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A Being of Great Order: Reading Lacan in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing*

Chamois Summer Holschuh

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A BEING OF GREAT ORDER:
READING LACAN IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE CROSSING*

A Thesis

by

CHAMOIS SUMMER HOLSCHUH

Submitted to Texas A&M International University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2014

Major Subject: English

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Approved as to style and content by:

Chair of Committee,	Manuel Broncano
Committee Members,	Jonathan Murphy
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December 2014

Major Subject: English

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my professors at Texas A&M International University. You have all taught me invaluable lessons about literature, humanity, and what can be achieved when these are studied together. You've also warned me of the solitude that comes with our field, and I am reminded of a passage in *Letters to a Young Poet* where Rainer Maria Rilke writes:

We are unutterably alone, essentially, especially in the things most intimate and most important to us. In order for a person to advise, even to help another, a great deal must happen. Many different elements must coincide harmoniously; a whole constellation of things must come about for that to happen even once.

A constellation has indeed formed in my sky, as all of you have influenced my life in some way or another. Under your guidance, I have had wonderful opportunities to develop as a student, a writer, and a person at this little campus on the border. I will always treasure my time in your classrooms and endeavor to honor your labors with my life after TAMIU.

ABSTRACT

A Being of Great Order: Reading Lacan in Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing* (December 2014)

Chamois Summer Holschuh, M. A., Texas A&M International University

Chair of Committee: Dr. Manuel Broncano

Cormac McCarthy's *The Crossing* follows Billy Parham on a psychologically taxing series of adventures that leave the teenaged would-be cowboy in utter despair by the end of the novel. His unhappiness and dissatisfaction invite a Lacanian reading. This thesis first explores his efforts to trap a pregnant shewolf as an illustration of Jacques Lacan's treatment of *das Ding* and the role of the *objet petit a*. While the she wolf functions as an *objet petit a* in the trajectory of Billy's desire, *la matriz*, a scent used by hunters to lure wolves, is used as a conceptual depiction of *das Ding*. To follow, McCarthy's use of maps and emphasis on storytelling throughout the novel are contextualized within Lacan's understanding of signification, a highly linguistic aspect of the psychoanalytic process. As Lacan insists the analysand be prompted to situate himself within a chain of memories and emotions, McCarthy demands his characters participate in the exchange of narratives to find meaning. Resisting, as Billy does, results in a sense of displacement and complicates any attempt at forming an identity. Finally, the corrido which memorializes Billy's younger brother is compared to the genre of courtly love poetry as accessed by Lacan. The troubadour's Lady and the *corridista*'s hero function in the system of human desire as well as signifiers in the signifying chains of those who write, sing, read, and

listen to these ballads. Billy's resistance to the corrido's induction of his brother reveals that Boyd has become yet another *objet petit a* in Billy's strain of desired objects. By the novel's end, it would appear meaningful signification and the creation of identity are beyond Billy who will become an itinerant wanderer in a vast landscape of structures outside his purview.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout *The Crossing*, Billy Parham is thwarted by forces beyond his control, and he is unable to reconcile himself to a world so unforgiving and seemingly bent on destroying his will. The second installment of the *Border Trilogy*, Cormac McCarthy's novel follows Billy on his travels between the United States and Mexico. His initial reason for entering the latter country is to return a trapped and pregnant shewolf to the mountains from which he believes she originates. He fails and comes back to his family's ranch in New Mexico only to find his parents have been murdered in an Indian raid. On Billy's next trip, he is accompanied by his younger brother Boyd on a quest to regain their family's horses which have been stolen and presumably taken south. When his brother prefers to stay in Mexico with his *novia*, Billy returns to the US alone and attempts to join the army. Rejected for a heart murmur, he initiates a third crossing in order to relocate his brother only to find that he has been killed in a shootout. Billy endeavors to bring his brother's body back to American soil, a trek that sees his horse stabbed and Boyd's remains desecrated. Constant failure and unhappy feelings of displacement wreak havoc on the protagonist—in sharp contrast to his brother Boyd who effortlessly integrates himself into an outlaw life and Mexican myth via his induction into the corrido tradition.

McCarthy's novel is a hefty catalog of the elder Parham boy's failures and misery. Complete with a formidable vocabulary and its author's apparent distaste for punctuation, *The Crossing* seems to quantify the common comparison of McCarthy to William Faulkner. Nonetheless, McCarthy is distinct from his forerunner in regard to their disparate belief systems. Madison Smartt Bell explains, "Despite a very strong current of fatalism in his work, Faulkner is a humanist, first and last. He sees things on a human scale—envisioning a world made to the

This thesis follows the style of *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*.

measure of humankind. McCarthy is not a humanist. Nor is he an anarchist, nor a nihilist, as I think he has sometimes been called. There is order in his universe but that order doesn't have anything much to do with us. We can give it a name and even pray to it if we wish. It won't make any difference" (10). The entire McCarthy canon reinforces this notion of man's insignificance; regardless, *The Crossing* insists that man endeavor to make meaning for himself. In this novel, storytelling is the key as it enables the individual to gain at least a perceived control of the world through narration. This aligns with psychoanalysis' method of having the analysand recount memories and emotions to construct an explanation for present psychological distress. This affords the analysand a sense of order over what has otherwise confounded him/her to the point of anxiety. In this vein, Jacques Lacan's work in psychoanalysis provides a stencil with which we can trace McCarthy's emphasis on narrative in conjunction with his treatment of Billy's experiences in the Border Trilogy. In particular, this thesis will explore Billy's desires, his inability to find meaning for himself, and his response to the corrido which memorializes his brother.

