding ahead with one of the Delawares and he carried his rifle loaded with the small hard seeds of the nopal fruit and in the evening he would dress expertly the colorful birds he'd shot, rubbing the skins with gunpowder and stuffing them with balls of dried grass and packing them away in his wallets. He pressed the leaves of

trees and plants into his book and he stalked tiptoe the mountain butterflies with his shirt outheld in both hands [...]. Toadvine sat watching him as he made his notations in the ledger, holding the book toward the fire for the light, and he asked him what was his purpose in all this [. . .].

Whatever exists, he [the Judge] said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent [. . .].

He nodded toward the specimens he'd collected. These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he properly be suzerain of the earth.

What's a suzerain?

A keeper. A keeper or overlord.

Why not say keeper then?

Because he is a special kind of keeper. A suzerain rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgements (sic) [. . .].

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 must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation. (Blood Meridian 198-199)

We clearly see the validity of Monk's view of the Judge as the avatar of European Enlightenment in this passage. McCarthy's description of the Judge's notebooks and his collecting is, of course, a brutally satirical version of the Victorian amateur scientist and collector. In addition, as much

hermeneutic scholarly work on Imperial adventure narratives attest, the desire to know all and to contain and understand the world through science equates with the desire to control all. We can see concordance here with Hegel what describes as the first movement of self-consciousness.

Regarding the self-defining subject, Hegel writes,

> Self-consciousness has before it another self-consciousness, it has come outside itself. This has a double significance. First it has lost its own self, since it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly it has thereby sublated that other, for it does not regard the other as essentially real, but sees its own self in the other.
>
> It must cancel this its other. To do so is the sublation of that first double meaning, and is therefore a second double meaning. First, *it must set itself to sublate the other independent being, in order thereby to become certain of itself as true being*, secondly, it thereupon proceeds to sublate its own self, for this other is itself. (emphasis added) (Phenomenology 105)

Here, Hegel and McCarthy address almost exactly the same effect of modernity or Enlightenment thinking. The Judge almost quotes from Hegel, disregarding as we have noted, the dialectic resolution Hegel finds. In this resolution, the master loses what she seeks, her independence, by her very act of enslaving.

The "second double meaning" is the dialectical realization that Hegel sees self-consciousness reaching, the sublation of itself. So, to clarify, the first movement of self-consciousness controls by sublating another independent being: it asserts its own existence by gaining control over the other. Despite the negative connotation of the first stage of this dialectic, the sublation of self in the controlling urge—or the enterprise of ordering—shows Hegel's fundamental optimism. Just as the master looses her freedom and the slave gains hers in the

power dynamic of the master/slave dialectic, Hegel argues that the destructive force of domination that results from the idea of the modern self-defining subject will be overcome because it defeats its own primary purpose. That is, rather than making the master free, domination of an other enslaves her. Modernity, then—and the negative aspects of it which have been so powerfully noted by thinkers from Nietzsche to Baudrillard—will be overcome in Hegel's thought. To him, modernity is not the goal toward which we have progressed, but merely another stage, one which shall be dialectically surpassed. In more depth, with the master/slave dialectic Hegel seeks to prove what he sees as the triumph of Reason over the desire to sublate and control. Humanity will realize, in Hegel's thought, from the dead-end or *aporia* of constantly striving to conquer and control the world and other people, that we can gain no real freedom from rapacity and domination.

In fact, alienation results from this sort of domination. Hegel addresses this in the master/slave dialectic:

> In all this, the unessential consciousness is, for the master, the object which embodies the truth of his certainty of himself. But it is evident that this object does not correspond to its notion; for, just where the master has effectively achieved lordship he really finds that something has come about quite different from an independent consciousness. It is not an independent, but rather a dependent consciousness that he has achieved. (Phenomenology 109-110)

In Hegel's formulation, mastery, or what I have called the enterprise of ordering, results in the alienation of modernity. The act of asserting control—as the master does over the slave, and as Judge Holden attempts to do over the whole of the earth—leads not to independence, but rather to the realization that the relationship to an other is *constitutive* of one's self-definition.

Monk, in his discussion of McCarthy's rejection of "the desire to unify in synthesis" (97), argues that the Judge offers a horrible synthesis of utter destruction and that in doing so, McCarthy presents Holden's villainy as the ultimate negative version of modern synthesis. That is, in Monk's argument, the Judge does offer synthesis, an evil one, and in doing so he serves as a stand-in for the evil of European modernity's push toward subsumption of the past and other cultures. Rather that this, though, we see that the Judge in fact rejects Hegelian synthesis. In Hegel's dialectical movement of the master/slave, the domineering master comes to realize that through his sublation of the slave that he has failed to achieve ultimate independence or freedom. The Judge gives no such quarter, and he rejects synthesis rather than personifying negative synthesis. In fact, Judge Holden stands triumphant at the close of Blood Meridian: un-synthesized, un-overcome.

McCarthy rejects the dialectical turn of Hegel's metaphor of the master/slave, thus he rejects synthesis. To recapitulate my minor disagreement with Monk, then, rather than reading Judge Holden as an avatar of successful synthesis, and thus a negative example of McCarthy's mistrust of synthesis, I argue that the Judge utterly rejects synthesis. The Judge can be more properly seen as a Hegelian dialectic that has stalled on the first stage. Thus, Blood Meridian does not illustrate the horrors of modernity through a negative vision of synthesis; rather the novel focuses on the first step of a Hegelian vision of modernity, dwelling on its ethical vacuity. This rejection of synthesis may mark McCarthy as less a philosopher than a fatalist, as has been remarked by many critics. For while Hegel argues that the turn from mastery as the final goal to an enlightened realization that self-consciousness cannot achieve independence from such domination follows in a dialectical fashion, McCarthy utterly repudiates this. Beyond whether we find Hegel's argument logically or philosophically persuasive, it can be accurately typified as

part of his fundamental teleological ontology. That is, from this destructive dead-end of domination, modernity and Enlightenment thought society will move past violence and domination as it manifests in the search for total independence as we become aware that not only does total independence not exist but that the search for it—the enterprise of ordering—serves only to alienate. This must happen, in Hegel's thought, because Reason works even in the most destructive phases of history to bring humanity to ever higher levels of development. And in Hegel's mind, Reason is not fundamentally destructive as it is in the Romantic tradition. Reason must be held on to and not abandoned, for only through Reason can humanity midwife fulfillment into existence. In this way, Hegel's conception of the world does not rely on a wholly fated, mechanistic dialectic of progress. Only through human endeavor, through Reason, can humanity reach its true potential. So, *telos* is an ontological fact, but only through humankind can it be realized.

Does the turn of the master/slave dialectic, and by proxy much of Hegel's thought, rely entirely on a progressive idea of *telos*? In other words, might we question whether Hegel's cosmology of *Geist* and the power of Reason are assumed factors in the step past domination in the master/slave dialectic? I am not sure that this is entirely the case, meaning that Hegel's chain of logic may prove to be self-contained and not reliant upon the *deus ex machina* of his basic understanding of progression in history and *telos.* Regardless, even if the turn from controlling to negate to the realization that this is not only destructive but a dead-end, does not entirely rest on Hegel's basic progressivism, it certainly illustrates this progressivism in great contrast to McCarthy's fiction. McCarthy's Western novels use the mechanism of Hegel's thought, i.e. the idea of ontological conflict, but utterly reject the fulfillment which Hegel thought to be the prime moving force of "Life." McCarthy firmly denies this fulfillment—which we have called the

speculative ontology of modernity, i.e. the progressive teleological vision of life—in Blood Meridian in nearly every imaginable way. From the horrific play on Westward expansion and American mythmaking that constitutes the main thrust of the novel, to the triumph of the Judge at its conclusion; McCarthy deals *telos* a death blow in Blood Meridian.

The lack of fulfillment or synthesis, a tendency in McCarthy's fiction that Holloway notes on a meta-level, exhibits itself both in the conclusion of Blood Meridian proper, and in its Epilogue. In the first case, the repeated phrases "he never sleeps" and "he says that he will never die" (Blood Meridian 335) indicate that the Judge's project is not to be seen as a step in a positive, teleological dialectic. The Judge is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, and his enterprise of ordering will not be subsumed into a movement toward integrity with the world or fulfillment. The Judge's annihilation of the Kid at the close of the novel designates this as well. Only the Judge remains at the end of the narrative, he never sleeps and he will never die. The Judge triumphant: his destructive modernity reigns, his search for radical independence via the sublation of all that is not himself lords over Blood Meridian at the end. The contrast is evident: McCarthy's pessimism against Hegel's optimism. But the ontological mechanism McCarthy invokes, the groundwork of his fictional world, borrows deeply from Hegel in contrast to Monk' interpretation.

The final word on the idea of synthesis in its teleological aspect appears in the strikingly written Epilogue of Blood Meridian. The Epilogue echoes the closing of Sergio Leone's "Once Upon a Time in the West." That film concludes with a sweeping pan out of laborers laying the railroad line through the soon-to-be town of Sweetwater. The implication is clear: the Wild West has ended, civilization approaches, and Leone's Western cycle has been closed. In McCarthy's Epilogue to Blood Meridian, we have a somewhat similar vision, albeit an even more ambivalent

one than Leone's. The "man progressing over the plain" (Blood Meridian 337) may be digging postholes or he may be engaged in some less obvious task. Either way, the implication mirrors the end of "Once Upon a Time in the West." The old West is being mapped and controlled. Instead of the laying of railroad lines and ties over the un-demarcated landscape of the West as in the film, McCarthy uses the imagery of a hole-digger. Of course in both Leone's and McCarthy's vision, this old West was not a Turnerian region that strengthened the "American character." McCarthy takes Leone's amoral anti-heroes down a much darker path in Blood Meridian. His Wild West was one of overriding horror. But Leone's conclusion to his Western cycle laments the loss of the West (albeit somewhat ambivalently), while McCarthy portrays it as simply another event, no worse and no better and—more importantly—imbued with no particular meaning. The synthesis—the process of Leone, of modernity, of Hegel—is entirely removed from the Epilogue of Blood Meridian. This betrays McCarthy's other looming philosophical question, that of *telos*.

To return to the long passage from Blood Meridian quoted above, McCarthy pays no heed to the "second double meaning" of Hegel's master/slave dialectic. The Judge does not conceive of losing his "suzerainity" (Monk) through his enterprise of ordering. He does not see himself in what is other; he will never understand the relational nature of life as Hegel posits it. To rephrase, Judge Holden in Blood Meridian follows Hegel's movement; he indeed embodies a Hegelian dynamic as Monk notes. McCarthy illustrates the apparent fatuousness of this type of teleological, progressivist philosophy of history which Judge Holden personifies. In Blood Meridian, McCarthy accepts the very problems Hegel so adroitly identifies in modernity, but goes on to extrapolate that this process of domination—the enterprise of ordering—is not a

single phase of the development of humanity toward perfect unity with *Geist*, but rather the actual permanent state of things.

D. The History of Violence in Blood Meridian: Ontological Conflict and Modernity

The astute reader may note a tension in McCarthy, one which perhaps troubles my approach to his work and its focus on modernity. To entirely blame modernity for the horrors of Blood Meridian—and the later failures and losses in the Border Trilogy—ignores the idea that violence is somehow resident in men in McCarthy's fiction. That is to say, McCarthy's Western novels unquestionably equate violence with a natural condition, violence is a trans-historical phenomena. I this section, I will address this apparent problem.

The most obvious indication of this may be in the last of the three quotations that preface Blood Meridian:

> Clark, who led last year's expedition to the Afar region of northern Ethiopia, and UC Berkeley colleague Tim D. White, also said that a re-examination of a 300,000-year-old fossil skull found in the same region earlier shows evidence of having been scalped.
>
> THE YUMA DAILY SUN
>
> *June 13, 1982* (Blood Meridian 1)

The implication is clear; mankind has ever been violent and brutal. How may this be seen in light of the school of scholarly work that has identified McCarthy's interest in querying modernity, including the present analysis? This question must be addressed on two levels. In the first case, the Judge partakes in violence for a purpose, unlike the rest of the cast of characters of Blood Meridian who have a "taste for mindless violence" (Blood Meridian 3). The Judge systematizes violence, he seeks to find his own independence via the enterprise of ordering, the rationalizing

of the world. The Judge, then, realizes what the others—aside perhaps from Glanton—do not, that their violence and desire to find "whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will" (Blood Meridian 5) are deeply interrelated. Violence, the negating of the other, is the ultimate act of freedom in as far as Hegel's self-consciousness is concerned. And this sort of self-consciousness, the self-defining subject, has been one of the great hallmarks of modernity (and not coincidentally of the cowboy mythos as well). McCarthy's portrayal of violence as a trans-historical, ontological fact, is unquestioned herein. This trans-historical violence, however, is let loose with horrifying results by the onset of self-consciousness in modernity. Hegel's thought parallels this to some degree in his discussion of the French Revolution in The Phenomenology of Mind.

Hegel saw the French Revolution as the prime example of the concept of freedom or radical individuality gone wrong. We must note that in Hegel's formulation, rogue individualism itself did not precipitate the mass murder of the Revolution. Rather, the acceptance of the principles of radical individuality as a model for government did so. Hegel typifies this as "the world is for it absolutely its own will, and this will is universal will" (Phenomenology 344), referring to the idea that world exists for the pleasure[27] of the individual will, and that this individual will is then in concordance with the "universal will" of the people. In Hegel's discussion of the negative and destructive aspects of "Absolute Freedom" as it played out in the French Revolution, we note that while conflict is part of the ground state of the world, particular ways of thinking or being elevate this conflict into a rage of destruction. I hope the connection to Blood Meridian is clear. That is, we may see the condition of ontological conflict as concrete, but we may also see that particular ways of being in the world, or ways of thinking, unleash this

[27] Use of the word "pleasure" may be confusing here. I do not mean that the world exists to provide physical or hedonistic pleasure, rather that the world exists for this type of self-consciousness at its pleasure.

conflict or violence in entirely horrific ways. We may somewhat flippantly term this idea the notion of "bad philosophy." Bad philosophy, or drastically incorrect ways of understanding the world have, in both Hegel's and McCarthy's minds, horrible consequences. Conflict, or violence, may be an ontological fact that is resident in life and the world, but it can be exacerbated or stoked.

