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Voices of the “In-Between”.

Anarchetypal Crossings of the Frontier in Cormac McCarthy’s *Border Trilogy*

Abstract: Ever since Christopher Columbus set foot in America, the leitmotif of the travel narratives written by those visiting it has been that of shaping the unknown territories according to prefabricated ideas. The importance held by the myth of never-ending expansion in American culture has also created a fascination for everything situated beyond the culturally constructed borders of the country. Cormac McCarthy’s *The Border Trilogy* tackles both these matters, as it is centred around the frontier between Mexico and the southwestern part of the United States. This paper will analyse the patterns of movement taken up by these characters in crossing the borders, while also using Corin Braga’s concept of the “anarchetype” to characterize them as products of an in-between state in which the characters cannot follow a clearly structured route anymore because they belong to both and neither of the two extremes simultaneously.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy; *The Border Trilogy*; Anarchetype; Journey; Frontier, North American Literature.

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We can safely say that, apart from being labelled as “the land of opportunity” or “the land of freedom”, America can also be seen as a land occupying the culturally constructed space existing between people’s projections about it and its actual reality. Shaped both geographically and ideologically by the European travellers, the north American continent stands at a crossroads of utopian and dystopian perspectives¹, which have given its territories a dual character since the very beginning. Moreover, as the Europeans’ initial impressions of the New World also referred to its “boundless immensity and seeming emptiness, or ahistorical character”², the first American perception about the endless territories laying ahead over the horizon tended to view them as “empty, unchanging topographies waiting to be discovered by whites”³ as well. Feminine metaphors were used to tame these unknown and mysterious landscapes within the colonizers’ collective imaginary, and so images like that of the virgin land which needed to be dominated and conquered or the nurturing mother earth which was going to help the settlers in their challenges

greatly contributed to the westward expansion that lasted all through the 19th century.

There is also a significant importance in Thomas Jefferson's ideas that the large and open American spaces were great for their inhabitants to evolve morally and as a community due to the opportunities and liberty they stood for, but it was Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis (first presented in 1893) that took a critical look at this colonizing movement made from east to west and associated it with the development of the American character in such a way that even today it is being seen as a foundational element in the American culture⁴. In his words,

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. [...] In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe. [...] The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. At first, the frontier was the Atlantic coast. It was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense. Moving westward, the frontier became more and more American. [...] Thus the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines⁵.

In this way, "the demand for land and the love of wilderness freedom drew the frontier ever onward"⁶ and, together with

the mythologisation of the frontier, especially during the first half of the 20th century many American men still held their belief in Manifest Destiny and in the idea that they have been "formed by the call of the West and the requirements of extending the border between civilization and frontier westward across the country"⁷. However, a problem appeared as the process of conquering and "civilizing" the remaining "empty" northern American territories ended around the 1890s and the so called "middle ground" between wilderness and civilization, i.e. the territories that until then had been considered testing grounds for the strong and determined individuals, began to already disappear by the 1860s due to the increasing processes of immigration, industrialization and urbanization.

By the end of the 19th century, the western side of the United States was fully mapped, which also meant that there was no longer a clear separation between the eastern part – still very European in its construction, appearance and behaviour – and the wild West with its large and empty lands awaiting to be "Americanized". In another study⁸ I have looked at how determined white European men were, over the centuries, to conquer and dominate all the uninhabited (to be read: "inhabited by indigens") territories they encountered, and also at the way they created artificial worlds with this purpose in mind, when they remained out of actual geographical land to subjugate. In this paper I intend to adopt a similar strategy, namely to analyse what spaces were targeted when the Americans' desire to head west for the vastness and the economic potentiality of the yet uncultivated areas had no ground to be satisfied anymore, and also how did those

who crossed the border act upon what they found on the other side.

To this end, Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* (*All The Pretty Horses* – 1992, *The Crossing* – 1994 and *Cities of the Plain* – 1998) is a literary work that captures in detail the ways in which two distinctive cultures clash because of the misconceptions each has about the other and the “in-between” condition of those who get caught in both. Almost all of McCarthy's protagonists are presented as men of the road, as characters fleeing their homes and setting off into wilderness in search for a different (and in their view better) world order, but here the stories of John Grady Cole and of brothers Billy and Boyd Parham are also strongly connected to this frontier and westward expansion matter. As its very name announces, the trilogy is full of passings or trespassings of borders, but it's important to note that they are as much geographical as cultural, symbolical, temporal and social.