In Chapter I, Billy's tracking and eventual chaperoning of a shewolf into Mexico and his disastrous failure is discussed in the context of Lacanian desire. According to Lacan, desire is impossible to satisfy because the objects we pursue are only temporary distractions. Further, Lacan maintains that humans are confined to the order of the symbolic, where everything may be represented by language. Anything unrepresentable through language is unknowable and cannot be part of the symbolic. Lacan assigns such phenomena to the order of the real and introduces *das Ding*¹ as a way to allude to that which cannot be signified. He credits *das Ding* as the simultaneous inciter as well as the ultimate object of desire. Because it is the inarticulable "thing" beyond human understanding, it is beyond our reach, incapable of being articulated and

therefore possessed. Our linguistic nature is confounded by this, however, and we vainly endeavor to seek out and name/obtain *das Ding*. We desire it. In this way, *das Ding* launches the trajectory of desire while also being the ultimate object we pursue. However, because it is inaccessible, we are forced to look elsewhere for fulfillment. In place of *das Ding*, we pursue a never-ending succession of substitute objects which Lacan terms *objets petit a*. The wolf hunt in *The Crossing*'s first chapter can be used to illustrate this concept of desire and its innerworkings. The shewolf which Billy pursues functions as an *objet petit a*, and the *idea* of the untrappable wolf, as will be explained by Don Arnulfo, is likened to *das Ding*. Finally, *la matriz* offers a representation of the ex-timacy which *das Ding* causes in individuals by virtue of its simultaneous presence at our core and absence from our comprehension. The notion of displacement is concretized in *The Crossing* by Billy's itinerancy that lasts into old age but first began with his tragic loss of the shewolf.

Chapter II explores Billy's inability to find meaning for himself in the context of Lacan's linguistic studies. According to McCarthy, it is necessary for men to interact, sharing their stories with each other. If an individual fails to participate in this exchange, he risks relegating himself to meaninglessness because he fails to orient himself within a narrative structure. This structure will be used to exemplify Lacan's understanding of signifying chains. These chains are made up of signifiers and signifieds. In elementary terms, signifiers are symbols—such as words, images, etc.—and signifieds are their meanings. Lacan observes that the signifying chain allows the individual to define and interpret his surroundings and experiences. In this way, he orients himself and creates a meaningful identity. McCarthy's treatment of maps throughout *The Crossing* offers a more visual way of thinking about the role of signifiers and signifieds in the individual's endeavoring to position himself within a signifying structure. The trust one must

place in a map demonstrates the utter dependence one has upon signifying chains for direction. Beyond the individual, multiple people are able to successfully communicate amongst each other when they participate in an overarching signifying chain. We can think of these participants as belonging to a linguistic community. Constant reinforcement of these signifying chains is necessary in order to maintain relevance to the experiences of the community and its individual members. This aligns with McCarthy's insistence that stories must be told, over and over, to retain their meaning and for the narrators and listeners to maintain relevance to the tale. As noted, humans are linguistic beings and as such must always occupy a signifying structure like a navigator must depend on the map before him. Lacan observes that the very fact that the individual feels the need to perpetuate a signifying chain implies that he may otherwise disappear from the signifying chain, an event that would destroy his identity and ability to function. Similarly, McCarthy holds that resisting the call to narrate the self relegates one to meaningless solitude as evidenced by Billy's inability to establish a home.

In Chapter III, the corrido that memorializes Boyd is compared to the genre of courtly love poetry which Lacan explores in great detail in his *Seminars*. These ballad styles utilize a hero and a Lady, respectively, as *objets petit a* toward which the singer or poet aspires. Their role as such is exposed by their interchangeability. Billy learns that Boyd's corrido is in no way solely attributed to his brother; this particular song has been sung long before the Parham boys even entered Mexico and will likely be attributed to other *güeritos*² in the future. Likewise, Lacan finds that the Lady featured in courtly love poetry is no singular woman. Boyd and the Lady are very much *objets petit a*, consistently succeeded by others according to Lacan's understanding of desire. As previously noted, *das Ding* is the ultimate object of desire, but, because it cannot be had, we sublimate our desires toward the pursuit of substitutes instead. The

characteristic of the *objet petit a* as a substitute is always present, though, and thus always carries with it an underlying awareness of the Thing that is missing. *Das Ding*, unknowable as it is, would be traumatic to behold as it would require the individual to leave his signifying structure in the symbolic order and encounter *das Ding* in the real. Fortunately, then, the symbolic function of the *objet petit a* positions the object in front of *das Ding*. This masking is what Lacan refers to as “the beautiful.” The beautiful may be manifested in a painting, a person, a memory—virtually anything that serves to protect the individual regarding it from the Thing that would otherwise dismantle his signifying chain and him along with it (since his identity relies on that chain). The Lady performs this task in courtly love poetry as does Boyd in the corrido. Billy is unwilling to validate the corrido’s depiction of Boyd within his own signifying chain, so he is unable to regard Boyd as the mythological hero that the Mexican *corridistas* depict. However, by his jealousy of his little brother, Billy nevertheless makes Boyd into an *objet petit a* and still validates a comparison with Lacan’s Lady.

The tragedies which befall Billy would leave anyone reeling, and indeed *The Crossing*’s protagonist has great difficulty making sense of his experiences. McCarthy wreaks havoc on the notion of dependability on the structures we take for granted. He challenges his own characters’ physical and psychological stamina while raising serious questions about the seemingly simple acts of navigation and narration. Through a Lacanian lens, readers can at least gain an understanding of the manner in which these structures operate and are dismantled. McCarthy’s meandering web of tales become synthesized into a chain of realized desires much like the analysand’s self-narrative is constructed in the clinical session. As such, this paper’s reading of *The Crossing* becomes an exercise in signification, drawing together events and characters to construct meaning.

CHAPTER I

THE SHEWOLF AND DESIRE:

THE HUNT FOR *DAS DING*

To deliver his philosophical discourse on wolves, McCarthy uses as his mouthpiece the character of Don Arnulfo, an elderly wise man whom Billy seeks for advice when he is first trying to trap the shewolf. It is clear that Billy does not truly comprehend his undertaking as Don Arnulfo extrapolates on the mysteries of the hunt and man's ineptitude regarding his prey.