The second approach to this problem of what seems to be the trans-historical nature of violence in McCarthy's Western novels in contrast to our consideration of modernity follows from the first. As discussed, McCarthy sees conflict as an ontological fact about the world. Again, he here follows Hegel:

> The presentation of itself, however, as pure abstraction of self-consciousness consists in showing itself as a pure negation of its objective form, or in showing that it is fettered to no determinate existence, that it is not bound at all by the particularity everywhere characteristic of existence as such, and is *not* tied up with life. (Phenomenology 107)

This is Hegel's analysis of the destructive, domineering aspect of the modern self-defining subject and its enterprise of ordering. It seeks to establish itself as radically free, i.e. "not tied up with life." Here we have the same concept as the Judge's suzerainity—the idea that humanity is not tied to life, instead it exists in opposition to it. This plays out in violence or struggle in Hegel's philosophy:

> The process of bringing all this out involves a two-fold action—action on the part of the other and action on the part of itself. In so far as it is the other's action, each aims at the destruction and death of the other. But in this there is implicated also the second kind of action, self-activity; for the former implies that it risks its own life. The relation of both

> self-consciousnesses is in this way so constituted that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle. (Phenomenology 107)

While Hegel addresses two self-consciousnesses—rather than consciousness or self-consciousness against the world—as we have seen this notion of conflict and subsumption runs throughout Hegel's ontological vision. Here Hegel speaks of person against person conflict, but this may just as well be read as cat against mouse, or any sort of "contradiction." As Charles Taylor writes,

> In Hegel we find the idea many times stated that real existences go under because of contradiction. This is true of historical forms, but it is also true of finite spirits, animals, things. But, one might protest, these latter continue to exist, while historical forms disappear. Yes, Hegel replies, they go on existing as types, but the individual specimens go under; they are all mortal; and this mortality is necessary; it is a reflection of the ontological conflict. (Hegel 106)

The above is an important notion in McCarthy's fiction and one to which we shall return to, particularly concerning The Crossing and the embedded tale. In the current discussion, however, I quote Taylor to illustrate Hegel's basic understanding of conflict or contradiction as an ontological fact. This "life-and-death struggle," the Desire (in Hegelian terminology) to sublate the other not only symptomatizes the modern self-defining subject, but also illustrates a basic feature of the world. In Hegel's philosophy, the world is factually made up of conflict upon conflict. This engine drives Hegel's famous dialectic. Contradiction leads to resolution, and in this resolution we may begin to see *telos* and the workings of Reason. In Blood Meridian, McCarthy accepts conflict and violence as ontological fact much in the same way Hegel does. McCarthy, however, refuses to provide dialectical resolution. So conflict, as we saw with

Hegel's interpretation of self-consciousness and the horrors of the French Revolution, can and is brought forth in apocalyptic fashion by bad philosophy.

In order to further clarify this argument, let us note another similarity between what Judge Holden and Hegel have to say about violence and conflict. In Chapter XVII of Blood Meridian, Holden holds forth on war:

> It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner. That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other. (Blood Meridian 248)

The Judge continues:

> Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. Who has not heard such a tale? A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man's hand or that man at his. What more certain validation of a man's worth could there be? [. . .] This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another with 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. (Blood Meridian 249)

Aside from the possible hint at Hegelian thought we have when the Judge says, "All other trades are contained in that of war,"[28] there are deeper implications here. Holden comes across almost as an evil Hegel, and Holden's war seems in its "forcing the unity of existence" as

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[28] See Hegel's statement that "the present stage [. . .] contains all previous stages within itself," (Phenomenology 95).

something like the cunning of Reason. The similarity to the passage from The Phenomenology of Mind above is clear, especially when Hegel writes, "The relation of both self-consciousnesses is in this way so constituted that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle." This is the very same notion that Judge espouses in a much darker form.

Let us return to Hegel then:

> The relation of both self-consciousnesses is in this way so constituted that they prove themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle. They must enter this struggle, for they must bring their certainty of themselves, the certainty of being for themselves, to the level of objective truth, and make this a fact both in the case of the other and in their own case as well. And it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus is it tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not bare existence, is not the merely immediate form in which it at first makes its appearance, is not its mere absorption in the expanse of life. Rather it is thereby guaranteed that there is nothing present but what might be taken as a vanishing moment—that self-consciousness is merely pure self-existence, being-for-self. *The individual, who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness.* In the same way each must aim at the death of the other, as it risks its own life thereby; for that other is to it of no more worth than itself; the other's reality is presented to the former as an external other, as outside itself; it must cancel that externality. (emphasis added) (Phenomenology 107)

So here, the Judge on war seems to nearly exactly echo Hegel. Of course what Hegel describes above is only a beginning movement in a dialectic process and not an end, as it is for Holden.

Hegel interprets the life-and-death struggle, or war in Holden's words, in a two-fold manner. First, the struggle shows "ontological conflict." This idea of ontological conflict, of the operation of the engine of the world, resides in both Hegel and in Blood Meridian. That is to say, there is a ontological aspect to violence and conflict; it must not be seen entirely as the result of modernity but rather as the way of things.

The second reading, though, very much applies to the speculative ontological grounding of modernity. The ideas Hegel describes above result precisely from the modern development of the self-defining subject. This makes up a large part of Taylor's argument for the value of Hegel's thought to contemporary life. Hegel not only addresses the ontology of the world as conflict, but more particularly he describes what he thought to be a first movement in a dialectic process whereby such struggles and domination would cease to have meaning, due to their failure. The above passage, though, fails to elucidate Hegel's idea that this sort of struggle would ultimately fail to do what it attempts to do, that is give full meaning to the independent existence of the individual. In fact, in the beginning of the paragraph which follows the above excerpt, Hegel writes, "This trial by death, however, cancels both the truth which was to result from it, and therewith the certainty of self altogether" (Phenomenology 107).

Here we find the difference between Judge Holden's speech on war and Hegel's passage in The Phenomenology of Mind. War is god in Holden's words. War, in fact, solves the very diremption of modernity. Clearly this interpretation is not what Hegel intended, indeed humanity in Hegel's view will move beyond the failures of the "trial by death" to a positive reintegration with the world and with *Geist*.[29] So, we have the inherent violence of existence—ontological conflict—and the destructive violence which results from self-consciousness's attempt to

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[29] Perhaps the Judge never got past the passage in question when reading Hegel.

establish itself as radically free from the world, indeed as the master or suzerain of the world. The two are combined both in Hegel and in Blood Meridian; they are not in fact contradictory. Violence, Hegel and McCarthy argue, both tells us something about the structure of being *and* tells us about how we perceive ourselves as self-defining subjects.

In Blood Meridian, only Judge Holden sees this. The other characters in the novel see the first aspect of violence above alone. They act out of compulsion, and they see violence as the way of the world. Holden knows, however, that violence in humanity's practice serves another purpose: the enterprise of ordering, the setting of the self-defining subject above and against the world. The Judge is prescient, he knows of what he does compared the other characters' brute ignorance. Holden engages in his trade, war, to embody his control over the world. And in his horrific view, that the only sort of unity we can hope for is that of war, terror, and violence. What Hegel thinks of as a process of accretion—the dialectical process of ontological conflict—and as a movement toward positive unification, Holden sees as proving that the life-and-death struggle itself conveys the only sort of value to existence.

Hegel and Holden think along the same general lines, but they are informed by deeply different intuitions about the world. The Judge argues that the only transcendental meaning of truth is in the life-and-death struggle, that it is death which gives life value. Monk mistakes this for synthesis, but in fact the Judge does not synthesize, he personifies a view wherein synthesis does not occur. If the reader wishes to see McCarthy as "a mad genius with a fetish for sensation violence" (Owens 10), or as a purveyor of "deterministic mythmaking, matching his metaphysical cheapness with a slickness unto death all its own" (Wood), one might take the Judge's view as that of McCarthy, and as the answer to the riddles of the coiners. That is, value is not in fact stamped out by humanity, but the only sort of transcendent value we can identify is

the struggle between life and death. The only knowable value is existence or negation. As we shall see in the discussion of the Border Trilogy, I think this is an important strain of thought in McCarthy's work, but finally an unpersuasive one. McCarthy does not advocate such a view in his fiction, despite the recurrence of the theme.

Hegel, on the other hand, interprets all this as merely part of a process, a step toward integrity. This is an important part of the speculative ontology of modernity, the notion of progress toward the better. Certainly Hegel's vision of progress was unusual due at least partly to his cosmology of *Geist*, and his concept of *Geist* has few if any adherents today. But to contemporary scholars, and in the context of this analysis, the very underlying notion of perfection or betterment through progress finally makes Hegel's thought illuminating in contrast to McCarthy's Western fiction. As we shall see in the following section, not only does McCarthy explore the dark side of the modern self-defining subject in Blood Meridian's enterprise of ordering, but he also tackles the apparent stunning ethical failure of the teleological view of history in modernity. Thus we have Judge Holden as a Hegelian "world-historical figure." What follows may be seen as a gloss of Hegel's philosophy of history, one that no doubt fails to do the complexity of his thought justice. On the other hand, it will not be an unfamiliar reading, and we shall find this discussion powerfully germane to McCarthy's Western fiction.

III. Judge Holden as World-Historical Individual: The Ethical Error of Telos

Hegel poses an epic question in the short volume of his lectures entitled Reason in History: "But in contemplating history as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed, a question necessarily arises: To what principle, to what final purpose, have these monstrous sacrifices been offered?"

(Reason in History 27). History is evidence to Hegel; it shows progress and the process of the world—this is Hegel's "owl of Minerva." Hegel's Reason works throughout history and through humanity. Most of us, of course, are never aware that we serve Reason and that our decisions and actions midwife our coming expressive unity. In Hegel's view, we are intimately involved with the process of *telos*, though we do not know it. This is his famous "cunning of Reason."

Some, though, are aware of what they do, and what they serve. Hegel calls them "world-historical individuals." Taylor writes of these world-historical individuals, "the greatness of world-historical individuals does not just lie in their being instruments of the world-spirit [i.e. *Geist*]" (Hegel and Modern Society 99).[30] That is to say that we are all instruments of *Geist* through the cunning of Reason. The world-historical individual (or figure), however, is of a different status. She has a realization, to some degree, of her place in history as a great fomenter of change. Taylor continues, "[world-historical individuals] are also those who first sense and give articulation to what must be the next stage. Once they raise the banner men follow" (Hegel and Modern Society 99). In addition to raising the banner and "show[ing] the way to what all men in their depths aspire to," the world-historical individual is at least partially aware of why she does what she does:

> Shlomo Avineri... finds that Hegel contradicts himself in his doctrine of the world-historical individual, since he seems to hold that that he is fully conscious of the idea he is realizing, at other times only instinctively conscious, and in still other passages he is said not to be conscious at all [. . .]. [This] can be fairly easily reconciled around the notion that world-historical individuals have a sense of the higher truth they serve, but they see it through a glass darkly. (Hegel and Modern Society 100 note 1)

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[30] By world-spirit, Taylor refers to Hegel's conception of *Geist*.

Judge Holden is a world-historical individual. He knows the "higher truth" he serves very much in contrast to his cohorts. In fact, Hegel writes a description of the world-historical figure that could well describe Holden:

> A world-historical individual is not so sober as to adjust his ambition to circumstances; nor is he very considerate. He is devoted, come what may, to one purpose. Therefore such men may treat other great and even sacred interests inconsiderately—a conduct which indeed subjects them to moral reprehension. But so mighty a figure must trample down many an innocent flower, crush to pieces many things in its path. (Reason in History 43)

We have here a rather chilling passage, and one which seems a perfect description of the Judge, even down to the trampling of "innocent flowers."[31] Let us note that Hegel saw such conquerors as Caesar and Napoleon as world-historical figures, and presumably he saw himself in this fashion as well. This deeply troubling aspect of Hegel's thought expresses a certain admiration for such world-historical individuals.

The above passage likely does not do Hegel's thought justice. Reason in History was not a piece of writing that was prepared for, or meant to be, published (as Taylor notes), rather it is a small collection of his lecture notes published posthumously. In addition, Robert S. Hartman's introduction to his translation of Reason in History (the translation I am using) betrays a perhaps unorthodox interpretation of Hegel.[32] Regardless, the excerpt above exemplifies the dark side of

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[31] For example, the Judge slaughters the Apache boy he takes care of, apparently rapes children, and of course is a puppy-killer.

[32] As shown in the following passage: "The historic hero [world-historical individual], through his insight and energy, is the subject of history. The human individual without such insight and energy is the object of history, its victim. He is, in a way, guilty of his own death and suffering because he does not rise to the occasion, the human possibilities of seeing the wholeness of the historical situation" (Hartman xxxvii).

Hegel's thought, and of modernity.[33] An unsubtle reading of Hegel's philosophy of history leads to inevitably to these questions concerning ethics and morality. Hegel's owl of Minerva metaphor illustrates this. If the work of philosophy can only be done in the aftermath of history, and if one accepts positive *telos*—in Hegel's formulation or any other—how can the horrors of history be morally judged? Are they not all necessary in a sense? In the system of Hegel's dialectic, all is for the better, everything that has occurred must then have occurred as it did, a "theodicy" in Hegel's words (Hegel 121). This is a kind of fatalism, and Taylor notes in Hegel a "preoccupation with fate" (Hegel 149) While it is incorrect to state that the Hegelian philosophy of history is actually fatalistic, Hegel's use of history as fuel for forming a teleological vision contains with in it a fatalistic tinge, a line of thought McCarthy clearly shows as well.