Described by Dianne C. Luce as “a lullaby singing to sleep the vanishing cowboy, [...] an elegy for the evanescent world of the South-west”⁹, *The Border Trilogy* chronicles the various crossings of the border between Mexico and the southwestern United States by two adolescent boys at intersecting moments of the 20th century (more specifically in 1949, 1939 and 1952). Largely, their adventures may seem to resemble the coming-of-age stories set in a pastoral background: taken from the eco-critical view of Lawrence Buell, the term “pastoral” refers to “all literature – poetry or prose, fiction or nonfiction – that celebrates the ethos of nature/rurality over against the ethos of the town or city”¹⁰ or to “the idea of (re)turn to a less urbanized,

more “natural” state of existence”¹¹. However, McCarthy's approach of the theme and his numerous subtleties actually reveal a more complex perspective in which it isn't just the bucolic space in general that's being discussed, but precisely the association between this type of lifestyle and the southwestern wilderness of the United States, as well as the fact that the industrialization of the 20th century had rendered it impossible.

As “true *picaros* of the cowboy tradition”¹², the *Border's* protagonists also have the aforementioned wish to go west, away from civilization and in search of a pastoral way of living, but for this they need to find a further frontier space outside the American territories, which had undergone a process of technological and cultural homogenization. This “older and darker Arcadia”¹³ where John and Billy think they will be able to put in practice their fantasies is Mexico, which is perceived in the trilogy according to prefabricated ideas that recall the way Europeans described America through their ideological lenses when they first set foot on it. In fact, as Daniel Cooper Alarcón notices, Mexico has had its own tradition of being portrayed in a series of binary terms (beautiful/desolate, enchanting/repellent, dreamlike/bloody, civilized/cruel etc.), terms that constructed the image of a “primitive, preindustrial world where the infernal rests immediately beneath the fragile surface of paradise”¹⁴. Partially taking up this image in ways that will be better explored later, McCarthy thus presents the nostalgia after the disappearing lifestyle of the cowboy that drives John Grady and Billy Parham south towards the only space where “the Americans can live out their dreams of working as cowboys on

a large ranch, [where they can] find wilderness spaces unbroken by barbed wire, train tracks and paved roads"¹⁵.

The problematization of the cowboy condition in the context of the novel is important for understanding how the books reflect postmodernity in both its incredulity towards the grand narratives and its portrayal of decentred, multiple subjects with no fixed or singular identity, whose worldview is also no longer linear. McCarthy deconstructs here the cultural myth of the cowboy through placing his trilogy long after its post-Civil War golden days, yet still greatly influenced by it: "The golden age of the real cowboy in the American West was gone as the twentieth century dawned. Yet a cowboy culture was still glowing brightly in the minds of Americans. While this culture still permeates our society, it is not the culture of the real nineteenth century cowboy. Rather it is a blend of fact and imagination"¹⁶. John and Billy know their way around horses very well and they have all the qualities of good cowboys, but this fictive idea about the cowboy lifestyle with which they set out on the road makes their approach to their surrounding world and to life in general no longer valid in the post-World War Two modernized world. It is thus a problem of misrepresentation and false expectations that turns them into agents of both worlds at home in neither, which in turn shatters their identity into pieces they lose and pick up again on each of their border crossings.

This type of in-between, multiple condition of the self could be seen as coming in response to the world's "principle of unrest", as Brian Massumi calls it, the constant non-linear movement and "restlessness [of] human history that constantly

tangles the lines" and "fundamentally challenges the concept of identity as something stable that precedes movement and mixing"¹⁷. If we narrow this down to the way in which the lives of the American people changed after World War Two, the connection (already noted by Richard Gray) becomes evident:

seduced by the imagery of advertising and the cinema, encouraged to ride out of familiar, stable locations in search of the unfamiliar or for the sheer experience of movement, Americans became a part of a distinctively modern, discontinuous and anonymous culture: a culture that was, and is, not specifically tied down to any individual locality, state, region – or, indeed, to any particular nation¹⁸.

This riding done "for the sheer experience of movement" is at odds with the typical archetypal journey which has a clear purpose and doesn't really allow digressions to be made from the originally established route. However, the journeys headed west – and the ones searching for "the West" elsewhere as well – are historically known to defy such strictly delimited structures and instead follow alternative directions that nevertheless respond to their desire since what they seek is anyway a way of living and not a destination. Thus, in accordance to Deleuze's rhizome, it is also relevant to note how "directions in America are different: the search for arborescence and the return to the Old World occur in the East. But there is the rhizomatic West, with its Indians without ancestry, its ever-receding limit, its shifting and displaced frontiers. There is a whole

American “map” in the West, where even the trees form rhizomes”¹⁹.

All of these aspects are valid when it comes to the literature that describes such voyages as well, as “the West is still primarily a series of brief visitations or a trail to somewhere else; and Western literature [...] has been largely a literature not of place but of motion”²⁰. The typical Western hero, caught in this perpetual movement that also imposes his continuous self-transformation, is usually going through some initiation patterns in which he “escapes the confines of home, finds sufficient vocational mentors for guidance, and undergoes the requisite series of physical and spiritual trials out of which he emerges tried and true to the developmental ideal of the Western man: self-determined, self-contained, self-assured, and self-evident”²¹. Although McCarthy’s characters go through experiences that contribute to their development in similar ways, the writer modifies the trials’ endings so as to leave open the questions of their efficacy, possibility and relevance in the world inhabited by John and Billy.