McCarthy writes:

The old man went on to say that the hunter was a different thing than men supposed. ... He said that the wolf is a being of great order and that it knows what men do not: that there is no order in the world save that which death has put there. ... You want to catch this wolf, the old man said. Maybe you want the skin so you can get some money. Maybe you can buy some boots or something like that. You can do that. But where is the wolf? The wolf is like the *copo de nieve*.³ ... You catch the snowflake but when you look in your hand you don't have it no more. Maybe you see this *dechado*.⁴ But before you can see it it is gone. If you want to see it you have to see it on its own ground. If you catch it you lose it. And where it goes there is no coming back from. Not even God can bring it back. ... You cannot hold it in your hand for it is made of breath only. (352-53)

The particular animal which Billy pursues is a single member of the species and hereafter will be referred to as the "shewolf." The wolf of which Don Arnulfo speaks is not a single specimen but the idea of the wolf. Further, the wolf is not merely an item that can be incorporated into a system of exchange; it is something apparently beyond man's grasp, unstable and fleeting like the *copo de nieve* or "breath only." In this sense, Don Arnulfo's wolf can be used as a representation of the Lacanian Thing, or, *das Ding*, the unreachable absence at the center of desire. Though, the shewolf that Billy pursues and eventually captures exemplifies an *objet petit a*, or a substitute object-cause of desire which pretends to be *das Ding*. Elevated to the status of

das Ding, the *objet petit a* fools the individual into thinking desire is satisfiable when the substitute object is obtained. Accordingly, Billy believes that trapping the shewolf will satisfy his desire. However, Lacan maintains that desire is not a one-time event but, rather, an ongoing fact of existence. As soon as the *objet petit a* is obtained, satisfaction once again eludes its pursuer who must next go after a new *objet petit a* in his search for satisfaction. In the same way, Don Arnulfo explains that the hunter who may desire “some new boots or something like that” can capture a particular wolf to bring him the money he needs to do so. Though, at the point that he kills the wolf in view of exchanging the pelt, Don Arnulfo asks, “But where is the wolf?” The idea of the wolf, which the hunter thought he was pursuing, dissipates as he moves on to the next *objet petit a*. As in the example given, the next *objet petit a* could be money, followed by boots, which will then be followed by something else in the never ending course of desire. True satisfaction is revealed to be impossible, and to believe otherwise is futile. Since it is his human desire to restore the captured shewolf to the Sierra Pilares, Billy’s mission is likewise a doomed enterprise, never to be fully sated. Because of this, it provides an opportunity to explore Lacanian desire in McCarthy’s novel.

The crossing that sets the book in motion involves Billy’s attempt to transport a pregnant shewolf to the Sierra Pilares, a mountain range in northern Mexico, where he believes she belongs.⁵ Throughout the novel and especially in the first chapter, McCarthy treats the wolf species with an almost spiritual reverence. Billy’s fascination with this particular animal is foreshadowed on the very first page of the book when, as a young child, the howling of wolves wakes him in the middle of night. He dresses in the dark and steals away on an hour long trek to find them “run the antelope in the moonlight” (309). The relentless hunt is depicted not as savage ferocity but as a poetic ballet: “They were running on the plain harrying the antelope and the

antelope moved like phantoms in the snow and circled and wheeled and the dry powder blew about them in the cold moonlight . . . and the wolves twisted and turned and leapt in a silence such that they seemed of another world entire” (310). They chase the antelope out of sight, but Billy waits, hoping for another glimpse. When they return, the wolves celebrate a successful hunt with a graceful performance: “Then he saw them coming. Loping and twisting. Dancing. Tunneling their noses in the snow. Loping and running and rising by twos in a standing dance and running on again. There were seven of them and they passed within twenty feet of where he lay. He could see their almond eyes in the moonlight. He could hear their breath. He could feel the presence of their knowing that was electric in the air” (310). McCarthy’s careful crafting of this event ensures that readers understand Billy does not perceive the wolves as ruthless killers but as marvelous creatures. Still, their activity, hunting, serves to reinforce that they are nonetheless harbingers of death and that to come near to a wolf is to endanger one’s self. Billy is fully aware of this, so, upon the wolves’ return approach, he holds his breath to prevent a puff of moisture from dispersing and creating a visual marker of his presence. When Billy eventually returns home and creeps back into bed, he tells no one of his experience—not even his brother Boyd. This solidifies for readers that the dangerous quest to follow is purely between Billy and the shewolf, motivated by his infatuation with the species.

This elaborate ode to wolves and Billy’s admiration for them run counter to the typical attitude of ranchers in the American west of the 1930s, the setting of the Parham family farm. Extensive ranching in the southwest from the mid-1800s onwards resulted in ecological upheaval wherein the wolves’ natural prey was either displaced or diminished to pitiful populations. To survive, Wallis Sanborn notes, “the wolves sought sustenance by attacking easy fodder—the domestic animals owned by westerly moving settlers” (133). As the problem escalated, bounties

were increasingly awarded “to appease and compensate the livestock owners,” a system which continued well into the late 1920s in New Mexico (133). S. K. Robisch explains that “By the thirties, the decade in which *The Crossing* opens, the Southwestern United States was all but rid of its wolves, and a ‘great trapper’ might catch three or four in a season” (288). McCarthy mentions one such trapper: W. C. Echols, a man whom the New Mexico district of the Bureau of Biological Survey portrayed as a hero in the late 1920s (Robisch 289). McCarthy presents Echols as a legendary wolf-hunter, mythologized by those who claim he is half-wolf and that he knows what the wolf knows before the wolf even does.⁶ Indeed, the trapper must think like a wolf if he hopes to lure it to its own demise. When evidence of a wolf surfaces near the Parham farm, Billy and his father set out to trap and eliminate it. They track her and anticipate her next move as best they can. However, the shewolf’s cleverness and apparent adaptation to being hunted by men proves her to be an almost impossible catch. Robisch comments, “When the few wolves left escaped the most carefully planned efforts to catch them, their infamy achieved legendary proportions” (288). Accordingly, Billy develops a respect for the shewolf’s intelligence and sacredness as expressed by Don Arnulfo that eventually causes a change of heart. He foregoes the plan to kill her, and instead makes a grave effort to safeguard the animal from the American policy of extermination and eventually from Mexican criminals. However, he is unable to preserve her long enough to convey her to the Sierra Pilares alive.⁷