Judge Holden believes that history must have happened the way it did, that we may see contingency in the present, but never in the past. The Judge says, "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" (Blood Meridian 250). This statement clearly evokes Nietzsche, but the mention of historical law smacks of Hegel. The Judge lectures further,

> A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test. A man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views. His very involvement in such a trial gives evidence of a new and broader view. The willingness of the principal to forgo further argument as the triviality which it in fact is and to petition directly the chambers of the historical absolute clearly indicates of how little moment are the opinions and of what great moment the divergences thereof. (Blood Meridian 250)

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[33] These disturbing passages may indicate why Karl Popper interpreted Hegel's philosophy as an "apology for Prussianism" (The Open Society and Its Enemies 231), and an influence on Fascism. We should note that Popper's writing on Hegel is now largely regarded as unimportant.

Again, the historical pops up here. History is the judge, or so the Judge seems to say. As in Hegel's thought, looking back into the historical record offers the only possible interpretation of right and wrong—hindsight is 20/20 as the cliché goes. Using the idea of the world-historical individual who pushes humanity along into the next phase, we can see Judge Holden as the great historical apologist, as some have seen Hegel.[34] Let us use the idea of Judge as apologist to illustrate larger philosophical issues than just the repugnant results of Euro-American imperialism. Imperialism is, in McCarthy's fiction, a symptom rather than a cause. It is a symptom of the speculative ontology of modernity in the two ways we have explored it thus far, the subject/object split and the teleological model.

Judge Holden, and the entirety of Blood Meridian itself, presents us with the dark side of this teleological model in its relation to history. This darkness of modernity can be found not only in Blood Meridian, but in the novels of the Border Trilogy as well. The ethical problem the Judge poses, then, may very much draw from Nietzsche's rejection of the kind of speculative progressive ontology of the world which Hegel typifies in our current examination. The Judge, like Nietzsche, notes that moral law is made-up. Importantly, though, he adds that only within the historical absolute can actions be judged. This applies distinctly to Hegel.

The Judge, in point of fact, manifests the ethical quandary that results from progressive teleology. As world-historical individual, he clearly represents the "coming of the modern age" in Blood Meridian, much as the Epilogue does. He is the ultimate negative Enlightenment figure. He shows not only the rapacious horrors that result from modernity, but in fact he exhibits the very rationalization that modernity has taken to heart: the concept of progressive *telos*. For the Judge, the ethics of the present are meaningless, as they were (largely) for Hegelian world-

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[34] Cf. Popper.

historical figures such as Napoleon, and we might even add Hitler or Stalin. The march of history, of progress, can be cold-hearted and can crush many innocent flowers. But, in the eyes of modernity, the winner (seemingly with little concern for their brutality) can appeal to the historical absolute to gain ethical justification.

Of course, the myth of the West (Slotkin 39) illustrates this problem perfectly. And in rendering the "opening" of the Western United States as a hellish holocaust, McCarthy displays a vivid mistrust of the stories we tell about the Wild West. In this respect, critics and scholars are correct to identify McCarthy's annihilation of Turner's Frontier Thesis. But we must take such an analysis a step further in the attempt to note the larger canvas upon which all this is painted. The very ideas of the Frontier thesis and Manifest Destiny illustrate a particular hermeneutic, that of modernity in its teleological aspect. In the end, to be crass, the near eradication of the Native population of North America is seen as tacitly historically acceptable by Americans because it allowed for the great blossoming of the modern representative democratic state. This point is imperative. McCarthy's Western novels display utter disgust for this idea, as Blood Meridian makes abundantly clear. History is not a justification, and ideas like the world-historical individual are poisonous.

Satanic, calculating Judge Holden speaks the words of such justification with a forked tongue: his evil is manifest. Blood Meridian skewers progress and *telos*, while accepting visions of both trans-historical ontological conflict and the destructive hermeneutic of modernity. And if the Judge and Blood Meridian explore the dead-ends of modernity through an explication of the horrors resulting from the self-defining subject, and the ethical justification that results from a teleological view, the novels of the Border Trilogy deal with both identity and the narrative act in the aftermath of Blood Meridian. In our discussion of the novels of the Border Trilogy, and

particularly The Crossing and Cities of the Plain, we will see a continuation of the historical issues we have just mentioned, as well as a kind of resolution: a resolution we may find inadequate. This resolution or alternative viewpoint concerns history, identity and, the narrative act (or storytelling). In examining it, we will again find recourse in Hegel's thought.

Chapter 3

-The Border Trilogy: *Bildungsroman*, Identity, and the Embedded Tale-

For history is a pontoon bridge. Every man walks and works at its building end, and he has come as far as he has over the pontoons laid by others he may never have heard of. Events have a way of making other events inevitable; the actions of men are consecutive and indivisible. –Wallace Stegner (29)

I. *Introduction*

The novels of the Border Trilogy (All the Pretty Horses, The Crossing, and Cities of the Plain) contain very similar characters, and even similar plots. All three concern themselves with young men, border crossing, and failure to obtain an objective or objectives. As such, the trilogy novels can usefully be seen as variations on a single theme, almost as re-tellings of the same story. As Edwin Arnold writes, "each volume joins in the larger pattern, to be sure, but each also maintains its essential uniqueness" (221). The "ex-Mormon" in The Crossing in fact states this (in a passage we shall return to) when he says, "whether in Caborca or in Huisiachepic or in whatever other place by whatever other name or by no name at all I say again that all tales are one. Rightly heard all tales are one" (The Crossing 143). This idea of stories and their repetition and restating is central to the Border Trilogy, as we shall see.

As such, we can treat McCarthy's Border Trilogy as a unit for the purposes of analysis. While the books are not concerned with exactly the same issues at all times, certain *leitmotifs* present themselves throughout the Border Trilogy. Above and beyond the philosophical problems we discussed in Blood Meridian and their refinement, an overwhelming recurrent theme presents itself in the form of the three novels. In fact, they seem to have almost the same plots, with slightly different details. In his discussion of All the Pretty Horses, Arnold notes that

the novel "is the romantic adventure, a modern *bildungsroman* set on a foundation of philosophical and ontological speculation" (221). All three of the Border trilogy novels are modern *bildungsromans* in form, if not in content, this is the major recurring theme. As we shall see below, the literary efficacy of the genre of the *bildungsroman* relies not only upon the main character's formation of personality, but also her successful integration into adult life. While the novels of the Border Trilogy follow the form of the *bildungsroman*, then, they explicitly reject what Moretti argues to be its substantive or symbolic content: the formation of a thoroughly modern self-defining subject. In this way, the novels of the Border trilogy make use of the *bildungsroman* in order to engage in what Arnold calls philosophical and ontological speculation.

Moretti names the *bildungsroman* a "symbolic form" (3). Echoing, perhaps, Adorno and Horkheimer's "Excursus I: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment" in Dialectic of Enlightenment (Adorno, Horkheimer and Schmid Noerr 35), Moretti writes, "Achilles, Hector, Ulysses: the hero of the classical epic is a mature man, an adult" (3).[35] Moretti refers to this phenomenon of the adult as hero and center of the epic as "the perfect embodiment of the symbolic relevance of the 'middle' stage of life" (3), something he notes that begins to change drastically with the onset of modernity: "but with the first enigmatic hero of modern times, it [this paradigm] falls apart" (3). Moretti goes on to name Hamlet as our culture's "first symbolic hero" (3) at the young age of thirty. In this opening salvo of his study, Moretti lays the groundwork for what is to follow; an investigation of the form of the *bildungsroman* as the great symbolic literature of modernity. Moretti's approach is germane to our study. He reads the novel of formation as the literary parallel to the modern self-defining subject, which invokes both the problems Hegel strove to

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[35] Although we may argue that Achilles' behavior was far from mature in The Illiad!

solve between freedom and situated-ness, and the power of *telos* in the modern world view. In the following short section, we will take a closer look at Moretti's work in order to define the terminology and conceptual architecture to be employed in our examination of McCarthy's revision of the *bildungsroman*. This also assists us as we seek to locate the literary strategy behind McCarthy's revision of the form, and its relevance to what we are calling the speculative ontology of modernity, as well as the philosophical *aporias* which result from this ontology.

Following this introduction to Moretti's ideas, we will turn to the novels of the Border Trilogy. McCarthy's revision or deconstruction of the *bildungsroman* constitutes the major formal theme of the Border novels. When we have isolated the symbolic meaning of the *bildungsroman qua* an engagement with modernity, we shall see McCarthy's take on the form illustrates as it his deep questioning of the speculative ontology of modernity. This will be done in two movements. First, we will examine the *bildungsroman* as the symbolic literary form of the self-defining subject and how McCarthy resists this. To illustrate, I will discuss the plot and structure of All the Pretty Horses in particular. The first section of this Chapter focuses on the role of identity in the *bildungsroman*, and on an interpretation of McCarthy's performative portrayal of cowboy life. The main characters of the Border novels all self-identity with the mythic, romantic role of the cowboy. This self-identification, i.e. the performative nature of the cowboy lifestyle, is another of McCarthy's interrogations of the nature and problems of the self-defining subject. Second, we will examine the implicit *telos* of the *bildungsroman* and McCarthy's engagement of it. This then we will relate to Hegel's thought and to the ontology of modernity.

In the section following the discussion of McCarthy's recasting of the *bildungsroman*, I will address the most strongly Hegelian aspect of McCarthy's Border fiction: the embedded

story, narrative, or tale. McCarthy adopts and adapts manifestly Hegelian ideas in his formulation of the embedded tale. Finally, with the embedded tale, we shall see where McCarthy at last finds value and meaning. That is, in contrast to the state of ontological conflict, the troubling aspects of modern teleology, and the seemingly bridgeless gap between subject and object, McCarthy eventually finds value, if not much hope, in human remembering and in the narrative act.

The task of pursuing this line of inquiry requires an unusual reading. In addressing three complete novels, and over 1000 pages of text, I must inevitably be somewhat myopic in determining which particular passages and trends to address. As a result, this Chapter should not be read as a comprehensive overview of the Border Trilogy. Rather, I will focus on a few particularities and recurring themes in the books. Most of the attention of the work to follow addresses the latter two novels of the trilogy, The Crossing and Cities of the Plain. All the Pretty Horses will be examined as it relates to the *bildungsroman*; however it will not be extensively addressed after this. I will isolate plot and structural features in All the Pretty Horses that reappear in the other two novels, but I must limit which specific textual examples I use. This discussion concerns two particular lineaments of the Border novels, namely their structure in as far as they play on the *bildungsroman*, and the idea of the story within a story, or embedded tale, which will show the importance of human remembering in the Border Trilogy.

II. *The Bildungsroman and Modernity*

If in classical epics the adult man "is the perfect embodiment of the symbolic relevance of the 'middle' stage of life," as Moretti writes, then in the era of the *bildungsroman*, the modern hero is youthful. In fact, Moretti writes, "youth is both a necessary and sufficient definition of

these heroes" (4). For Moretti, youth itself in fiction is symbolic; it "becomes for our modern culture the age which holds the 'meaning of life'" (4), and the novel of formation exhibits the very hallmarks of modern culture. Therefore, I consider it no coincidence that the central characters in McCarthy's novels from Blood Meridian to Cities of the Plain are all boys or young men. The youth of his main characters serves a primary metonymical purpose in the novels, it is an indisputable signifier of the *bildungsroman*. And, in fact, the *bildungsroman* addresses many of the same issues that Hegel's thought does. This, of course, is no coincidence either. Clearly the modern notion of the self-defining subject, both in the great freedom it allowed for, and its tendency to cause alienation, were the problems of the day in late 17th and early 18th century Germany, if not in all of Europe. We may note, for example, that Goethe's Wilhelm Meister (1795-1796)—the standard for the *bildungsroman*—was published only a decade before Hegel's first attempt at laying out his philosophical system in The Phenomenology (1807). As we shall see, the form's engagement with the issues of modernity we are concerned with—the subject/object break, and it's mirroring in humanity's redaction from social/divine/natural orders, and with the teleological model of history—were, there is no doubt, at the heart of the form. With assistance from Moretti's work, we can address these ideas in some detail.

A. The Self-Defining Subject and the Subject/Object Problem in the *Bildungsroman*

J.A. Cuddon describes the *bildungsroman* in the following terms, "literally an 'upbringing' or 'education' novel [. . .] which is an account of the youthful development of a hero or heroine (usually the former). It describes the processes by which maturity is achieved through the various ups and down of life" (82). While Moretti notes that the era of the *bildungsroman* has been over for a least a century, its influence remains as strong as ever in

contemporary fiction. The genre or form of the *bildungsroman* deeply informs the contemporary novel; in fact its focus and reliance upon the formation of a character have become nearly *de rigueur* in fiction.[36] If the actual *bildungsroman* "by the numbers" has largely disappeared there is little doubt of its importance in the conception of the contemporary novel.

While Cuddon gives us a working definition, Moretti's project locates the meaning of the *bildungsroman*. Moretti shows that the form actually symbolizes—and perhaps deeply influenced—the questions of modernity that concern us here: the subject/object split, the self-defining subject, and modern teleological ontology. Moretti writes that the *bildungsroman* resulted from "Europe plunging into modernity, but without possessing a *culture* of modernity" (5). The *bildungsroman*, then, is "the form which will dominate, or more precisely, make possible the Golden Century of Western narrative" (5). Moretti may be said to be making even a larger claim with this last sentence; that the *bildungsroman* actually served to help usher Europe into modernity. That is, the form did more than simply reflect the issues of the time, but in fact allowed, at least in part, European culture to fully embrace modernity.