It is for this reason that, before moving on to the individual analysis of each of the *Border’s* volumes, an explanation of the an-archetype is also required – especially as it comes as one of the most suitable theoretical frames to be applied on the aforementioned characteristics of American travel literature. First proposed in his 2006 book entitled *De la arhetip la anarhetip* and then developed in many other shorter or longer studies, this concept is Corin Braga’s choice for defining the opposite of the well-known archetype, here understood culturally as a recurring model or artistic constant in the imaginary of different societies. According to its author, the term is

made up of three Greek etymons: the prefix *a, an* (‘a-,’ ‘anti-,’ or ‘contra-’); *árkhaios* (‘old,’ ‘original,’ or ‘primitive’) or *arkhê* (‘beginning’ or ‘principle’); and *týpos* (‘type’ or ‘model’). Grouped in pairs, these roots can be found in ‘anarchy’ (comprised of *an* and of the verb *árkhein* – ‘to lead’ or ‘guide’) and ‘archetype’ (‘first type,’ ‘original model’). Depending on how we combine all three of them, the an-archetype would denote, then, either an ‘anarchic model’ of text, which rejects and destroys structure, or an ‘anti-archetype,’ to wit, an ‘exploded’ or fragmented archetype²².

Perhaps an easier understanding of the concept shall arise after a comparison of the archetypically structured texts and the an-archetypically composed ones. The former consist in narratives that flow “in an organized, centred, and unified manner”, according to Aristotle’s rules about the unity of time, place and action, and they are based on a complete, finite, and homogeneous scenario. On the other hand, the latter refer to narratives which behave “anarchically and chaotically”, which don’t bring forth a totalizing, central meaning and which are “developing instead in surprising and contradictory directions that cannot be subsumed under a single scenario”²³.

The purpose of this paper will be to take this concept and apply it on the selected McCarthy novels, in an attempt to prove that the postmodernist worldview can also be found in the routes these characters follow along America’s culturally demarcated map. With this in mind, we shall now take a closer look at how do the trilogy’s characters’ journeys across the

Mexican border look like, what were their purposes and where exactly could they be situated between the structure of an initiatory, anarchetypal journey and the opposite patterns of a non-linear and open-ended anarchetypal one.

The Mexican Cowboy and *All his Pretty Horses*

The protagonist of *All The Pretty Horses*, the first volume of *The Border Trilogy*, is John Grady Cole, a sixteen-year-old boy from Texas who, after his maternal grandfather's death and his parents' divorce, is faced with his mother's decision to sell the ranch he grew to love after growing up in it. John's "in-between" condition is identifiable from the very beginning: as it is often common in the South, his middle name is his mother's maiden name and the narrator chooses to call him "John Grady" throughout the whole book, which shows that "his mother's blood runs stronger than his father's. In a patriarchal culture, John Grady's strongest heritage is matrilineal: his mother is the exception in a long line of ranching men"²⁴. At the same time, as the middle space between wilderness and domestic space will be gone once the ranch will be sold, he is determined to go find himself another and leave behind the "real" world of the technologically modernized United States in favour of his more romantic and pastoral (but eventually unreal) vision of Mexico.

The Mexican territories, imagined as these southern empty spaces where the characters can relocate their fantasies about the wild West, appear literally as a white space on John Grady and his friend Lacey Rawlins' maps:

There were roads and rivers and towns on the American side of the map as far south as the Rio Grande and beyond that all was white.

It dont show nothin down there, does it? said Rawlins.

No.

You reckon it aint never been mapped? There's maps. That just aint one of em. I got one in my saddlebag.

Rawlins came back with the map and sat on the ground and traced their route with his finger. He looked up.

What? said John Grady.

There aint shit down there²⁵.

The problems regarding their adaptability and relation to the other country thus arise from the start of their journey: as Daniel Weiss notices in "Cormac McCarthy, Violence, and Borders: The Map as Code for What Is Not Contained", the boys fail to see Mexico as a country with its own history and identity and instead they look at it from the perspective of the colonialist who travels and acknowledges the other only in relation and as inferior to the centre he belongs to. Rather than providing useful information about what they will find there, the available maps give the boys the impression that they can "remap the space south of the American border [and] recreate the white space in [their] own terms"²⁶.