Sanborn coolly comments that if Billy and other men had let the shewolf be, she very likely could have returned to Mexico on her own, given birth to her pups, and lived her life as it should have been, unmolested (135). He notes that “the she-wolf is most likely doomed from the instant a rancher discovers her first local kill, a ‘veal calf’... a valued commodity” (135). The economic system which birthed the bounty system by which wolves were nearly if not

completely exterminated from the region is a human contrivance, developed to feed human desire—for beef, for sport, for money. Anything that runs counter to this appetite is either made to submit to it or is eliminated. Sanborn further observes, “The calculus remains the same: man controls, often through killing, that which exists freely in the natural world, and in *The Crossing*, the absence of the wolf from southern New Mexico is the direct result of the acts and desires of man” (135). This assessment is reinforced by Manuel Broncano’s note that “Billy Parham’s quasi-mystical relationship with the she-wolf is a deeply moving account of the fragile balance of the natural world and the destructive power of human agency” (72).

Because she is an animal, Lacan would not subject the shewolf to the same realm of experiences that he would a human. From a psychoanalytic perspective then, we can read Billy’s appropriation of her and his hope for her to be free of pain, danger, and restrictive human society as his own desires projected. With this in mind, to deliver the shewolf to the place from which Billy believes her to originate is the pursuit of *his* desire that he mistakes as the rightful course for the animal. According to Lacan though, desire is ultimately insatiable. Indeed, Billy will not succeed, at least not as he plans. However, before Billy even develops this objective, he struggles to simply trap her. This is an ominous enterprise as Billy is warned by the prophetic Don Arnulfo that, in order to locate the wolf, “it was not a question of finding such a place but rather of knowing when it presented itself. He said that it was at such places that God sits and conspires in the destruction of that which he has been at such pains to create” (McCarthy 354). The shewolf—which McCarthy, the creator of everything in the novel, has taken such care to craft with reverence and awe—is indeed literally destroyed by Billy’s desire to conduct her to the Sierra Pilares.

However, we are first concerned with the notion of locating the wolf of which Don Arnulfo speaks, the wolf as enigma. He explains, “El lobo es una cosa incognoscible ... Lo que se tiene en la trampa no es mas que dientes y forro. El lobo propio no se puede conocer. Lobo o lo que sabe el lobo” (McCarthy 352).⁸ By “lo que se tiene en la trampa,” Don Arnulfo means to convey that what a man understands when he hunts is nothing but superficial corporealities—*dientes y forro*—and that the wolf itself—*el lobo propio*—will always be beyond him. The wolf in the trap exemplifies an *objet petit a* for the hunter, as the shewolf is for Billy. As previously noted, the particular animal here is only a temporary object of desire and one which will be supplanted by another as soon as the hunter determines what he wants next (money, boots, etc.). The wolf itself, however, is that which eludes the hunter. This interpretation of the object of desire being unobtainable, or in ontological terms, unknowable—*incognoscible*—suggests the “wolf itself” as a representation of *das Ding*.

Das Ding, according to Lacan, is impossible to articulate and therefore also unknowable. He explains that, as a linguistic being, man obtains an understanding of his surroundings through language. His signifying structure—his consciousness’ library that catalogs and operates everything he knows—depends on the ability to name things with “signifiers” so they may be assigned meaning, or a “signified.” These signifiers and signifieds belong to Lacan’s order of the “symbolic,” which regulates desire by providing the individual with a sense of control via the power to name and define (Evans 201-202). When man is presented with something unnamable, it is unobtainable to his structure of knowledge. Beyond the reach of signification, Lacan deposits such phenomena into the order of the “real.” Dylan Evans notes that “this character of impossibility and of resistance to symbolisation ... lends the real its essentially traumatic quality” (160). Indeed, man’s inability to name and obtain something is a deeply unsettling

notion; essentially, *das Ding* renders him powerless. To this end, Don Arnulfo emphasizes that the hunter is not in control of his own pursuit of the wolf. He states that, if the hunter truly wants to capture the enigma, he must see the wolf itself, or *das Ding*, “on its own ground” but also that this is a site which “there is no coming back from” (McCarthy 353). To enter the real and comprehend *das Ding* would require a transcendence wherein the individual leaves behind the symbolic. This is psychologically impossible to achieve, however, because of human dependence on symbolization which firmly entrenches man in the symbolic order.

Evans explains that “the real is ‘the domain of whatever subsists outside symbolisation’ ... Lacan [links] the real with the concept of impossibility ... because it is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order, and impossible to obtain in any way” (159-60). What the “real” attempts to contain is “only that which is impossible to symbolize ... the impossible Thing at the heart of the subject” (58). This leads Lacan “to express the idea that the heart of our being ... is also radically Other, strange, outside ... the subject is decentred, his centre is outside of himself, he is ex-centric” (58). Lacan’s view that desire is the mechanism by which humans operate positions the ultimate object of desire at the “heart” of the human psyche because this ultimate object is the inciter of such longing. Thus, *das Ding* is at the core of the individual. However, because *das Ding* is impossible to detect through symbolization, it belongs to the order of the real. The human, as an occupant of the order of the symbolic, is thus estranged from his own heart. As a result, Lacan posits that man is ex-centric to himself. Further, because *das Ding* cannot be rendered in the realm of symbolization, the very term “*das Ding*” has no claim to it.