How was this so? With its focus on youth and formation, the typical *bildungsroman* was, effectively, about the modern self-defining subject's struggle. The very tension we saw in Hegel between the desire for pre-modern placement within an order, and the power and indeed vacuousness of radical freedom, play out in the *bildungsroman*. In Moretti's formulation we must see the *bildungsroman* as:

> The 'symbolic form' of modernity: for Cassirer, and Panofsky, through such a form 'a particular spiritual content [here, a specific image of modernity] is connected to a specific material sign [here, youth] and intimately identified with it'. 'A specific image of

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[36] We may note that one of the most common complaints against novels, stories, plays, films etc is that the work shows no growth in its characters.

> modernity': the image conveyed precisely by the 'youthful' attributes of mobility and inner restlessness. Modernity as a bewitching and risky process full of 'great expectations' and 'lost illusions'. Modernity as – in Marx's words – a 'permanent revolution' that perceives the experience piled up in tradition as a useless dead-weight, and therefore can no longer feel represented by maturity, and still less by old age. (5)

These great expectations were those of the modern self-defining subject and its seemingly unlimited possibilities, and the lost illusions concern the meaning of being in relation to a higher order. This tension forms the heart of the *bildungsroman*. The strife between ideas of freedom and situated-ness was Hegel's great fascination as well, as we have seen. Our discussion of Hegel made clear that the subject/object break made possible the modern self-defining subject.

Following Taylor, we read Hegel as attempting to bridge the gap between the supposedly independent self-defining subject, and the need for situated-ness both spiritual and social. Therefore in Moretti's reading, and in ours, the form of the *bildungsroman* deals directly with this self-defining subject and its relation to society. That is, the form deals with the very same problem Hegel dealt with, although in Hegel's thought the cosmology of *Geist* put humanity into a much larger sense of situated-ness than a merely social one. As Moretti states, "it is still clear that we seek to indicate with it [the *bildungsroman*] one of the most harmonious solutions ever offered to a dilemma conterminous with modern bourgeois civilization; the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of *socialization*" (15); i.e. the self-defining subject against the larger order. The hero or heroine of the classic *bildungsroman* finds a way to toe the line between self-definition and coming into relation with society and the world. In this way the classical example of the *bildungsroman* is, as Moretti argues, a

compromise between the very modern positions of self-defining subject and social or divine order.

Our discussion of All the Pretty Horses, then, will attend to two aspects of the *bildungsroman* as they relate to modernity. First, the very structure of the *bildungsroman* itself echoes modern development of the self. McCarthy's refusal to finally fulfill the characters at the closing of the three novels, then, can be read as a refusal of aspects of the ontology of modernity. In the second case, we shall address the particular perfomativity of the protagonists of the Border Trilogy. The main characters of each book understand their cowboy identity through the filter of the myth of the West, the same myth McCarthy so brutally deflates in Blood Meridian. McCarthy deals with an apparent paradox here. The myth of the cowboy valorizes independence and radical freedom. On the other hand, its very status as myth calls into question the validity of those who self-identity with it. So while the cowboy myth plays at total independence, in fact it relies on a particular hermeneutic, that of modernity. The Border novels, then, utilize both the structure of the *bildungsroman* and the problems of modern identity formation to engage in the self-same critique of the self-defining subject.

The self-defining subject and its tension with situated-ness are not, however, the only problems of modernity we may find in the bildungsroman. Moretti further argues that the novel of formation is fundamentally teleological in aspect.

B. *Telos*, *Bildungsroman*, and Hegel

These recurring problems of modernity, as they manifested themselves in the time of Hegel's greatest influence and at the peak of the form of the *bildungsroman*, reflect not only the

self-defining subject and the subject/object split, but as Moretti argues, *telos* and history. He writes,

> Narrative and history, in fact, do not retreat before the onslaught of events, but demonstrate the possibility of giving them order and meaning. Furthermore, they suggest that reality's meaning is now to be grasped solely in its historical-diachronic dimension. Not only are there no 'meaningless' events; there can now be meaning only *through* events (6).

We may duly note both the language of Hegel, as well as the language of Judge Holden and his enterprise of ordering in the above passage. Order and meaning are available through the examination of history: a pattern becomes clear, and progress is the way of the world. For modernity, for Hegel, and in the *bildungsroman*, the positive dialectic is an ontological fact. This idea discloses both the speculative ontology of modernity and the infrastructure of the *bildungsroman*. Moretti calls this the "teleological rhetoric" (7) of the *bildungsroman*. It shows that "the meaning of events lies in their *finality*" and Moretti states that this "is the narrative equivalent of Hegelian thought, with which it shares a strong *normative* vocation: events acquire meaning when they led to *one* ending, and one only" (7). This is Hegel's owl of Minerva swooping by again, or to paraphrase Jürgen Habermas, the elevation of history to the rank of philosophy. The interpretation of the *bildungsroman* as it relates to the Hegelian idea of history as philosophy, and its relation to modernity, will figure deeply in our discussion of McCarthy's take on the form.

In the above passage, Moretti refers to the inevitable conclusion of the *bildungsroman*, the so-called "happy ending" wherein the novel's hero or heroine becomes a fully formed, and socially adjusted, subject. Through this happy ending, the reader is invited to interpret the events

of the novel that not only preceded it but in fact caused it, as historically necessary in order for the ending to have occurred as it did. That is to say that the *bildungsroman* relies upon causal necessity in the same fashion as Hegel's *telos* does, and as indeed the speculative ontology of modernity does. Moretti poses the compromise presented by the *bildungsroman* as being opposed to proper synthesis, meaning that while the typical hero or heroine does find happiness or fulfillment at the end of the *bildungsroman*, the genre or form never advances a radical solution to the problems of the modern self-defining subject. Here, we might say, the *bildungsroman* differs somewhat from Hegel's thought. The form was perhaps less revolutionary than Hegel's philosophy; it did not strive toward perfection the way Hegel's thought inevitably did. Moretti, though, sees something similar to Hegelianism in the happy ending of the classical *bildungsroman*: "the happy ending, in its highest form, is not a dubious 'success,' but this triumph of meaning over time. Hegel: 'The true is the whole. But the whole is nothing else than the essence consummating itself through its development'" (55).

In our consideration of McCarthy's take on the *bildungsroman*, we will find a parallel with Hegel's thought. This leads us to McCarthy's view of the speculative ontology of modernity again, particularly in its teleological aspect. McCarthy has no truck with happy endings of course, and this is imperative to his revision of the *bildungsroman*. If, as Moretti argues, what we have at stake with the form is not only the identity and placement of the self-defining subject, but the very *telos* of Euro-American philosophical modernity, this, then, is precisely what the Border Trilogy novels do not provide. In fact, McCarthy queries and finally rejects the ontology of modernity. Moretti's interpretation of the *bildungsroman* states that "narrative and history [. . .] do not retreat before events, but demonstrate the possibility of giving them order and meaning"

and McCarthy resists precisely this. Order and meaning are most definitely *not* to be found through the analysis of history, in fact only a deep ethical and moral morass lies down that road.

In the following section we will examine the Border Trilogy, and particularly All the Pretty Horses, in the light of the *bildungsroman*. Through the revision of this form, McCarthy addresses the philosophical problems of modernity: the subject/object split, the self-defining subject, modern *telos*, and their relationship to history. The enterprise of ordering we saw in Blood Meridian will be evident again in McCarthy's engagement with epistemological issues in the Border Trilogy, but unlike Blood Meridian some quarter is given. In the end, McCarthy rejects the tyranny of history and its teleological implications in favor of a humanistic remembering. History, as it plays out on multiple levels in the Southwestern novels, must be brought down to a human level. To think like Hegel, to fully embrace modern *telos*, is to commit a grievous error in McCarthy's fiction. The Judge does just this, as does Dueña Alfonsa in All the Pretty Horses, and Eduardo the evil pimp in Cities of the Plain.

Of course one of the great stumbling blocks to isolating any kind of positive vision in McCarthy's work stems from his clear sympathy with the devil. His evil characters, the ones that embody the negative aspects of modernity, seem too convincing at times. Thus, many readers are at a loss to when they ask whether McCarthy's fiction has any redemptive urge. Clearly in Blood Meridian and Outer Dark, for example, it does not. However, when we read his works as of a piece, we begin to see, if not redemption, the possibility of an alternate way of being than that which Euro-American modernity has foisted upon us. If teleological rhetoric leads to great evil, what does McCarthy suggest otherwise? And why does he seem to take such devilish pleasure in his portrayal of evil which we have argued stems at least in part from the ontology of modernity?

We can address this in the following way: McCarthy's evil characters are never incorrect about the implications of causality and history, i.e. modern *telos*. In fact, McCarthy's prose goes to great lengths in order to back them up. But their assuredness belies that validity of argument implies no moral or ethical weight at all. To see things in the modern, teleological, Hegelian sense is, to McCarthy, to default on morality. History always serves to justify the winners, the end always warrants the means in historicism. This is McCarthy's argument against modern teleological rhetoric that we see on display in Judge Holden, Alfonsa, Eduardo, and others in his Western novels. In his revision of the *bildungsroman* we shall see it again, this time manifested not only in characters' words, but in form, structure, and plot. In opposition to this, McCarthy advocates for the "truths of men," rather than the "truths of history." And the truths of men, as we shall see in Section III can be found in the embedded tale; the narrative act.

III. *Formation and Identity: McCarthy's Revision of the Bildungsroman in All the Pretty Horses and the Border Trilogy*

Identity and its formation are the *raison d'etre* of the *bildungsroman* on the most basic level. As we saw above, in the *bildungsroman* the passage of a youth through life and the resulting process of identity formation concludes in a happy ending of self-definition and integration. This form, then, reflects—and in Moretti's argument symbolizes—one of Hegel's primary concerns; that is, the tension between the self-defining subject and its relationship to and integration into the world. If the *bildungsroman* in its form mirrors not only the problems of modernity with which we have been concerned in this study, but in fact proposes a kind of solution to these problems, then a reading of McCarthy's Border Trilogy that focuses on his treatment of the *bildungsroman* will show what I have stated above: that McCarthy knowingly

rejects both the solution or compromise of the *bildungsroman* as it relates to the formation of identity, but also the historical, teleological rhetoric of the form, and thus of modernity.

Phillip A. Snyder sees the critique of the *bildungsroman* in the Border Trilogy: "McCarthy[. . .] critique[s] [. . .] the *bildungsroman* as a productive developmental mode for ensuring individual maturation and survival in the world" (209), and he is exactly correct. Snyder also writes, though, that "the Border Trilogy shares nostalgia for the cowboy past tinged with a persistent avocation of cowboy virtues in the present, particularly as invested in the materiality of cowboy culture" (199), and offers an in depth reading of the trilogy as celebrating, in a way, the "cowboy code" despite this code's weaknesses or failures. This sense of valorized tradition in the Border Trilogy is not entirely erroneous. As we shall see concerning the tale, McCarthy finally does find value in human remembering, but I think this has little to do with cowboy culture *per se*. In fact, the stressed perfomativity of the main characters in the Border Trilogy would certainly seem to contradict a straight acceptance of cowboy codes. Regardless, let us now turn to All the Pretty Horses for the purpose of laying out McCarthy's revision of the *bildungsroman* and its engagement with identity, *telos*, and modernity.

All the Pretty Horses sets the template for the later two Border novels in important ways. While McCarthy's following trilogy novels delve deeper into philosophical questions, he rehashes the structure and tone of All the Pretty Horses throughout the trilogy. We are more concerned with structure than tone presently. All the Pretty Horses functions as a *bildungsroman*, or more properly a take on, or revision of, the genre. Through its plot, form, and structure we can identify McCarthy's larger strategy in the entire trilogy regarding modernity, identity, and *telos*, for the three novels are nearly re-tellings of the same story, an idea which will appear again when we address the embedded tale. All the Pretty Horses serves both heuristically and functionally in

my analysis as the program piece for the trilogy. While The Crossing and Cities of the Plain contain much more direct philosophical speculation within their texts, All the Pretty Horses sets the formal convention upon which the later novels will rely.

All the Pretty Horses begins with a de-fathering that serves to set the main character, John Grady Cole, free upon the world. While the funeral that opens the novel is that of John Grady's grandfather, as we see in the pages that follow, this grandfather was John Grady's true father as opposed to his sickly, war-scarred actual parent. The novel commences with loss, with a forcible setting free from the past that allows for John Grady's journey. As we shall see, this journey is not one of development as it would be in the traditional *bildungsroman.* Rather, in the end, the novel denies John Grady his fulfillment. The denial of fulfillment becomes increasingly evident in the following novels as well, culminating in John Grady's death and Billy Parham's homelessness in Cities of the Plain.

With the loss of his maternal grandfather at the start of All the Pretty Horses, John Grady loses his connection to the land, and presumably his future as a Texas cowboy. McCarthy writes, "The Grady name was buried with that old man the day the norther blew the lawnchairs over the dead cemetery grass. The boy's name was Cole. John Grady Cole" (All the Pretty Horses 7). Of course, the narrator refers to John Cole as John Grady through the rest of the novel, so the name finally does not die. McCarthy's use of "Grady" rather than "Cole" ties the character to his maternal side, and to the ranch. John identifies with the surname Grady, not Cole. He identifies with his rough and tumble Texas rancher grandfather, not his dying, weakened father. In actuality then, the name does not die with the old man. Instead the ranch dies, and the legacy of young John Grady dies. McCarthy shows us as much in a conversation between John Grady and his mother:

[John Grady:] Why couldn't you lease me the ranch? [. . .] I'd give you all the money. You could do whatever you wanted.