As Grady and Rawlins go further south and enter the not-precisely-delimited zone between Mexico and the United States, this blank space is still available for them to interpret and construct according to their prefabricated fantasies ("Where do you reckon that paradise is at?²⁷", Rawlins asks at one point). The narrative abounds

in idyllic descriptions of the landscapes as they ride through unknown types of grass and see unique species of birds and fish, aspects that resemble the first contact of the colonists with the New World. However, this “in-between space” that shares physical and cultural elements of both countries and thus belongs to neither of them exclusively will prove to be the only space where John Grady will be able to exist contently, as in both end points of his pendulations the reinforcement of the different cultures, each in its own specificity, will prove too strong for his hybrid self to feel at home.

This aspect can be easily observed in how the plot develops after the boys get hired at a Mexican ranch: initially everything corresponds to their projections and they feel they could remain there forever, but soon enough the Mexican reality starts to abruptly shatter them. John Grady shares the same romantic and pastoral view upon life as Don Héctor (the *hacendado*), but by getting sexually involved with his daughter Alejandra he crosses an unnegotiable boundary of the traditional Mexican world and so the father’s response to this imported American modernity equals with Grady’s expulsion from the land of his dreams. As he and Rawlins end up in a Mexican prison where truth and justice are arbitrary, they begin to feel again how, far away from the frontier space, the relations between the United States and Mexico are again reduced to “assumptions [made] according to received understandings of the respective countries, often emanating from Mexicans who have never visited the United States and United States citizens who have never visited Mexico”²⁸.

For those at the top of the prison system, for example, Americans “are like the

jews. There is always a rich relative”²⁹ to get them fast out of the Mexican jails, but for the peasants encountered by the boys a bit earlier in the story, “the country to the north was little more than a rumour. A thing for which there seemed no accounting”³⁰. In a similar manner, the violence lurking beneath the pretty surface of idyllic landscapes, ranches and horses shows the naïve boys that the lack of urban civilization they seek can go both ways: while it fulfils their cowboy dreams, it also lets evil roam just as freely as horses do. But the problem goes even deeper, as Grady’s vision of Mexico is not inadequate just because it’s based on American stereotypes, but also because it speaks of a pastoral world order which corresponds to neither Mexico’s present, nor past. As Dueña Alfonsa (Alejandra’s grandaunt and godmother) recalls, “when I was a girl the poverty in this country was very terrible. What you see today cannot even suggest it”³¹, so ultimately what’s at fault is not necessarily the Americans’ need for a further frontier space due to the impossibility of finding it in the West anymore, but Grady’s both temporal and physical in-between condition.

As other critics have noted too, “this may be the most significant border McCarthy explores in the trilogy—the one that lies in the gap between the ideal and the real, a wild zone in which often conflicting elements are given play to produce a shifting relation of theory and practice characterized by a deferral of closure and marked by a continuous accommodation”³². Metaphors like the coin toss and the puppet master are used to describe the unpredictability of human destiny and actions and their effect on the general course of things, but Dueña Alfonsa also gives John Grady

the key to understanding why his "quest" failed: "Between the wish and the thing the world lies waiting"³³, so it is because of the world's undeniable materiality that such idealistic pursuits are always doomed to remain unfinished.

The "quest" label appears very often in the critical studies written on *The Border Trilogy*, as many scholars view especially *All The Pretty Horses* as a *bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age story or an archetypal rite of passage where "John Grady's conceptions of the wilderness and of his place in the world develop, slowly and in stages"³⁴. However, despite the fact that all these things are indeed present in the novel, my argument is that there are also enough elements that could give the boys' journey an anarchetypal character.

The ending of the novel catches John Grady riding on into the sunset, "horse and rider and horse [passing] on and their long shadows [passing] in tandem like the shadow of a single being"³⁵. The cowboy lifestyle he dreamed of disappointed him when he put it into practice, Alejandra rejected him and the Texas he returned to, despite still being a good country, is not *his* country, not the country his soul longs for – although he doesn't know which country that might be either. The end of his bigger journey is thus not in sight, but what about the character of the smaller ones made throughout the book? In his Quixotic attempt to "[obtain] something beautiful and [reproduce] that beauty"³⁶, John Grady has also been seen as "an unlikely knight errant, displaced and dispossessed, heroically tested and stubbornly faithful to a chivalric code whose power is severely circumscribed by the inevitable evil in a hostile world"³⁷. Unfortunately, just like

Don Quixote, he will experience the baroque feeling of *desengaño*, the disenchantment of the fact that his ideal of the land ("The land is the promise, the promise is the land; alive, a symbol, a voice, a character"³⁸) vanishes and loses all its magic as the novel delivers us its open ending.