An elaborate treatise on *la matriz*, delivered also by Don Arnulfo, presents an opportunity to illustrate the ex-centricity evoked by *das Ding*. Throughout the novel, *la matriz*, when used as

a broad term, is a metaphor for the unnamable forces that direct the world. Translated to English, we recognize this term as “the matrix,” a systemic body with interoperable parts which cannot be removed from the architecture of the system without compromising both their individual definitions and that of the overall system. *La matriz*, as a specific term, is first introduced to readers as a hunter’s aromatic compound used to lure wolves into pre-set traps. In the novel’s early pages, Billy is fully engaged in trying to catch the shewolf in such a way. To this end, he rummages through the abandoned cabin of “old man Echols,” based on the famous real-life trapper, for equipment. Among bottles labeled “Lion” and “Cat,” Billy finds the wolf scents are unmarked, save for one: “Number Seven Matrix” (McCarthy 347, 351). He takes this particular mixture to Don Arnulfo who refers to it as “la matriz” and goes on to offer an enigmatic description of such concoctions. The old man explains that “the matrix was not so easily defined. Each hunter must have his own formula ... that things were rightly named its attributes which could in no way be counted back into its substance” (351-52). There is no standard recipe for *la matriz* which allegedly contains mystic properties because its ingredients cannot be proven let alone represented in language. As a result, each hunter’s matrix will be unique, and even the maker may not be able to replicate it. Most important to the illustration of Lacan’s theory, though, is that *la matriz* has “things ... rightly named its attributes which could in no way be counted back into its substance” (352). Similarly, *Das Ding* has been given attributes by Lacan, but these linguistic descriptions cannot actually exist within it because *das Ding* does not conform to the symbolic realm’s use of signifying structures. As previously noted, even the signifier “*das Ding*” has no credibility since *das Ding* cannot be limited to linguistic terms. Likewise, *la matriz* resists definition, and, in this context, Echols’ neglect to label the majority of his wolf scents becomes rather poignant.

Despite a dearth of information regarding *matriz* ingredients, Don Arnulfo says that “in his opinion” the most effective wolf scents contain the menstrual blood of shewolves (352). The phrase “in his opinion” prevents the mistake of asserting a definitive signifier on behalf of any of the contents in *la matriz*. Intriguingly, the proposed efficacy of menstrual blood in *la matriz* suggests that a wolf will respond best to the uterine component which first gave it life as it is drawn toward its demise in the hunter’s trap. The lifeblood responsible for the wolf’s existence is now also found outside of the wolf in the hunter’s compound. In the wolf’s pursuit of *la matriz* then, there is a desiring toward an exterior object which is yet also at the very core of the wolf’s being. This exemplifies Lacan’s theory that *das Ding* causes an ex-timacy to the self. The wolf’s dangerous pursuit of *la matriz*, however, is not quite a fitting illustration of Lacan’s death drive. This concept is better understood through Billy’s insistence on conveying the shewolf to the mountains of northern Mexico.

To near *das Ding* is painful as it brings one psychologically closer to death, or, as can be interpreted by Don Arnulfo’s poetic description: the place where “God sits and conspires in the destruction of that which he has been at such pains to create” (354). To prevent that from happening, the pleasure principle operates as a barrier to excessive pleasures, as a minimizer of pain, and aims to maintain a homeostatic existence. As part of the symbolic order, the pleasure principle makes use of signifiers and signifieds to populate the individual’s desire with *objets petit a*. As has been discussed, *das Ding* is inaccessible to this realm yet lies at the heart of this system of desire. Excessive pleasure comes so close to *das Ding* that articulation becomes difficult, a scenario which has been established as painful. This better describes *jouissance*, which Evans further distinguishes as “an excess of enjoyment which returns again and again to transgress the limits of the pleasure principle and seek death” (164). It is this repetitious pattern

that Lacan is referencing when he uses the term “death drive”—a persistent striving for the most dangerous and painful satisfaction of arriving at *das Ding* in spite of the discomfort and trauma it produces. He makes yet a further distinction that “[i]nsofar as the drives are attempts to break through the pleasure principle in search of *jouissance*, every drive is a death drive” (92). Thus, even the pursuit of an *objet petit a* participates in this drive despite the fact that the object in question is not truly *das Ding*. It should be noted that in Freudian terms, the event of death is considered “a return to that blissful inanimate state where the ego cannot be injured” (Eagleton 139). Aspiring toward death is essentially “struggling to return to a state before we were even conscious”—a state untainted by pain or confusion (139). If pursuing *das Ding* is a death drive, then, one might regard a successful encounter with *das Ding* as a homecoming for the ego.

In this vein, Lacan’s theory stipulates that *das Ding*, as the vacuole around which desire and the pleasure principle operate, draws the individual toward itself. Lacan writes, “The world of our experience ... assumes that it is this object, *das Ding*, as the absolute Other of the subject, that one is supposed to find again” (52). However, “[i]t is to be found at the most as something missed” (52). Because actually finding *das Ding* would result in death, we are meant only to strive for it, substituting an *objet petit a* to avoid realizing the lack of it. The *objet petit a*, which is something plausibly attainable (such as fame or wealth, or in Billy’s case, the shewolf), is elevated to the prestige of *das Ding* so that we may fool ourselves into believing we have satisfied desire when we obtain the *objet petit a*. This delays for a little while the sense of absence by which we recognize the pseudopresence of *das Ding*. As the individual pursues a given *objet petit a*, he still moves toward *das Ding* by virtue of engaging desire. The more aggressively a desire is pursued, the closer the individual comes to *das Ding* and the more endangered his wellbeing, as we see in the operations of the death drive. Thus, to arrive at the

actual center of desire—to truly satisfy desire—is to pursue death. This is not necessarily an intentional suicide mission but a reckless pursuit of something missing.