[Mother:] All the money. You dont know what you're talking about. There's not any money. This place has barely paid expenses for twenty years. [. . .] Anyway you're sixteen years old, you cant run a ranch.

[John Grady:] Yes I can.

[Mother:] You're being ridiculous. You have to go to school. (All the Pretty Horses 15)

So at the start of the novel, John Grady is de-fathered, de-connected, and in his mind, disowned. This state of affairs sets into motion his journey into Mexico and the following events. The very same pattern will be repeated in The Crossing when the parents of Boyd and Billy Parham are murdered, setting the events of the final two chapters of that novel into motion, and it repeats again in Cities of the Plain.

With nothing more to lose John Grady and his friend Lacey Rawlins light out for Mexico in search of the authentic cowboy life. McCarthy writes that they were "like thieves newly loosed in that dark electric, like young thieves in a glowing orchard, loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing" (All the Pretty Horses 31). Here we see the freedom of the cowboy life, as felt by two adolescent boys when they set off for their great adventure. In this passage, McCarthy draws a parallel to Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, and he evokes the sense of adventure and awe that Twain saw in boyhood, very much in contrast to the dismal, windy, barrenness of the funeral of John Grady's grandfather. Again, The Crossing exhibits nearly the same sense as Billy and Boyd head to Mexico to recover their family's stolen horses. Perhaps the Parham brothers are less enthusiastic due to the terrible loss of their parents, but there is no doubt that the sense of adventure figures strongly in their journey. And in Cities

of the Plain, John Grady's "ardenthearted"ness again leads to conflict in Mexico, this time over Magdalena, his betrothed.

As John Grady and Rawlins set out, McCarthy notes the performative aspect of their identities. That is, by nearly all definitions John Grady (we know less of Rawlins's life) is a "real cowboy," or at least his comes from a real cowboy background, even if he is too young to have been a working hand. McCarthy makes it clear, however, that John Grady and Rawlins self-identify with the mythical West Wild outlaw cowboy role. To wit, in a conversation with an American Mexican (who says he has "never been to Mexico in my life"), Rawlins and John Grady show their romantic conception of the outlaw:

> [Mexican:] Where you headed?
>
> [Rawlins:] Mexico.
>
> [Mexican:] What for?
>
> Rawlins looked at John Grady. You think he can be trusted?
>
> [John Grady:] Yeah. He looks all right.
>
> [Rawlins:] We're runnin from the law. (All the Pretty Horses 34)

Rawlins and John Grady go on to joke that they robbed a bank, and a similar incident occurs when the pair comes across Jimmy Blevins, whom they attempt to fool into believing they are outlaws.

Here we begin to see the performative aspect of identity that recurs through the Border Trilogy, particularly in McCarthy's play on "the all american cowboy" (referring to John Grady) in Cities of the Plain. So, in All the Pretty Horses, identity is at stake in two ways. First, identity seems to be taken away by death in the case of John Grady's grandfather. With that death, John Grady loses his connection to ranch life. In the second case, we see that the boys have assumed

the role of Wild West outlaws, or at least fallen under the sway of its romantic appeal. This is the performative aspect of identity. In what follows, All the Pretty Horses puts its characters, particularly John Grady, through their paces (as do the other two Border novels). The structural similarity between the three trilogy novels bases itself on the form of the *bildungsroman*. As we first see in All the Pretty Horses, however, fulfillment or growth does not forthcome in any of the Border Trilogy novels. In this way, McCarthy revises the *bildungsroman* querying both personal identity and the notion of progress, or *telos*.

The center of All the Pretty Horses becomes, after the boys arrive at the Nuestra Señora de la Purísma Conceptión ranch in Mexico, a love story. As John Grady falls in love with Alejandra, he gets closer and closer to his imprisonment and the realization that his love is doomed. The patrón of the ranch, Alejandra's father, discovers their trysts and has John Grady and Rawlins rounded up and shipped off to jail for an incident involving Blevins's horse in the closing of Chapter I. An overzealous guard kills Belvins on the way to the jail, and John Grady and Rawlins are abused daily while incarcerated. Finally, after a gory conflict with an assassin, John Grady and his friend are released. Rawlins has by this time had enough of Mexico and vows to return home, while John Grady sets off back to the ranch to find his love, Alejandra. At the ranch he has a long discussion with Dueña Alfonsa, some of which we addressed in the previous chapter. In the end, Alejandra rejects John Grady because of what the affair meant to her father. She says, "I didnt know that he would stop loving me. I didnt know he could. Now I know" (All the Pretty Horses 252), and finally, "I cannot do what you ask [. . .]. I love you. But I cannot" (All the Pretty Horses 254) when John Grady pleads with her to leave with him.

This rejection sends John Grady into a tailspin of violence. Much like the existential reading of Blood Meridian shows, John Grady appears to lash out against the world following

Alejandra's rejection of him. He goes on to reclaim his horse and those of Blevins and Rawlins as well. After some violent interludes, John Grady finally returns to the U.S. and begins the process of bringing the horses back to their proper owners, when possible. At the close of the novel, in a clear hearkening to the clichéd ending of Western films and novels, "He rode with the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west across the evening land [. . .] horse and rider and horse passed on and their long shadows passed in tandem like the shadow of a single being. Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come" (All the Pretty Horses 302).

Unlike the typical *bildungsroman*, fulfillment, or resolution, or integrity cannot be found in All the Pretty Horses at its close, nor in the other two trilogy novels. Not only does the end of novel have John Grady going into "the darkening land," which has less than positive connotations, but in the end love has been denied him. McCarthy also denies John Grady any reflective fulfillment, that is to say that John Grady does not grow stronger or more centered as a result of his. In fact, as we finally see in Cities of the Plain, John Grady's "world to come" ends in violent death at a young age as he rehashes a very similar doomed love to that which we see in All the Pretty Horses.

In Moretti's reading, All the Pretty Horses may be seen to resemble a dramatic tragedy rather than a *bildungsroman* at least in its conclusion. Moretti writes, concerning tragedy and the *bildungsroman*,

> In drama [. . .] the protagonist exhausts within himself a universe of values, a paradigmatic field: it is the 'loneliness' of the tragic hero, to whom the meaning of life is entrusted, to be achieved through *conflict*. But in the classical *Bildungsroman* this is

impossible; as later in Hegel, the certainty of meaning lies here not in conflict, but in *participation* in the Whole. (20)

The *bildungsroman* as a form, then, typifies two things about modernity. First, it presents a compromise between the self-defining subject and society, and second it manifests the ontology of *telos*. In the quote above, Moretti argues that in the *bildungsroman* conflict does not provide meaning. We might say that in McCarthy's work, conflict does allow for meaning; indeed many readers may feel this is the case in the Western novels. These readers err however. For while conflict is no doubt one of McCarthy's primary interests, his main characters do not achieve meaning through conflict. But nor do they participate in the whole, and nor do they become fulfilled individuals that learn to "get along" in the world. In fact the very opposite is true. Where does this leave us?

In all three of the trilogy novels, adolescent boys or young men go out into the world and have formative experiences, evoking the *bildungsroman*. But, as Moretti notes, the real meaning of the *bildungsroman* comes from its conclusion: the completion, or formation, or fulfillment of the individual subject. By not providing the happy ending in any of the Border novels, McCarthy addresses and revises the *bildungsroman* and its reflection of modernity. Two strategies result from this withholding of McCarthy's; the first involving identity, and the second involving *telos*. Rather than becoming a fully formed person, John Grady's greatest realization in All the Pretty Horses is as follows: "He thought that in the beauty of the world were hid a secret. He thought the world's heart beat at some terrible cost and that the world's pain and its beauty moved in a relationship of diverging equity and that in this headlong deficit the blood of multitudes might ultimately be extracted for the vision of a single flower" (All the Pretty Horses 282).[37] McCarthy

[37] The similarity to Hegel's description of the "slaughter-bench of history" seems patent.

has an innkeeper echo this sentiment as well, "he said that it was good that God kept the truths of life from the young as they were starting out or else they'd have no heart to start at all" (All the Pretty Horses 284). With his revision of the *bildungsroman*, McCarthy interrogates the ontology modernity by both disallowing his main characters positive personality formation, and in doing this, the "teleological rhetoric" of both the form and Euro-American modernity is undermined as well.

In fact, as has been noted by scholars like Monk, McCarthy seems unwilling to provide progress of any teleological kind. Cities of the Plain makes this most evident. In that novel, John Grady returns and heads back to Mexico for another woman. Indeed he has learned nothing from his failure in the All the Pretty Horses; his personality remains largely static. Now this can be read as a flaw on the author's part, but this flatness of character appears over and over again in McCarthy's work from Blood Meridian on, and as such I find it more compelling to assume that he does this for a reason. In the personalities and identities of his main characters we must look for McCarthy's engagement with philosophical problems. His unchanging characters, then, and their placement in *bildungsromans* that are empty of positive resolution—either of personality or integration into society—trouble both ideas of the self-defining subject and the ontology of progressive *telos*.

Let us delve a bit deeper into this idea. In the case of the self-defining subject, McCarthy addresses this in two ways with his revision of the *bildungsroman*. First, the cowboy characters appear to be free, but are not in two important ways. First, the idea of the cowboy is based upon individualism. Of course the characters in the Border novels personify this, as do Moretti's tragic figures. Although they are but children in the first two novels, the main characters of All the Pretty Horses and The Crossing do not rely on anyone, and they see themselves as completely

free agents. As McCarthy's narrator and anchorite characters never tire of telling us however, the weight of history and perhaps fate burden the actions of these boys and men. Rawlins recognizes this early on in All the Pretty Horses when he says, "Ever dumb thing I ever done in my life was a decision I made before that got me into it. It was never the dumb thing. It was always some choice I'd made before it" (All the Pretty Horses 79). And at a fundamental level (one which we do not have the space to discuss here), all three of the Border novels are about acts of will by characters who conceive of themselves as free. These acts fail because the characters are not truly, radically free as they imagine themselves to be. So, the first example of McCarthy's engagement with modern identity in the Border Trilogy shows itself in this fashion: the ultimate paragon of American self-defined freedom, the cowboy, is denied the happy ending and the positive formation of personality because, in McCarthy's view, this vision of freedom and self-definition is a faulty one.

In the second case, McCarthy fashions a variation upon the same theme. By earmarking the main characters of the Border Trilogy as partly performative in their identities (i.e. "the all american cowboy" syndrome), he complicates the notion of identity formation again. The cowboy sets himself against "society" in an important way with his independent ethos, but this very role or identity of the cowboy results just as much from society or popular culture as it does from a real way of being. In the case of All the Pretty Horses, we can this most clearly in the American Mexican and Blevins passages looked at above, as well as the relentless self-mythologizing that John Grady and Rawlins engage in the first half of the book. They see themselves as whiskey drinkin' outlaws, living the lost Wild West lifestyle. For example, Rawlins engages in self-mythologizing here, "Drinkin cactus juice in old Mexico, he said. What

do you reckon they're saying at home about now?" (All the Pretty Horses 51), and he and John Grady do so at the close of Chapter I as well in the following exchange:

> This is how it was with the old waddies, aint it?
>
> Yeah.
>
> How long do you think you'd like to stay here?
>
> About a hundred years. Go to sleep. (All the Pretty Horses 96)

And here: "Black boots, said Rawlins, Aint that the shits? I always wanted to be a badman" (All the Pretty Horses 96), clearly referencing cowboy movies or serials. McCarthy illustrates the irony of the ultimate self-defining subject, the cowboy, as the creation or avatar of a society rather than as an entirely "authentic" way of being. And again, the form of the *bildungsroman* comes into play. We might expect that, as in a traditional *bildungsroman*, Rawlins and John Grady would begin to develop their own sense of self and come to terms with the performative aspect of their identities. But neither does so, at least in the text provided us. Perhaps Rawlins does as he returns home, but this is mere speculation. Importantly, John Grady becomes, as will Billy Parham in the following two novels, a drifter. To be a drifter, is of course, the exact opposite of what the *bildungsroman* promises. In the *bildungsroman*, the main character defines herself and she comes to terms with society. McCarthy's Border characters accomplish neither of these things, and this is a crux of the novels. As *bildungsromans* in form but finally not in content, they resist the modern idea of self-definition.

More important than identity *per se* to the present analysis is idea of the progressive formation of identity as a micro model of modern *telos*. Moretti's identification of teleological rhetoric in the *bildungsroman* shows this. That is, the very process that the main character undergoes in a *bildungsroman* parallels modern societal, historical, and metaphysical *telos*.

Moretti's study of the *bildungsroman* has this conception at its heart: the *bildungsroman* reflects modernity in its very instantiation. Therefore, we must not overlook McCarthy's strategy of using the form but redacting the closure. Indeed, even if he did not compose the trilogy with the intention of pricking the ontology of modernity, there can be no doubt that the books perform this task. As we saw with Judge Holden, the appeal to history to give meaning to events implies ethical failure. Monk sees this as McCarthy's rejection of synthesis and his concern with "flight from modernity." In a significant way, he is correct. That is, McCarthy rejects the speculative teleological ontology of modernity. But he does not do so by portraying synthesis as evil, as Monk argues. Instead, McCarthy withholds the teleological rhetoric of the *bildungsroman* while using its form. So not only does he query identity in the ways we saw, he also investigates the very notion of meaningful progress or progress as positive philosophical rhetoric.