Essentially, it is John Grady's plural, in-between identity and worldview that influences the way he acts and thinks throughout the book. He identifies several times with the displaced native Americans (whom he encounters both at the beginning and the end of his journey), i.e., with people whose ancient values no longer have a place in a white-male-dominated and technologically driven world which has arbitrarily separated Mexico from the United States and which, however, they see as transitory in the bigger order of the universe. At the same time, Grady starts off as an American who wants to get immersed in the Mexican lifestyle (or at least in his perception of it), but instead it is the Mexican space that brings out the American in him (in Turner's sense) and ironically he ends up with a litre of Mexican blood in him, after a prison fight, which makes him feel like a "half breed". It is for these reasons that he can be fully himself only on the borderlands, where everything is juxtaposed and all the possibilities he has in his heart and mind are still achievable.

In connection to the deeper significations of what it means to live on the border and basically inhabit a middle space that also places you in between societies and cultures, Gloria Anzaldúa's definitions are particularly relevant: "borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep

edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition"³⁹. By believing that he can cross borders (both physical and cultural) as he pleases and impose his prefabricated ideas on the territories he discovers instead of being the one to adapt to the local customs, Grady acts out based on an ideal where such differences don't exist anymore because anything can be reshaped according to the intruder's wishes. In this sense, rather than being "illusory and artificial, a man-made convention which they can transcend"⁴⁰, the border between Mexico and the United States remains a strong barrier whose trespassing will have violent consequences (as it will be observable in the other two volumes of the trilogy as well).

Lastly, one also has to mention *All The Pretty Horses'* narrative structure, as its lack of chapters and its rough partition into only four parts with very few section breaks lets the story flow in its own rhythm and thus encourages the readers to see it as one unit as well. Gail Moore Morrison has seen the characters' journey south as a voyage through a wasteland purgatory that reaches an Edenic paradise for a while, then loses it and fails to regain it⁴¹, and it's precisely because of this that the circle remains open and the quest remains unfinished. There are both linear and circular patterns of movement through the book, but ultimately the most important one opens up in a rhizomatic sum of possibilities that remain to be explored (or not) in the next two volumes of the trilogy.

Passing and Trespassing across the Frontier in *The Crossing*

The second *Border* volume introduces another character, Billy Parham, who will take John Grady's journey across the border and will reenact it three times, roughly ten years before he did, in 1939. First, he does it to take a she-wolf back in the Mexican mountains from where it descended into New Mexico, then it's for getting back the horses that were stolen from his family's ranch while he was away, and lastly he goes back to Mexico to find his brother Boyd, who left him during the previous trip in order to live out his cowboy dreams with his girl. His adventures keep the quixotic character of Grady's and even take them to a deeper level, a fact that was quickly noted by an early review of the book:

If an old man in antique armor on a bone-thin horse, followed by a fat would-be squire on a mule, was once a strange apparition on the highways of Cervantes's Spain, then a young man on a cow pony dragging behind him a wild and recalcitrant she-wolf through ranches, American and Mexican, where wolves are a remembered tale of ravenous ferocity and terror, may well seem to replay that story, with the same mix of comedy, cruelty and philosophical wonder⁴².

In order to construct Billy's condition as an outcast and an in-between character, McCarthy creates a very interesting parallel between him and this she-wolf that starts attacking the ranchers' cattle in the beginning of the novel. Just as his family was forced to move south, close to the Mexican border, to be able to continue

the agricultural and ranching activity in a more and more industrialized state of New Mexico, the animal also had to adapt its behaviour to the rules of the more urbanized spaces it has to cross in search of other wolf companions. Gradually exterminated by the 1950s, this Mexican species of wolves is also transformed by McCarthy into a symbol of the wilderness spirit that is disappearing together with the pristine natural spaces forever damaged by the forces of industrialization.

There is a passage in *All the Pretty Horses* that speaks of the superior order found in horses' hearts and it's because Billy identifies with a similar one found in the she-wolf's soul that his problems start to appear:

the horses in his dream moved gravely among the tilted stones like horses come upon an antique site where some ordering of the world had failed and if anything had been written on the stones the weathers had taken it away again [...]. Finally what he saw in his dream was that the order in the horse's heart was more durable for it was written in a place where no rain could erase it⁴³.

In the eyes of one of the novel's very few characters who doesn't see the she-wolf as a threat or a source of entertainment and profit, "*el lobo es una cosa incognoscible. Lo que se tiene en la trampa no es mas que dientes y ferro. El lobo propio no se puede conocer*"⁴⁴. In another analogy, the she-wolf is seen like a snowflake or like the world itself which is made of "breath only"⁴⁵ and thus cannot be caught or touched – "if you want to see it you have to see it on its own ground"⁴⁶. Billy ends up in agreement with

this view once he catches the she-wolf and makes the quixotic decision to take her back in the mountains of Mexico, but unfortunately this journey involves the crossing of a natural border whose cultural implications McCarthy's second cowboy fails to acknowledge just like the first one did. The representative passage goes as follows, as Billy is trying to get the she-wolf out of the dogfighting pit in which some Mexican authorities have put it:

You think that this country is some country you can come here and do what you like.

I never thought that. I never thought about this country one way or the other.