McCarthy's crafting of the wolf, as explained by Don Arnulfo, parallels Lacan's treatment of *objets petit a* and *das Ding*. *The Crossing* blurs the line between species with this tale of boy and wolf, melding human desire with the mythos of the animal. For Billy to become aware (as much as anyone can be) of *das Ding*, he must become conscious of its absence. The shewolf's death initializes this very sense of "something missed." As Billy's *objet petit a*, she dies to make way for the next *objet petit a* which will be the retrieval of the family's stolen horses. Later, Billy desires to join the army, then to bury his brother in the US, and so on. The fulfillment or, more often, the thwarting of all of these *objets petit a* only further augments Billy's dissatisfaction and unhappiness. Ironically, the one comfort to be taken in all this is the shewolf's death. If we allow a brief anthropomorphization and recall Freud's definition of death as a state in which the ego is finally beyond any threat of harm, this is not a mournful event but a merciful one. When Billy pulls the trigger, it is indeed an act of compassion for the suffering animal, and the shewolf is restored to that place before life began, metaphorically demonstrated by the internment of her body in the Sierra Pilares. We view her death as a successful homecoming for her, even if Billy cannot understand it as such.

Three hundred pages after he ends her misery, in the closing chapter of the novel, Billy encounters an unsightly and "horribly crippled" dog, "[a]n arthritic and illjoined thing that crabbed sideways...with its milky half blind eyes" (McCarthy 738). The animal is clearly the rude and mocking counterpart to the lithe and clever shewolf at the novel's opening. At first, Billy detests the creature and runs it off by threatening to beat it with a yard-long piece of pipe. Maria O'Connell, who also aligns the malformed dog with the shewolf, writes, "Billy's anger at

the dog really reveals the mistreatment of his own soul” (10). His violent reaction to the canine jolts readers who cannot help but recall his tragic experience with the shewolf. As O’Connell notes the confusion between dog and “his own soul,” we are reminded again of the projection of Billy’s desire onto the shewolf and the subsequent fusion of his desire with her fate. The same night after he threatens the dog, Billy is awoken by a bright light caused by the Trinity Test of the nuclear bomb, an event that shakes him to the core. Regretting his misplaced anger, Billy vainly calls for the ragged dog, perhaps hoping to resume his psychological dependence on a canine. McCarthy writes, “[H]e walked out on the road and called for the dog. He called and called. Standing in that inexplicable darkness. Where there was no sound anywhere save only the wind. . . . he bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept” (740-41). While he may have successfully conveyed the shewolf to a merciful death, he did not experience her relief. Rather, he is now haunted by the memory of it, doomed to a desperate, ongoing awareness of an absence at the heart of his own being.

As a human, Billy is forever barred access to *das Ding*. Nonetheless, as the motivation of all desire, the underlying current of all human activity, *das Ding* would seem to be the very essence of human existence. It generates an ex-timacy as shown by *la matriz* and by Billyl’s itinerancy throughout *The Crossing*. Broncano’s following observation confirms such a view: “The second novel of the Border Trilogy represents a profound meditation about the human condition . . . as an endless quest for meaning in an apparently meaningless universe. It is a universe of grief and sorrow, of loss and penance, in which humans are forced to live in a state of permanent displacement” (72). That displacement is the result of constantly sidestepping *das Ding*, which, if we deem it the essence of what it means to be human, is the home to which we

can never return in this lifetime. At the end of the trilogy, in *Cities of the Plain*, when we see Billy in his final days, age seventy-eight and homeless, this notion is further cemented.

CHAPTER II

THE COMMUNION OF MEN:

MAPS, STORIES, AND SIGNIFYING STRUCTURES

The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta ... And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up ... to distinguish us from them. ... It is in a constant state of transition. ... Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger.

— Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

A map, having been drawn by one individual, is relevant only so long as someone else is navigating with it just as a story, being narrated by an individual, is meaningful only if someone is listening to it. Throughout *The Crossing*, McCarthy emphasizes the necessity of interpersonal communication to the development of meaning. He requires not just a speaker—be it a cartographer or narrator—but an interlocutor as well—a navigator or audience. To determine meaning, both the initiator and the recipient require each other and are dependent on the signification processes involved in language. McCarthy's treatment of this offers itself as a way to think through Lacan's work in linguistics within the field of psychoanalysis. Lacan holds that language is at the foundation of man's ability to create meaning through the use of signifiers and signifieds. Wherever maps are highlighted in the novel, they reinforce the fact that language is a human invention, developed as a psychological tool to communicate through speech, an act which contributes to the development of meaning for both the speaker and the interlocutor. Further, McCarthy insists on a communion between men that demands individuals to play both roles for each other. The listener must take a turn speaking and vice versa. This allows for multiple narratives to emerge which may conflict with each other, exposing the flaws in either

story. This interaction creates a space wherein the multiple accounts are merged to create a more holistic story, what is embodied in McCarthy's term *tercera historia*.⁹ This third history may not necessarily be truer than the others, but it is at least more comprehensive since its emergence requires the consideration of multiple perspectives. However, without both participants and a persistent renewal of exchanges, any meaning derived from this process cannot last.

To discuss Lacan's linguistic contributions to psychoanalysis, a background in semiotics is first necessary. One of the fathers of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure maintains that a sign "represents something for someone" and consists of two elements: the signified and the signifier (Lacan qtd. in Evans 182). The signified is the concept of the sign—the thought that corresponds to a particular sign; the signifier is the phonological aspect of the sign—"not the actual sound itself, but the mental image of such a sound ... the 'acoustic image' which [corresponds to] a signified" (186). Saussure insists that both the concept and the phonological aspect are necessary and, being equal to each other in value, interact in such a way that they cannot be parted without destroying the sign. The sign "horse," for example, can mean only one thing because the signified aspect of the sign evokes the concept of the animal while the signifier simultaneously evokes an utterance which is reserved only for that particular sign. "Hat" is phonologically different from "horse" as well as diverse in its apparently intrinsic signified, demonstrating that signs operate in a system of differences where one is defined *against* the other yet relies on the presence of that other to allow for such an opposition. Indeed, Saussure attests that "in language there are no positive terms, only differences" (186).