In All the Pretty Horses, John Grady does not progress toward a self-realization in any important way, as his fate in Cities of the Plain will show. In fact, while we might see the Border novels as *bildungsromans* of formative alienation, even this is inadequate. In the end, while John Grady's quest to claim Alejandra comes to a tragic conclusion in All the Pretty Horses; he does not give up an alienated and bitter man, as we see in Cities of the Plain. Has John Grady learned anything? The answers would have to be no in the case of the final novel of the trilogy. McCarthy's conscious strategy of using the form of the *bildungsroman* thrice in a row, retelling virtually the same story thrice, and providing no self-realizing redemption for his characters in any of the novels shows his manifest rejection of modern *telos* as a concept.

Perhaps the best textual example of this appears in The Crossing. At the close of the novel, the drifter Billy Parham witnesses the detonation of an atom bomb test at White Sands. McCarthy writes, "He [Billy] woke in the white light of the desert noon and sat up in the

ranksmelling blankets. [. . .] He looked out down the road and looked toward the fading light [. . .] and he looked again at the road which lay as before yet more dark and darkening still where it ran on to the east and where there was no sun and there was no dawn" (The Crossing 425). Note the reprise of "darkening" here, just as in the conclusion of All the Pretty Horses. Some have read this passage as a lament for the coming of the nuclear age. Certainly, such a reading is accurate. We may also read the above as an indication of progress. As we saw in Blood Meridian, the idea that all becomes excusable in the annals of history resides in this passage as well. For what was the nuclear age but the age of true American flowering and world-domination? In the years after World War II, the U.S. became the dominant global power and exploded from its cultural youth. The nuclear threat solidified America's nearly unassailable status. Where would we be today if the Bomb had not been developed?

And yet nuclear war, while perhaps it seems a distant threat in the post-millennium era, would be the greatest holocaust this planet has ever known. Billions might die. What sort of *telos* is this? What sort of dialectical movement could possibly take something so horrible as merely a stage? Certainly the Hegelian Idea cannot effectively address the possibility of nuclear holocaust. Without the Bomb, this country would not be what it is. But with the Bomb, existence itself is in peril. Like the holocaust of the Wild West to which we were privy in Blood Meridian, possible nuclear devastation illustrates the error of teleological thinking, while bringing to mind the horrors of the 20th century world wars and the U.S. bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

In McCarthy's revision of the *bildungsroman*, as evidenced by his refusal to provide the happy ending which gives meaning to the events which preceded them, *telos* is at stake. In the present reading, All the Pretty Horses serves to illustrate this, but in point of fact it exists in all three of the trilogy novels, and as such I think it vital to explore. To read McCarthy as a simple

pessimist, or metaphysically cheap, or a fatalist, proves incorrect in the final analysis. Instead we may read the trilogy novels as critiques of the very fundamental ideas that lie at the base of modernity. The Border novels address, then, the speculative ontology of modernity. As in Blood Meridian, McCarthy addresses the subject/object problem with his query of the very notion of the radically free self-defining subject in these works. That is, while his revision of the *bildungsroman* in its apparently fatalistic aspect, rather than endorsing fate, it queries the nature of how we see ourselves in modernity. The focus on performative identity in the trilogy mirrors this same problem; the problem of the self-defining subject that is immersed in cultural detritus. Finally, and most importantly, McCarthy continues to interrogate modern teleological rhetoric. He does this indirectly with the alteration of the symbolic form of the *bildungsroman.* That is, by using the form but redacting its punch line, if you will, he shifts his narrative from one that would confirm modern *telos* to one that rejects it.

I have written above that to see McCarthy having no hope at all is incorrect. How so? As we shall see in the next section, by the time of The Crossing and Cities of the Plain McCarthy proposes an alternate interpretive strategy to the problems of being-in-the-world than the epochal ones of modernity. His alternative, the embedded tale, may not prove convincing; indeed his pessimism overwhelms even this to some extent. But in order to examine McCarthy's philosophical position and to answer the accusations of utter inhumanity in his fiction, we must address the embedded tale. In what follows, a direct appeal will again be made to Hegel's thought. Like the idea of ontological conflict, McCarthy seems to have adapted the idea of the embedded tale directly from Hegel's mechanics.

IV. *Hegel, the Embedded Tale, and Value*

McCarthy makes his clearest use of manifestly Hegelian ideas in the "embedded tale" as it appears in The Crossing and Cities of the Plain. The embedded tale or story ultimately provides what little hope or resolution McCarthy offers in the Border novels. An epistemological model that accepts human knowing in place of ontological speculation, the embedded tale appears to be an unprecedented development in McCarthy's *oeuvre*. That is, McCarthy finds value and meaning in human experience and in the act of remembering. This distinctly humanistic approach—the favoring of human meaning over attempts to understand the workings of the world—forms McCarthy's own response to the convincing nihilism of Blood Meridian. McCarthy's solution to his own problems, like many solutions, may be found wanting. But in this study we are concerned with isolating McCarthy's philosophical position, and in order to do so, we must address his proposed solution which ultimately boils down to remembering and small acts of human kindness.

The embedded tale itself, clearly McCarthy's attempt to address the role of fiction and stories (and thus of course his own art), interests us less as a conclusion than as a formulation. Recall Dianne C. Luce's quote on this matter from the Introduction: "McCarthy was thinking about the role of narrative in our lives and had done some reading in Hegel that seems to have influenced his ideas by at least Fall 1991" (202). Again, like his acceptance of Hegelian ontological conflict, McCarthy adapts only the mechanics of Hegel's dialectic rather than its substantive content in the embedded tale. By this I mean that the vision of meaning that McCarthy develops in The Crossing and Cities of the Plain plainly echoes Hegel's strange conceptual schema of dialectic subsumption and causal connection. McCarthy is not interested in

Hegel's *Geist*, Reason, or *telos*, however. Indeed the narrative act takes the place of Hegel's Idealism.

Stories, storytelling, and history are vital topics of what J. Douglas Canfield calls the "vatic passages" of the Border Trilogy. These passages are one of McCarthy's trademarks; in them a strange outsider offers cryptic, philosophical remarks to the often uncaring or perplexed protagonist or protagonists. The Epilogue of Cities of the Plain, the stories the gypsy tells Billy about airplane wreckage and Billy's encounter with the ex-Mormon in The Crossing are examples of these vatic passages. While the vatic passages of Blood Meridian, and to lesser extent All the Pretty Horses, often come from evil characters like Judge Holden, the anchorite in possession of a human heart in Blood Meridian, and Dueña Alfonsa (who is perhaps not truly evil), by the time of The Crossing, these interpolations come largely from the mouths of more helpful, if no less bizarre characters.

Monk addresses one of these passages in Cities of the Plain as an exemplar of McCarthy's concern for tales and history and its relation to Hegelian thought: "The world of our fathers resides within us. Ten thousand generations or more. A form with no history has no power to perpetuate itself. What has no past can have no future" (Cities of the Plain 281). In Monk's interpretation, we are to believe that passages such as this present us with Holden-esque sophists who articulate a Hegelian view which is fundamentally opposed to the larger theme of the novels. Thus, in Monk's argument, the overall schema of the Border novels rejects movement and celebrates flight from modernity. Monk is on the right track with such an interpretation in some respects. He identifies the strikingly Hegelian nature of the passage above in service of his reading that the Border novels completely resist Hegelian modernity and its synthesis. The problem with this interpretation is that this stranger from the Epilogue of Cities of

the Plain bears no malice, unlike the Dueña or Holden. A more accurate reading would compare the stranger of Cities' Epilogue, or to Quijada, the ex-Mormon, and the gypsy of The Crossing; characters that are strange but not evil.

Monk states correctly that "there is much in McCarthy that is akin to the dialectic process" (95). Unfortunately the thrust of his argument forces him to claim that the Hegelian model we find in McCarthy's idea of the embedded tale must also be despised in the same way synthesis is. A rejoinder to this interpretation may be found in the following passage from The Crossing concerning the *corrido*[38] that has come to include Boyd's deeds: "It [the *corrido*] does not owe its allegiance to the truths of history but to the truths of men" (The Crossing 386). This program statement for the Border Trilogy sums up McCarthy's position on meaning and value—it can only be found in a humanistic understanding, and never in a transcendent one. The passage from Cities of the Plain excerpted above demonstrates this very same position. McCarthy's inquiry centers partly around the court of history again.

> Returning to the idea of the embedded tale, the ex-Mormon of The Crossing says:
>
> There are different worlds, you must agree. Yet even so there is but one world and everything that is imaginable is necessary to it. For this world also which seems to be a thing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale. And all in it is a tale and each tale tells the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them. So everything is necessary. Every least thing. Nothing can be dispensed with. Nothing despised. (The Crossing 143)

Here one of McCarthy's anchorites espouses a startlingly Hegelian view for perhaps the first time. This is a striking passage. It takes a basically Hegelian vision of the embodied, holistic

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[38] *Corridos* are Mexican folksongs, often about outlaws and rebels.

world/universe and transposes the idea of the tale or story into the place of Hegel's "World Spirit" or *Geist*. As we saw in Chapter 1, Hegel's vision of the universe posited a very similar idea to the one McCarthy espouses here. When the ex-Mormon notes "everything is necessary [. . .]. Every least thing," we look back to Hegel. Hegel's Idealism—his particular understanding of the Idea of the world as posited by *Geist*—relied on this same sense. He saw every least thing as necessary because *Geist* is good and with and through *Geist* humanity moves toward perfection. Thus every little thing of history has served to enrich the present and help humanity on its way to integrity. And here we see a strong point against Monk's claim that McCarthy entirely rejects Hegelian thought. The Ex-Mormon is strange, and perhaps a little frightening, but he is no Holden, and in fact he directly contradicts the Judge here. Rather than every small crumb being capable of devouring us, the ex-Mormon tells us "nothing can be dispensed with."

The ex-Mormon obviously echoes Hegel when he says of the world, "all in it is a tale and each tale tells the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them." McCarthy uses Hegel's mechanics here, but rather than proposing a transcendent Ideal of human history being fulfilled, the narrative act takes the place of history in McCarthy's formulation. McCarthy, as we saw with ontological conflict, finds use value in Hegel's architecture, if not his larger vision. And rather than valorizing *telos* or historical absolutes, McCarthy opts to find meaning and value in the tale.

This becomes increasingly evident as The Crossing goes on. Two particular examples will serve to illustrate the continuing idea of the embedded story. Billy's interaction with a group of gypsies who are transporting the wreckage of a bi-plane is the first of these, and the second will be evident in the status of Billy's brother Boyd as a hero of the *corrido*. In Billy's dialogue with the gypsies, McCarthy again queries value and how it is assigned (as we saw with coins),

this time by troubling the factual truth of the stories or narratives surrounding this airplane. Problems of meaning, and value, and how they are assigned come to fore in this passage, particularly as these problems relate to stories and narrative. Here we will see the import of the embedded tale. In the second case, Billy's brother Boyd dies about two thirds of the way through the novel, but takes on another life through narrative in the *corrido*. The idea of the embedded tale appears most prominently in the Epilogue to Cities of the Plain. As I will show, the nameless stranger at the close of Cities of the Plain rehashes the embedded tale and value discourse that we first see in The Crossing.

Toward the end of The Crossing, the main character, Billy Parham, heads back into United States from Mexico carrying the remains of his brother, Boyd. Billy runs into a group of gypsies who are using horses to tow the ruins of a small, canvas-winged bi-plane on a float up a river. This passage is vital to our discussion of embedded tale, and its status as an alternative to philosophical modernity. Billy enquires about the plane, asking the head gypsy, "Y a donde van con el aeroplano?" [And where are you all going with the airplane?]. The head man gives an interesting answer, "Con respecto al aeroplano, he said, hay tres historias. Cual quiere oir?" [With respect to the airplane, there are three histories (or stories). Which do you want to hear?] (The Crossing 403-404). Here, McCarthy begins his inquiry into meaning and how it is assigned anew, as he did in Blood Meridian. In fact, there turn out to be four histories rather than three, and we find that the histories given to Billy by the gypsy leader are all factually false. Regardless, like most of us, Billy says that he "wish[es] to hear the true history" (The Crossing 404). The gypsy leader then goes on to give an account wherein there are two planes, almost exactly alike. One plane is desired by a man whose son died in that plane, and his father wishes

to reclaim this plane in order to "bleed it of its power to commandeer his dreams" (The Crossing 406).

The gypsies had attempted to retrieve the plane in question, but it had gotten caught on rocks in the river. They abandoned it for a time, and upon their return, they saw that the plane had washed away. The gypsies knew of another plane that was similar—identical in fact—so they located this other plane and were in the process of bringing this other plane to their client, the father. Billy then notes, "that it seemed to him that the freighters [the gypsies] did not hold the identity of the airplane in any great consequence" (The Crossing 410), to which the head man responds, "that is was indeed of consequence and that it was in fact the whole burden of their inquiry [. . .]. From a certain perspective one might even hazard to say that the great trouble with the world was that that which survived was held in hard evidence to past events [. . .]. A false authority clung to what persisted" (The Crossing 410). History, *telos*, and narrative all come together in this passage.

The "false authority" of what persists is precisely the Hegelian model of teleological history. That is, what survives, and we must read this as society as well as physical objects, gives meaning through its mere existence. History is the adjudicator; and this is modernity in a nutshell. And not just modernity, but the particular brand of modernity that has been so deeply influenced by Hegel's thought. The importance of this section of The Crossing cannot be overstated; in fact it sums up McCarthy's larger scheme in the Border Trilogy. He takes on Hegel's modernity while keeping his architecture, just as he does with ontological conflict and the coin imagery of Blood Meridian and All the Pretty Horses.