Yes, said the hacendado.

We was just passin through, the boy said. We wasnt botherin nobody. Queríamos pasar, no más.

Pasar o traspasar?

The boy [...] said that the tracks of the wolf had led out of Mexico. He said the wolf knew nothing of boundaries. The young don nodded as if in agreement but what he said was that whatever the wolf knew or did not know was irrelevant and that if the wolf had crossed that boundary it was perhaps so much the worse for the wolf but the boundary stood without regard.

[...] When the boy said that he had not known that he would be required to pay in order to pass through the country the hacendado said that then he was in much the same situation as the wolf⁴⁷.

That the wolf knew nothing of boundaries might be true when it comes to the ones created by humans, but lines that

separate an animal's territory from another's exist too, so Billy's responsibility would have been to be acquainted and respect the rules of his own species and not act upon the phantasm that everyone is seeing the world in the same idealized and romanticized way as him.

Eventually, as an ultimate solution to still save the animal from the hands of its exploiters, Billy decides to shoot it and finish the journey towards the mountains of Mexico, even if only to bury the she-wolf and let her wild spirit run in the woods with its ancestors, as his last vision of her shows. His first voyage across the Mexican border ends here, but before arriving back home, finding out that his family has been killed and the horses stolen and going back to Mexico with his brother to find them, Billy has a period of wanderings that will become like a leitmotif of his way of coping with the failed quests he embarks on. As Dianne C. Luce puts it, Billy's actions show a "commitment to the road or the flow of experience without autobiographical narrating to give it shape, direction or meaning. [...] for him life becomes mere motion, having no meaning beyond the living of it from moment to moment, from one experience of pain and thwarting to the next"⁴⁸.

During his wanderings he meets several characters who ask him if he's lost or warn him against this way of living, as just passing among men instead of living with them will eventually make him become estranged from everyone including himself⁴⁹, but the text is also filled with comments about the deeper order of the world where all things are interconnected and no one is superior to the other: "The passing of armies and the passing of sands in the

desert are one"⁵⁰ and "There are no separate journeys for there are no separate men to make them. All men are one and there is no other tale to tell"⁵¹. In their desire to get their horses back and resume their previous life at the ranch, the boys show their belief in this kind of worldview and they get access to bits of it through their travels and the encounters they have on the way, but the cruel materiality of Mexico's reality will quickly point out how their condition is just as hopeless as the wolf's.

Despite becoming the subject of legendary tales that give a mythic quality to his adventures, Boyd nevertheless gets killed for acting according to his idealized projections and Billy discovers that he is doomed to remain stuck between the archaic and the new world, as neither are opening their gates to him. Upon his return to the United States – which were already engaged in World War Two, a war he can't fight into because of a heart condition – he is described as "a thing wholly alien in that landscape. Something from an older time of which they'd only heard. Something of which they'd read"⁵². His only possibility thus remains that of continuing to ride and work at various ranches, maintaining a liminal status that makes the end of his long journey ahead both out of reach and out of recognition.

Billy's third and final crossing of the border is motivated by his wish to find his brother (or at least his remains) and bring him back home, and ironically "it's the only time [he] was ever down here that [he] got what [he] come after. But it sure as hell wasn't what [he] wanted"⁵³. This trip is the one that changes his view upon the cowboy lifestyle for good, as after Boyd's death he will never idealize it like he did

in the beginning, but it is also filled with memorable encounters that together show Billy the anarchetypal nature of his travels. Probably the most important of those encounters is with the group of *gitanos* who carry the remains of an airplane back to the father of the pilot who died in the wreck: they see themselves as men of the road and world wanderers, "in no proprietary relationship to anything, scarcely even to the space they occupied [... because] movement itself is a form of property"⁵⁴. They identify Billy as a man of the road too and he again denies it, but they say that "the way of the road was the rule for all upon it"⁵⁵ and also that "nosotros mismos somos nuestra propia jornada. Y por eso somos el tiempo también. Somos lo mismo. Fugitivo. Inescrutable. Desapiadado"⁵⁶.

The Crossing is the volume with the deepest philosophical comments from the trilogy, and it is relevant to my argument that many of the discussed themes relate to the dialectic between the rules imposed by passing through a culturally bordered space and the freedom that arises from a motion immersed in the understanding that our journey through the world and through the different versions of ourselves is just as fugitive, inscrutable and merciless as time itself. Despite its incompatibility with a world that sees land as one of the most important types of property, wandering the world becomes the ideal way of interacting with the environment – instead of trying to impose foreign projections on it, while it also comments upon the uselessness of maps and the impossibility of constructing ordered journeys that follow an archetypal pattern.