Lacan takes issue, though, with Saussure's idea that the signified and the signifier emerge simultaneously with the mention of their sign. He argues that the signifier takes priority and that "the signified is a mere effect of the play of signifiers" (186). Signifiers, as "acoustic images,"

are innumerable; any concoction of sound-image possible by human cognition may be a signifier. This does not necessitate that every signifier is sensible or that it corresponds to a definite signified. This leads Lacan to posit that, logically (not chronologically), signifiers take precedence as they do not depend on the existence of a signified. This renders what Lacan terms the “pure signifier,” essentially meaningless in itself nevertheless present because it is different from other signifiers.

While it might be tempting to simply replace Lacanian signifiers with the term “words,” they are not actually the same thing. Morphemes, phonemes, phrases, and sentences may also serve the function of a signifier. Further, non-linguistic entities may be signifiers: relationships, acts, objects, and so on. As will be discussed, topographical features of maps may even serve as signifiers. Evans explains, “The single condition which characterises something as a signifier, for Lacan, is that it is inscribed in a system in which it takes on value purely by virtue of its difference from the other elements in the system. It is this differential nature of the signifier which means that it can never have a univocal or fixed meaning ...; on the contrary, its meaning varies according to the position which it occupies in the structure” (187). In clinical psychoanalysis, this structure is the individual’s consciousness, composed of signifiers with various meanings that only the individual can determine and which the analyst attempts to draw out in therapy sessions. Understanding the individual’s signifying structures aids the analyst in helping the patient to reconcile with the signifying structure of his surroundings—namely, society. To apply Lacan’s treatment of linguistics to human communication in general, beyond the individual level, one need only take a given signifier and consider it as the majority of a given linguistic community’s members are prone to interpret it.

In interpersonal conversation, the surety with which signifiers relay their meanings requires that both the speaker and listener are of the same linguistic community. This linguistic community consists of more than a shared knowledge of a given national language (English, Spanish, etc.); it also requires the conversationalists to have familiar social and historical backgrounds. These commonalities contribute to a signifying structure which stipulates the signified aspects of the signifiers exchanged in speech; in other words, belonging to the same signifying structure is akin to understanding a workplace jargon that may otherwise confuse non-colleagues. Not every signifier in that jargon is unique to one community of colleagues, though, as various words are often shared by multiple communities yet with different definitions and connotations. Even if the non-colleagues possess the same signifier in their own lexicon, their signifying structure may endow it with a different signified. As Evans noted, a given signifier “can never have a univocal or fixed meaning” because of its “differential nature” (187). Thus, if communication is to be effective, if a signifier is to at least *appear* to have a fixed meaning in the context of a given conversation, the speaker and listener must be inductees of the same signifying structure.

Throughout the novel, Billy often lacks this necessary integration with others, sometimes linguistically and sometimes socially. Recall that signifiers are not necessarily individual words but may also be embodied in acts, relationships, etc. For example, upon his second return to New Mexico, Billy’s ragged clothing and otherworldly countenance cause people to distance themselves from him. McCarthy writes, “people looked back at him through the rolling dust as if he were a thing wholly alien in that landscape. Something from an older time of which they’d only heard. Something of which they’d read” (648). Billy’s appearance does not sync with contemporary America’s social vision, and he is thus regarded as an oddity for which they have

no modern signifier. Maintaining Lacan's priorities, without the signifier, there can be no signified. Because of this, Billy's presence, though made tangible by their senses, is yet inarticulate within their contemporary signifying structures. At best, they can perceive him as some historical relic for which they have no modern use. In reference to this portion of the novel, Broncano compares Billy to Rip Van Winkle who also is "deprived ... of the historical consciousness that gives the individual a sense of belonging, and in turn he is not recognized by the villagers, who see in him a ghost from a long-gone past" (80). A similar situation causes a disconnect in signification as we see in Billy's exchange with the border patrol during this particular crossing:

[Guard]: I guess you come back to sign up.

[Billy]: I reckon. If I can find an outfit that'll have me.

[Guard]: You needn't worry about that. You aint got flat feet have you?

[Billy]: Flat feet?

[Guard]: Yeah. You got flat feet they wont take you.

[Billy]: What the hell are you talkin about.

[Guard]: Talkin about the army.

[Billy]: Army?

[Guard]: Yeah. The army. How long you been gone anyways? ... Hell fire, boy. This country's at war. (McCarthy 646)

Having lost touch with world events and intending merely to find work on a ranch, Billy misunderstands the guard's assumption that he has returned from Mexico to "sign up," unable to connect the signifier to its new connotation. Because he has been absent from American communities for so long, Billy is at odds with the historical context necessary to its jargon and struggles for successful communication with his countrymen.

Further, the revelation of war is a rude awakening to his lack of belonging, evoking his orphanhood in a national sense. In an attempt to remedy this *huerfano*¹⁰ state and to find himself a home, Billy tries to join the army but is rejected for a heart murmur, a condition he misunderstands to be fatal. Seeing the army as his only chance to join a community in which he

could find a purpose, find meaning, Billy makes a desperate plea to the military doctor to let him join in spite of the heart murmur. Billy insists, “I dont have anyplace to go. I think I need to be in the army. If I’m goin to die anyways why not use me? I aint afraid” (654-55). Obligated to follow regulations, the doctor still refuses him. McCarthy’s choice of medical anomaly is a well-crafted indicator of a deficiency at the core of the protagonist’s being that invokes a permanent displacement. Having been rejected three times by three different recruiting offices, Billy abandons his efforts and once again estranges himself, leaving his temporary job as a stablehand to wander indefinitely. This only further impedes his ability to communicate and develop relationships with others, the conversations of which ought to produce a *tercera historia*, a signifying structure for him.