When the gypsy says that the identity of the plane is "indeed of consequence," this must be read as a continuation of the discussion of value and meaning we saw concerning coin

imagery in Chapter 2. What is the meaning of the airplane? How does it come by this meaning? In the case of the coin, McCarthy argues that man stamps a meaning on it as we try to do in the enterprise of ordering. In The Crossing, his thought has become more complex. The famous recurrence of the word "matrix" in The Crossing illustrates this, but in the passage under current examination, we note the difference between an airplane and a coin. The coin is a meaningless piece of metal over which value is added. The airplane is a thing of humankind's creation in the first place, and as such its status as an object is not at the bottom of this passage. Instead, its meaning for the people whom interact with it is paramount. Borrowing perhaps from Heidegger, we might call this the referential totality of narrative surrounding the object. Unlike the coin, the meaning of the airplane is not either false or true in the same kind of transcendent way as a coin's value. Instead, its meaning comes from the narrative which envelopes it. The matrix of The Crossing, although we will not attend to it further here, parallels this idea of the referential totality of narrative, the inter-connectedness of things through ideas and stories rather than through an ontological or metaphysical picture.

As we discover, in a later passage, the story of the first plane, the one the gypsies lost in the river, had no factual basis. Billy encounters gypsies' client a few pages after the passage excerpted above. He tells Billy, "that airplane come out of a barn on the Taliafero Ranch [. . .]. It couldnt even fly where you're talkin about" (The Crossing 418). When Billy asks whether the man who flew it was killed in it, the client answers simply, "not that I know of" (The Crossing 418). So, then, the gypsies are not transporting the plane from high mountainous territory, it never crashed, and there is no second plane after the first one was lost. But as we will find with Boyd in the *corrido*, value and meaning relate less to hard reality, i.e. the false authority of that which persists, but rather to the narrative totality that surrounds them and the embedded story.

The same gypsy starts another, similar story a little after the airplane discussion. It concerns his youth and his father's habit of collecting old "photographs and tintypes" (The Crossing 412) of people and families unknown to the two of them. The gypsy says, "these likenesses had value only to the living who had known them and with the passage of years of such were none" (The Crossing 412). He begins to discuss his childhood traveling with his father. Concerning the photographs, the gypsy notes that "the kinfolk in their fading stills could have no value save in another's heart so it was with that heart also in another's in a terrible and endless attrition and of any other value there was none" (The Crossing 413). The young head man comes to see that there is no value outside of the context of the hearts of others, and he goes on to say that "every representation was an idol. Every likeness a heresy. In images they had thought to find some small immortality but oblivion cannot be appeased" (The Crossing 413). Again, Hegelian ideas manifest themselves in this passage. The description of value in the hearts of others in an "endless attrition" refers to Hegel's dialectical philosophy of subsumption. Like the airplane passage, value cannot be found in the *noumenon*, for value does not exist in a transcendental schema. Rather, McCarthy advocates for human remembering. Loss occurs finally when such tin-types have no narrative totality surrounding them. The only value McCarthy notes comes from humanity, not from God, or death, or metaphysics, or the speculative ontology of modernity.

Even though the portrayal of the referential totality and embedded story may seem less than positive in this passage, McCarthy finally begins to address his own pessimism here. Although "oblivion cannot be appeased,"—a recurring theme in McCarthy and one which the existential reading brings to the fore—value can be preserved within the narrative totality. And this narrative totality is an embedded one, that is to say that in McCarthy's worldview all stories

are all part of the same story, the human story. To reprise a quote from the Introduction, "whether in Caborca or in Huisiachepic or in whatever other place by whatever other name or by no name at all I say again that all tales are one. Rightly heard all tales are one" (The Crossing 143). We must follow this out if we are to see what sort of hope McCarthy provides. Value can be found only in the narrative totality, not in transcendence. That is, the *noumenon*, the thing as such (coin, airplane, photograph), has no higher value than that which the narrative totality provides. And in every narrative, and in every story, lies all the stories before it in an un-ending chain. Oblivion, then, becomes a problem only when we forget or are forgotten; or more properly when our stories are lost. But as the gypsy notes, "the world cannot be quit for it is eternal in whatever form as are all things within it" (The Crossing 413).

With these two passages we see a version of the strain of Hegelian thought that relies upon and revamps Leibniz, if in a deeply pessimistic formulation. We might call the idea expressed above McCarthy's obsession with the tyranny of causality. Again history seems to overwhelm the present, and in a deeply Hegelian way, every present moment is made up of the accretion of all moments past. But, and this is key, *value* is not to be found by pulling a thread of order out history. In fact, the process of finding justification from the past, both in the larger model of the courts of history, and on the micro-level with identity formation, are ethically empty in McCarthy's work.

To borrow from Holloway, like the Native pictographs that appear again and again in McCarthy's Western novels, the sign (airplane, or coin, or photo) signifies only insomuch as it has a story, or a narrative, constructed around it. Like the tin-types, these pictographs no longer have stories; they are signs which no longer signify at all. They have lost their value as those who kept alive their meaning perished. They are merely abstractions that appear to be "from

another world" now that their meaning, their value, is forgotten. No doubt at one time these pictograms had a story to tell, a story perhaps that was not so different from all other stories. The story was their meaning, the narrative gave them value. In the passage above concerning the photographs, the gypsy man seems to imply McCarthy's overwhelming hopelessness. The gypsy says that "every likeness is a heresy," and that "oblivion cannot be appeased." What we must remember in the discussion of these photographs is that they have been robbed of their content by removal from their particular referential totality, i.e. the families of the people in the photographs. Again like the pictograms, their value is lost because the narrative that binds them is lost. But against this, McCarthy's fiction makes another claim. If all stories are one, does loss ever really occur? That is, above and beyond the referential totality of the story, another layer of narrative appears; the embedded story, the accrued human story. This will become evident in our discussion of Cities of the Plain, but it may also be found in role of the *corrido* in The Crossing.

In the discussion of Boyd Parham, Billy's little brother, as a character in the *corrido*, an alternative to the idea of lost or forgotten personal narratives is posed and McCarthy's grudging humanism becomes evident. Billy asks a character named Quijada about the folk song or *corrido* that has sprung up around his younger brother's violent life and death. "What does the corrido say" (The Crossing 386) about Boyd, asks Billy. Quijada answers:

> The corrido tells all and it tells nothing. I heard the tale of the guerito years ago. Before your brother was even born.
>
> [Billy] You dont think it tells about him?
>
> [Quijada] Yes it tells about him. It tells what it wishes to tell. It tells what makes the story run. The corrido is the poor man's history. It does not owe its allegiance to the truths of

history but to the truths of men [. . .]. Even if the guerito in the song is your brother he is no longer your brother. He cannot be reclaimed. (The Crossing 386)

This passage centers around the new meaning or value that Billy, as character in song, has taken on. His previous identity is only tangentially relevant to how he will be remembered; indeed another story, a different narrative, has sprung up around him. Quijada notes that he "heard the tale of the guerito years ago. Before your brother was even born." Boyd has had his identity usurped to some degree by the *corrido* in which he has been lionized.

We might see this as troubling or problematic. Boyd cannot be reclaimed. But in fact, as Quijada says, this "is not a piece of luck to be despised" (The Crossing 388). Boyd lives on in narrative; value has been given to him by the *corrido*, by the tale. History does not impart value, nor does fact, but rather real value stems from "the truths of men." These truths of men constitute McCarthy's largely unspoken humanistic side as it appears in the Border Trilogy much in contrast to Blood Meridian. Indeed if any McCarthy character finds salvation, it may just be Boyd. This salvation, or perhaps vindication, comes from narrative; and of course we must read this as a valorization of McCarthy's own occupation. On a larger scale, however, Boyd's consecration in the *corrido* presents an alternate understand of meaning, history, and fact than that of modernity. Tales or stories do not attempt to explain in a factual matter the truths of history, as does modernity. We saw this in the gypsy's story about the airplane. With the juxtaposition of history and narrative, McCarthy's Western fiction argues that, as opposed to the ethical failures of modern *telos*—exhibited, for example, in the White Sands passage—the narrative understanding avoids the modern horror of the enterprise of ordering which results, in part, from subject/object thinking.

Quijada has more to say on this subject:

> The world has no name, he said. The names of the cerros and the sierras and the deserts exist only on maps. We name them that we do not lose our way. Yet it was because the way was lost to us already that we have made up those names. The world cannot be lost. We are the ones. And it is because these names and these coordinates are our own naming that they cannot save us. They cannot find for us the way again. (The Crossing 387)

In this passage, McCarthy leaves no doubt concerning his formulation of the subject/object split. Humanity and the world are forcible and forever separate, and our ability to think and understand will never be able to bridge this gap. Here again we see McCarthy's existential leanings. But does he address modernity here, or rather a fundamental condition of being in the world? The answer, I think, is both. We must have no doubt that there is little in McCarthy's fiction that implies that the subject/object problem can be resolved, or that it stems entirely from modernity. In his fiction, the break makes up the way of the world.

On the other hand, with the symbolic use of "coordinates," and maps, the spectre of modernity appears. On a fundamental level in McCarthy's work we are separate from the world. But in modernity, and with the advent of modernity's speculative ontology, we have tried to bridge the gap with knowledge and quantification. This attempt fails in McCarthy's fiction. Like Judge Holden pulling out the thread of order, humanity "tries to find the way again" with maps, with coordinates. Again I stress that in McCarthy's fiction this phenomenon plays out as constitutive of human-ness. That is to say that the idea of trans-historical existential alienation is an obvious theme of McCarthy's. Clearly, however, with his skewering of imperialism, his revision of the *bildungsroman*, and his valorization of a narrative based worldview, a major force of his work lies in a critical approach to the speculative ontology of modernity. In short, things

may be bad due to ontological conflict and human alienation, but the hermeneutic of modernity has made them much worse.

McCarthy returns to these ideas in the Epilogue to Cities of the Plain. If we accept All The Pretty Horses, The Crossing and Cities of the Plain as a trilogy, we are tempted to look for some sort of a conclusion in Cities of the Plain. The following excerpts from that novel will assist us to disclose this conclusion. These excerpts are useful although they often echo what we have already seen in The Crossing. I find it important to attend to the Epilogue of Cities of the Plain despite patent similarities to passages previously examine, because the Epilogue reflects much of what we have discussed regarding meaning, history, and the embedded tale.

In the Epilogue, then, the aged Billy Parham, now a drifter, finds himself under an overpass circa 2002. There he encounters one of McCarthy's trademarked prophets who holds forth on the storytelling act and its relationship to truth for the final time in the Border Trilogy. The unnamed storyteller tells of a dream that plays out as a sort of pre-Columbian ritual human sacrifice. This man, before he begins his story, says "In the middle of my life [. . .] I drew the path of it [his life] upon a map [. . .] I tried to see the pattern that it made on the earth because I thought if I could see that pattern and identify the form of it then I would know better how to continue" (Cities of the Plain 268). Billy rather dryly asks, "How did that work out?" to which the unnamed man answers, "Different from what I expected" (Cities of the Plain 269). Billy then asks the man what the map looked like and the man answers that it looked like a face at first and then did not.

The symbol of the map again appears, in the same function it served in Quijada's discussion in The Crossing, addressing both modernity and McCarthy's vision of the existential condition of man. But again, the map cannot provide sufficient pattern and form to assist us in

how to continue. We may see the map here as both history, and the enterprise of ordering, related as they are. That is, in opposition to the speculative *telos* of modernity, the task of looking back to find pattern and to pull out the thread of order ultimately cannot do what it promises—predict the future or make sense of our lives. Like the multiple stories of the gypsies, the map can look like a face one moment and then not in the next. The value in this map is not what it represents, that is the man's attempt to plot out his future from his past. Rather, the stress in this passage is on how the map may be perceived. A face, or a map, or both? Here McCarthy sets up the following discussion of an alternate way of understanding or being. The map presents a choice; do we see it as a map and try to scry from it the meaning all things, our own future included? Or is it a face, a human likeness that may provide refuge? We may see the map as either, McCarthy argues, but one way is less harmful that the other.

Billy asks, "Did you see [the face in the map] or did you just think you did?" and the man responds, "What would be the difference?" (Cities of the Plain 269). Billy says that "you just see whatever's in front of you," to which the response is, "Yes. I dont think that" (Cities of the Plain 269). Billy, like all of McCarthy's somewhat lunk-headed Border Trilogy protagonists is a bit of a materialist. He thinks what you see before you is the end-all be-all. When the man replies that he does not believe that, an opening occurs. This opening signifies, as the map/face does, the possibility for perceiving the world in a fashion other than that of modernity's speculative ontology. The text here builds toward an implied understanding that the narrative, the embedded story, the common story of humanity can be an alternate paradigm to Euro-American modernity.

A few pages later, the two discuss this a bit further:

[Billy] It's like the picture of your life in that map.

[Man] Como? [What?]

[Billy] Es un dibujo nada mas. It aint your life. A picture aint a thing. It's just a picture.

[Man] Well said. But what is your life? Can you see it? It vanishes at its own appearance. Movement by movement. Until it vanishes to appear no more. When you look at the world is there a point in time when the seen becomes the remembered? How are they separate? It is that which we have no way to show. It is that which is missing from our map and from the picture that it makes. And yet it is all we have. (Cities of the Plain 273)

To echo this, the man says, in reference to his map, "I can only say that I had hoped for a sort of calculus that would sum the convergence of the map and life when life was done. For within their limitations there must be a common shape or shared domain between the telling and the told" (Cities of the Plain 273).

Maps are prominent here at the very close of the trilogy for an important reason. The nameless man talking to Billy sums up much of what the trilogy has addressed so far. He talks of the subject/object problem, he addresses the assignation of value, and his frame of reference is the narrative act. In the above, we see yet another McCarthy anchorite tells us that we are forever separate from the world: "How are they separate? It is that which we have no way to show." The subject/object problem manifests as ontological fact. Even in his alternate formulation to modernity, McCarthy cannot see a solution to the break between human and world. The man soon expatiates on the story, and we find McCarthy's conclusion to his Border trilogy, a last bit of hope; the common shape or shared domain between the telling and the told.