There is an episode where an old man draws in the sand a map of Mexico that is

immediately dismissed by the other men as a "phantasm" and "a picture of a voyage"⁵⁷, because a country undergoing a continuous process of natural and cultural changing cannot be confined to such a materially limited object as a map. In Robert Jannett's words, "reading, narrating, mapmaking, and questing – these are activities that are no longer innocent but reveal our desire to project a fixed structure on a world whose chaos resists such interpretations"⁵⁸. Because maps fail to deliver the information McCarthy's characters desire from them in an objective mode and are instead shaped by each mapmaker's subjective views and interests, there's an inherent disorder to all such travelling endeavours that makes "plans [be] one thing and journeys another"⁵⁹. However, in the end McCarthy's characters advise Billy to forget about the structuring principle of his journey altogether, as "there were certainly other dangers to a journey than losing one's way"⁶⁰.

Another important aspect to be mentioned is the one related to Billy's numerous chance encounters from his journeys: while travelling with the she-wolf he meets people who offer him help or food or who want to buy the animal, then he hears various stories from cowboys, Indians and a caravan of artists and eventually he passes by both a wedding and a funeral, so the whole novel is like a palimpsest of juxtaposed stories that take Billy's further ahead and eventually become the parts that give it shape. The longer stories of the priest, the blind revolutionary and the *gitano* are three side narratives that McCarthy's chose to explore in more depth, but the fact that he could have reordered them (and all the other shorter secondary episodes) in any way he wanted or even replace, add or

take out some of them without the bigger meaning of Billy's evolution to change is a sign that his journey has an anarchetypal character.

The Crossing thus starts just like *All the Pretty Horses*, with a promise of picaresque adventures which are, in the wandering tradition of *Moby Dick's* Ishmael and *The Brothers Karamazov's* Alyosha, "mere projections of a tortured interior quest for the absolute, for a sense of purpose, an ordering principle that stands against the seeming chaos and indifference of the physical world"⁶¹. However, this ordering principle remains unfound as Billy continues to wander aimlessly in the book's ending, his quest proving to be just as hopeless as John Grady's while they share the condition of "outcasts in an alien land. Homeless, hunted, weary"⁶².

The Dark Truth of the *Cities of the Plain*

Another reason why the trilogy's narrative resists integration in a clearly-structured *bildungsroman* genre is the characters' "stubborn adherence to their cowboy codes [which makes them] ignore earlier lessons and repeat past decisions"⁶³. *Cities of the Plain*, the last novel of the trilogy, has John Grady's and Billy Parham's stories intersect as they work together at (yet again) a ranch, the former is killed in his attempt to save and marry a 16-year-old epileptic prostitute (Magdalena) from a local brothel and the latter returns to his endless wanderings just as he did after his brother's death (which also occurred for almost the same reasons as Grady's). The setting of the plot keeps its borderland character: the characters move constantly

between the twin cities of Juárez (Mexico) and El Paso (Texas), cities which show the now permanent intrusion of the urban space on the "plains" of the characters' earlier travels. Despite their ranching job which still keeps them connected to the old order of things, the country can no longer turn back to oil lamps and horses in the age of fast cars, jet planes and atomic bombs⁶⁴.

Anticipated by Billy's gradual fall out of love with it – although John still can't imagine himself doing anything else, the pastoral cowboy lifestyle and its association with Mexico is presented by McCarthy as a degenerating phantasm over the course of the three novels. Now the idyllic searched in the frontier space is replaced by the brutal reality of a corrupted city filled with abuses, so the incompatibility of the "Dos Mundos" (the last place where Grady sees his girl) and the doomed fate of the "in-between" people determined to fight against it come as an unnegotiable ending of the trilogy. Maybe not so surprisingly, this time it is the book's villain, Eduardo (Magdalena's pimp) who delivers the concluding speech on the matter:

Men have in their minds a picture of how the world will be. How they will be in that world. The world may be many different ways for them but there is one world that will never be and that is the world they dream of. [...] No man [gets what he wants]. Or perhaps only briefly so as to lose it. Or perhaps only to prove to the dreamer that the world of his longing made real is no longer that world at all⁶⁵.

As ever, the tragedy comes from the fact that the presumed raw spaces upon

which foreign fantasies are projected are actually not raw and empty at all, coming instead with their own particularities that cannot be erased. The Americans, however, repeatedly chose to ignore this aspect throughout history, drifting instead “down out of [their] leprous paradise seeking a thing now extinct among them. A thing for which perhaps they no longer even have a name”⁶⁶. Eduardo criticizes America's obsession for gilding other territories' cultural heritage after losing their own in much the same manner Judge Holden does in *Blood Meridian* (“Your heart's desire is to be told some mystery. The mystery is that there is no mystery”⁶⁷PG):

In his dying perhaps the suitor will see that it was his hunger for mysteries that has undone him. [...] That is what has brought you here and what will always bring you here. Your kind cannot bear that the world be ordinary. That it contain nothing save what stands before one. But the Mexican world is a world of adornment only and underneath it is very plain indeed. While your world [...] totters upon an unspoken labyrinth of questions. And we will devour you, my friend. You and all your pale empire⁶⁸.