Billy asks, "You sure you aint makin all this up?" (Cities of the Plain 277). The man replies as follows:

> The problem is that your question is the very question upon which the story hangs [. . .]. This story like all stories has its beginnings in a question. And those stories which speak to us with the greatest resonance have a way of turning upon the teller and erasing him and his motives from all memory. So the question of who is telling the story is very consiguiente.
>
> [Billy] Every story is not about some question.
>
> [Man] Yes it is. Where all is known no narrative is possible. (Cities of the Plain 277)

This, I think, is the vital claim. Narrative, maps, stories and pictures are about filling in the gaps of knowing. But in the end, stories take precedence in McCarthy's philosophical picture over history and over maps, that is to say, narrative takes over for philosophical modernity. Finally, we see McCarthy's understanding of the importance of narrative beginning to take shape in Cities of the Plain, very much echoing the understanding of the "hearts of men" in the *corrido* passage of The Crossing, and that novel's discussion of photographs. While all can never be known in McCarthy's view, as we have seen from humanity separation from the world, the hubris of attempting to know all permeates the modern condition. In our examination, the Hegelian model of progressive history exhibits this. So, in the above passage, when the man says "where all is know no narrative is possible," he valorizes the narrative act as a non-destructive way to give meaning. If we connect this to the previous mention of common shapes, or common stories, we begin to see the emergence of the narrative as a replacement for teleological historicism.

Clearly, McCarthy believes that our "waking life's desire to shape the world to our convenience invites all manner of paradox and difficulty" (Cities of the Plain 283), as we saw with the enterprise of ordering. As the unnamed man of Cities of the Plain Epilogue puts it:

> We wake [from dreams] remembering the events of which they are composed while often the narrative is fugitive and difficult to recall. Yet it is the narrative that is the life of the dream and the events are often interchangeable. The events of the waking world on the other hand are forced upon us and the narrative is the unguessed axis along which they must be strung. It falls to us to weigh and sort and order these events. It is we who assemble them into the story which is us. (Cities of the Plain 283)

The witness, the story, and/or the narrative make meaning in "waking life." We may read McCarthy's point not as a valorization, but actually as a discussion of societies and common histories; the coming together of the telling and the told. Common histories give us stories which we assemble into "us." This contrasts with the teleological model of modernity. The idea of the embedded tale and of witnessing are opposed to *telos* in the following way; history is defined from the top down, derived if you will, from the present in the modern teleological model.

Contrast this too with the performative identity of the cowboy protagonists of the Border Trilogy. Isn't the cowboy role just another story from which to sort and order ourselves? No, for as we have seen, the query of the *bildungsroman* and its subtext of the self-defining individual actually resist commonality. In their fierce, and radical, independence—which is based on a myth that McCarthy slanders in Blood Meridian—the trilogy heroes adopt a modern view of the subject. While we have noted that McCarthy makes no bones about the permanent separation of human being from world, we have also discussed his rejection of the modern idea of the entirely self-defining, absolutely free individual. That story is not a common one in McCarthy's sense, and it must be modified if we are to escape its primary danger, the desire to impose our will upon the world, consequences be damned.

The teleological model claims, in its Hegelian formulation, that ultimate truth can be proven in the court of history. Just like the Judge's blood-thirsty understanding of the stakes of life-and-death, this *telos* is finally rejected in the Border Trilogy. In fact, we see that the enterprise of ordering, the mapping of the world, the Desire to sublate the other, and the attempt to understand all that is the very hallmark of modernity are all rejected as falsehoods and lies in McCarthy's fiction. These are the truths of history. A choice is offered by the unnamed man when he says, "it is we who assemble them into the story which is us." What story shall we use? Modern *telos*? The destructive vision of humanity as suzerain of the world? Or rather should we accept the power of common stories, of narrative? Again by common stories, McCarthy does not appeal to nation stories, instead a much wider net is cast. For each story is an aspect of the single story, the single story of the truths of men.

The truths of men offer a different way, as shown with Boyd and the *corrido*. If oblivion cannot be appeased, it can be countered with the embedded story, and so too can modernity. History and narrative are not the same thing for McCarthy. As we saw in Chapter 2, the ontology of modernity that relies upon a teleological understanding of history only exacerbates what McCarthy believes to be our existential dilemma. The embedded story, and its assumption of Hegelian dynamics while disputing Hegel's *telos*, is the alternative strategy. Narrative brings us all together, not *Geist* or the Idea. And in narrative, the ethical failures of modernity that result from the very idea of *telos* are counteracted as well.

Not only does McCarthy directly address the power of the narrative as an alternative to modern ontology through the words of his strange prophets, but as I have suggested the very structural similarities of the novels work toward the same understanding. That is, McCarthy tells the same story three times, basically, and within The Crossing, Billy Parham is told three stories

by other characters. Not only do we have the stories within stories, but we have a formal signification that all stories may really be one, and a textual manifestation of the value of the narrative act. By writing a *bildungsroman sans* resolution three times in a row, McCarthy invalidates the teleological rhetoric of the form, and thus modernity, as well as offering a different understanding. Luce refers to this as "the world as tale," but the tale resists ontological status, that is to say that tales do not tell us about how to know all about the world, instead they are about people in the world. McCarthy argues in the end that we cannot come to the bottom of the world, the mysteries of the universe, and that our attempt to do so has resulted in much that has been destructive. But the embedded tale, the narrative act provides refuge from oblivion, if not appeasement.

-Conclusion-

Thus where everything that presences exhibits itself in the light of a cause-effect coherence, even God, for representational thinking, can lose all that is exalted and holy, the mysteriousness of his distance. - Martin Heidegger (331)

Cormac McCarthy's Western novels powerfully engage some of the prevalent questions of philosophical modernity, and by the end of the Border Trilogy McCarthy's fiction provides a vision of a way out of two of the most destructive aspects of modernity: *telos* and the Kantian problem with "the thing in itself." The Border novels propose an alternate understanding of history and order than that provided by modernity. By doing so, McCarthy's later fiction asks the reader to reconsider the philosophical importance of the subject/object split and the attempts to understand it. In the end, McCarthy's Border Trilogy valorizes a narrative understanding of human being-in-the-world over a historical one. In addition, his Border fiction argues that the endless human attempt to understand that which is outside of ourselves is a deeply flawed endeavor. Ultimately, the narrative act bestows meaning in McCarthy's work and the metaphysical workings of the universe are consistently portrayed as mysterious.

We have noted McCarthy's engagement with the problems of modernity in his (South)Western novels in a series of ways. In Blood Meridian, we saw the devastating effects of the enterprise of ordering and its basis in a teleological understanding of history. This led us to examine Judge Holden as a world-historical individual, and to an examination of the apparent ethical failure of modern *telos* as theodicy. In Blood Meridian, McCarthy has created a monstrous negation of modern *telos* and a powerful engagement with the way of being that has resulted from the subject/object split. We must note that in the case of the latter, McCarthy's fiction accepts the subject/object split as a factual one; there is no evidence that it can be

overcome. Instead, McCarthy's fiction urges us to consider how we react to this perhaps unsolvable problem, and what implications these reactions may have. Blood Meridian shows that the self-defining subject of modernity contains within it the urge for total control through annihilation, much as Adorno and Horkheimer show in Dialectic of Enlightenment. In McCarthy's work, however, the subject/object split is the way of the world. We must not attempt to overcome it with violence, however, for only madness like that which afflicts Judge Holden lies down that path.

The novels of the Border Trilogy also exhibit other concerns with modernity. With their troubling of identity and recasting of the *bildungsroman*, they continue McCarthy's concerns with the philosophical questions of modernity. In particular the idea of the self-defining subject is approached again in these novels, although in a somewhat different fashion than in Blood Meridian. Blood Meridian's strongest example of the problem of the modern self-defining subject is Judge Holden and his desire for suzerainity. The protagonists of the Border Trilogy do not manifest the same mania for control and destruction as does Judge Holden; however in context of their formal characteristics, the novels trouble the idea of self-definition. McCarthy's version of the *bildungsroman* in the Border novels is a less nihilistic version of the same critique seen in Blood Meridian. The modern celebration of the subject/object split and its inherent reliance upon *telos* are lambasted in McCarthy's Western novels.

In this study, G.W.F. Hegel's thought has provided both as a starting point for a discussion of the problems of modernity and as an example of typically modern thought. We have noted in this examination that Hegel's thought mirrors McCarthy's philosophical interests, and made the case that the last two novels of the Border Trilogy seem to unquestionably adopt

and adapt Hegel's mechanism while removing its *telos*, and supplanting it with the embedded tale.

McCarthy's fiction is fascinated by the Hegelian dialectic in two primary ways. First, in the sense of ontological conflict; and second as it relates to meaning or value. In the case of ontological conflict, the Border novels (including Blood Meridian) are predicated on violence. Violence is the inevitable process of sublation which we saw in Hegel's thought. Like Hegel, McCarthy sees this as a way of the world. That is to say that violence and the desire to sublate are not entirely rooted in philosophical modernity. Modernity however opens up the speculative *meaning* of violence, and the ideas of manipulability and the subject/object break engender a new understanding of the historical interpretation of violence.

Placed within the halls of history, large-scale violence can be read as inevitable, even necessary; the theodicy of Hegelian modernity. The Western novels follow Hegel's engagement with modernity on a conceptual level. That is, ontological conflict is a fact, but the development of the Enlightenment unleashed a modern mania for control through violence. McCarthy and Hegel are in agreement thus far. They diverge at systemization, however. Hegel thought that the negative aspects of modernity were just another step toward perfection. McCarthy's Western novels reject this optimism, and in fact he deeply queries Hegel's philosophy of human history. McCarthy's fiction finds that deduction from the present state of things that what happened before was necessary and thus "right" is despicable. This is the trap of *telos*; the ethical error of modernity.

In the human or humanistic sense, McCarthy again casts off Hegel's system while accepting his mechanics. Hegel argues that Kant went wrong, following others before him such as Descartes and even Plato, when he accepted that there was a separation between person and

world. To Hegel this was a misunderstanding, and in his philosophy everything relies on everything else; the world was completely interconnected and the individual human subject was not an isolated island. McCarthy does not accept Hegel's vision, and indeed the great modern problem of the self-defining subject and its relationship to the world forms one of McCarthy's persistent interests. As we have seen, in McCarthy's fiction this gap between human and world cannot be bridged. However, McCarthy adopts Hegel's dialectical model in his embedded tale or narrative. As we saw as the close of Chapter 3, the narrative act and the meaning it provides work in a positively Hegelian fashion. McCarthy then takes Hegelian interconnection and applies it to the narrative act.

How then does McCarthy navigate the terrain between the rabid destruction of Judge Holden's understanding of order and the seemingly less pessimistic vision of understanding seen in the embedded tale of the Border Trilogy? The two would seem to be similar; the act of pulling out the thread of order does not seem drastically different from value placed on stories in The Crossing and Cities of the Plain. As we have seen above, however, the large scale version of the enterprise of ordering differs for McCarthy from the narrative act. While McCarthy advocates that narrative gives meaning in the Border Trilogy, this meaning is drastically different from the meaning given by *telos*. I mentioned the idea of derivation from *telos* above; that in Hegel's thought we can deduce the philosophical importance of the past from present. This idea is central to modernity and modernity's reliance upon *telos*. McCarthy denies this interpretation of history and indeed he shows its deep ethical failure. Rather than deriving a thread of order from the present and parlaying it into an ersatz philosophy which seeks to bring order to where there is none, McCarthy's fiction finally comes to an understanding that the intrapersonal narrative allows humanity to find the only value it can find. Narrative order differs from modern

teleological order in that it does not totalize or systematize, and allows for the deepest kind of contingency, as we saw in the examples of the airplane wreckage from The Crossing. McCarthy celebrates the contingency that is inherent to the narrative act; that stories can be told in many different ways. Modernity's speculative ontology does not allow for this contingency.

As I noted above regarding McCarthy's antagonists, the reader may note a strange tension in the Western fiction. While contingency is valorized in the narrative act, McCarthy is still deeply attracted to fate. We may see this as his understanding of the ontology of the world. Like his antagonists, no doubt McCarthy accepts a fatalistic version of history, a tyranny of causality. In Cities of the Plain, however, this tyranny of causality takes a backseat. I think we can state without a doubt that McCarthy's fiction poses no meaningful way out of fatalistic causality. Instead it notes, by the end of the trilogy, that regardless of the facts of causality, we cannot and do not live as if history forces us to act in the way we do. Again, history does not provide value; human narrative does. The human kindness that closes Cities of the Plain illustrates this. Kindness is a contingency in McCarthy's world-view. In his fiction kindness may seem all too rare, buried under violence and pessimism. And indeed, I think we may say that the power of his work does not rest in its perhaps undercooked small sense of hope.

With striking prose and a rare truly pessimistic sense, Cormac McCarthy's work questions rather than answers. His fiction is not didactic, instead it asks us to question not only the metaphysics of causality, but more importantly the impact that such a metaphysic may have. In addition, McCarthy's fascination with *telos* and modernity serves much the same purpose as do social and philosophical critiques of modernity, although perhaps less stridently. This purpose is to deeply question very basic assumptions about how we are what we are and what the implications of our understanding of the world are. Finally McCarthy's fiction tells us that to

affix rigid transcendental meaning to events of the past is a destructive enterprise. If we find his alternative in the form of the tale or narrative lacking, let us again state that the brunt of McCarthy's fiction lies not with resolutions but with questions. I conclude with McCarthy's "Dedication" that closes Cities of the Plain, and the Border Trilogy as a whole.

I will be your child to hold

And you be me when I am old

The world grows cold

The heathen rage

The story's told

Turn the page.

(McCarthy Cities of the Plain 293)

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