The United States look indeed like a “pale empire” in comparison to “the adornments associated with Latin American Catholicism and the ornate artifice of Mexican art, culture, and ritual”⁶⁹, but the violently simple reality from under all this artificial surface will “devour” this northern American need of imaginary projections with the same force its idealized appearance attracted them in the first place. Despite

all this, however, John Grady stands his ground until the very end and refuses to accept Eduardo's point of view, killing him by stabbing his mouth and thus silencing this very straightforward worldview where people simply don't let go of their property (be it a horse, a house, a piece of land or a human being).

By giving failed endings to all the purpose-driven journeys from the trilogy, McCarthy builds his main characters as men of the road whose destiny is that of dismissing the illusion of their path's linearity and roaming endlessly on the rhizomatic, anarchetypal routes of their life, even if the only ones who realise this are the other characters the boys meet throughout the novels. John Grady dies young because of his stubborn fixation with the world he was made for but not born into⁷⁰, but Billy's flexibility and acceptance of the gradual modernization of the world lets him reach old rage – although McCarthy chronicles this in just a few words: “he rode on. Days of the world. Years of the world. Till he was old”⁷¹.

The year is 2002 and Billy is 78 years old, working as a cowboy extra in a movie in Texas and thus living the western lifestyle in the only place it still exists, in the entertainment industry. The fifty years that have passed between Grady's death and Billy's final moments in the *Border Trilogy* remain outside McCarthy's narrative, but we've already seen enough of his life journey to be sure of the drifting character of his destiny. The anarchetypal pattern of the trilogy is thus reinforced, especially as there's another character whom Billy meets and who tells him that it is up to him to shape and order his life not only physically/geographically, but also temporally (although it remains unclear if he refers

to the actual life, to how we narrate it or to both): "The events of the waking world [...] 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. Each man is the bard of his own existence"⁷². Since it's been in the tradition of American landscapes to be rearranged according to the interests and expectations of those describing them⁷³, it must be the same for the narratives taking place in these spaces: they too can be reshaped to fit the desires of those telling them.

Conclusions

So how, in the end, does Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* treat the (im)permeable frontier, its crossings, the two sides separated by it and their interactions? On the one hand, it explores in depth the border's other-than-geographical significations, which are multiple and of great importance to the characters' story: there is the problematic line between Mexico and the United States, but there is also the border between America's idealized projections about Mexico and the latter's violent and poverty-stricken reality, along with everything else these two sides imply both separately and when in conflict. The ultimate implication is that just as American law is not valid on Mexican territory, nor do American fantasies work outside the space they were created in.

On the other hand, McCarthy also constructed the trilogy's characters as outcasts with a split, in-between self, as wandering strangers with a need of flight and movement just like their ancestors.

However, because these patterns of motion bring along the traveller's cultural background instead of immersing him in the local practices and rituals, his proper interaction with the American spaces (he wants to build in Mexico) is thrice mistaken: the mental images he wanted to impose on them are destroyed when confronted with the actual lands, their brutal reality shows the characters' incompatibility with them and sends them back where they came from, and the actual essence of the territory remains forever unknown to the protagonists. Their initial home was no longer satisfying their desires, but the spaces where they go to build themselves another doesn't succeed in doing that either, so the result is a tragic series of failed quests and alienation.

And finally, precisely because of the failed nature of this quests, McCarthy calls into question the possibility of an ordered, finite and archetypal journey's existence. After around one thousand pages where he chronicled hundreds of longer or shorter voyages, across various spatial and temporal borders but also on the spaces around them, the writer shows his incredulity towards the bigger narratives through deconstructing America's fundamental myth of the cowboy and the maps that were supposed to guide the western expansion across the continent. In attempting to order and name the natural world so that we won't lose our way, without realizing that "it was because the way was lost to us already that we have made those names"⁷⁴, we have become estranged from the fluid, unrestricted movement of all things living, from an archaic world order that is now present only in the hearts of the marginal ones. The truth thus belongs to the anarchetypal

voices of the “in-between”, restless nomads and eternal wanderers who, belonging to multiple and no world at the same time, claim that “the one thing [they] knew of all things claimed to be known was that there was no certainty to any of it”⁷⁵.

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NOTES

1. In *Cormac McCarthy and the Writing of American Spaces* (2013), Andrew Keller Estes writes an in-depth analysis of how the American landscapes have been depicted in either extremely positive, either extremely negative terms by various explorers, writers or historians beginning with Cristopher Columbus.
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30. *Ibidem*, p. 95.
31. *Ibidem*, p. 231.
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35. Cormac McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
36. Nicholas Monk, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
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