This is best demonstrated by McCarthy’s emphasis on spaces and the production of meaning through them. The US-Mexican border, which provides the literal basis of the novel’s title, furnishes a helpful example in this regard. Stacy Peebles writes,

McCarthy’s fascination with place is slowly overshadowed by a simultaneous fascination with space itself ... regional imagination ... becomes a regional comprehension of narrative ... Each border needs the other because, as McCarthy might say, no story lives in isolation. Two worlds touch here ... The Border Trilogy gives us not only an enchanting and sometimes harrowing picture of the physical space of the Texas-Mexico borderlands, but also of the ever-shifting, half-life storytime world that lies just below its surface. (142)

Peebles observes that places like Mexico and Texas—and for the purposes of this particular novel, New Mexico and Arizona as well—require each other in order to validate their differences. In a Hegelian dichotomy, one being relies on its relationship to another for self-definition. Lacking an “other” to counter, the self has no boundaries. In geopolitical terms, the place would have no state or international lines. Without these, its limits cannot be defined, a sense of containment cannot be determined, and a wholeness of self cannot be perceived.

When positioned against each other though, the self and the other are able to produce meaning by virtue of their respective differences. The “US” is therefore defined by the fact that it is not “Mexico” and vice versa. Further exemplifying this process whereby meaning is created, McCarthy introduces a *gitano*¹¹ who offers to recount to Billy three versions of the same story which tell of a plane crash in the mountains. When Billy indicates that he wants only to hear the account that is true, the gypsy insists that they are all necessary for the derivation of truth. He goes on to explain, “La tercera historia, said the gypsy, es ésta. Él existe en la historia de las historias. Es que ultimadamente la verdad no puede quedar en ningún otro lugar sino en el habla.¹² ... This is the third history. It is the history that each man makes alone out of what is left to him. Bits of wreckage. Some bones. The words of the dead. How make a world of this? How live in that world once made?” (McCarthy 726). Here, “tercera” (or “third”) is not an indicator of sequence; rather, “third” is a product, the result of two pre-existing pieces, neither of which necessarily precede the other but which clash to make a new history. Because they are different, as shown in the Hegelian relationship of self and other, when the existing histories are brought violently together, it becomes apparent that their individual properties cannot be regarded as truly independent of each other. On either side, what was once thought coherent, foolproof history is cut and dissected so that their versions may be compared to one another; in their inability to align, both are found wanting. This is the case in contrasting histories believed and defended by Mexico and the US regarding rights to the geographical spaces marked by an international border. It is also the case in the gypsy’s telling of diverging accounts of the plane crash. As is inevitable when comparing two things, conclusions are made to explain their differences, and those conclusions produce *la tercera historia*. This version may not necessarily be more veridical than those histories which contributed to its creation, but it is more

comprehensive as it has been formed of the two, as a new molecule is formed in the violence of nuclear fusion.

La tercera historia cannot exist in the past as do the pre-existing histories which produce it; it is a lasting scar, a border ever-present so long as it is performed in a telling. This involves simultaneous absence and presence—for, after all, what is a scar but the result of an absence? What was once there—presumably whole flesh—has been lanced, cut out, irrevocably torn asunder. What replaces this *herida abierta*,¹³ as Gloria Anzaldúa termed it in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, is viscous blood, filling crevices just as the process of creating a *tercera historia* addresses the holes in conflicting histories. After a process of clotting and hardening, a confirmation period of the signifying structure, the result is a shining pock or dash where the marred flesh once was, the *tercera historia* now complete. To speak of a border, then, is to speak of an absence that longs toward fullness just as the signifier—defined by the negativity of its differential nature—is empty until charged by a signified. Border-making/the utterance of a signifier, is a traumatic act wherein the landscape/silence is ripped apart, scattering debris while a unit emerges, causing irrevocable divisions. Most important in all this is the realization that borders and signifiers are a human phenomenon. Animals care not for political distinctions between Mexico and the US, for what a man chooses to call a particular river or mountain.

On that note, McCarthy emphasizes the purely human habit of naming things—geographical features in particular. Early in their venture to retrieve their family horses, Boyd asks Billy, “You reckon the horses know where we’re at?” (McCarthy 498). Billy incredulously responds, “Hell they dont know nothin. They’re just in some mountains somewheres. You mean do they know they’re in Mexico?” (498). This launches a heated back-and-forth that only peters

out when Boyd concludes, “I don't think they backtrack. I think they just know where things are” (499). By distinguishing that horses are unconcerned with human signifiers (such as the names of countries or mountain ranges) but still have the ability to orient themselves in the physical world, McCarthy sets apart geographical terminology like “Mexico” and “Peloncillos” as purely human invention—the utilization of which is firmly entrenched in the human realm. We have seen this earlier in McCarthy’s gratuitous inclusion of human names for the geographical features that the shewolf traverses prior to being caught. As an animal, she has no care for politically determined international boundaries; to her, “Whitewater Creek” is just a river and the “Peloncillos” simply another mountain range. The importance she might ascribe to them is of an instinctual navigational nature; no differentiating linguistic signs are necessary as these places are only important to her in the present. There is no temporal distancing that language need cross. She is not relating a story about her past journey; she is not a patient in a counseling session constructing a narrative in order to gain self-meaning. Like the horses, she is not a linguistic creature and does not require a map to find her way. The Parham boys, however, do possess such an inclination, and McCarthy’s contrasting of animals’ freedom from linguistic dependence serves to emphasize the psychological nature of human signification.

After spying Keno¹⁴ in the town of Bacerca, Billy and Boyd commission an elderly local man to draw them a map to a town called Casas Grandes where they hope to find more information on their stolen horses. The map makes use of signification, though in a pictorial sense where images represent topographical features absent from the present setting. A distancing between signifiers and their signifieds still occurs, revealing that signification can function in a manner other than words. Though they merely appear as scratchings in the dirt, the images of mountains, rivers, and such communicate the same information to the Parham boys as

if “sierras” and “rios” were actually present. They pay close attention, sitting on the ground while they watch the old man: “He sketched in the dust streams and promontories and pueblos and mountain ranges. He commenced to draw trees and houses. Clouds. A bird. He penciled in the horsemen themselves doubled upon their mount. Billy leaned forward from time to time to question the measure of some part of their route whereupon the old man would turn and squint at the horse standing in the street and then give an answer in hours ... By the time the old man was done the map he’d drawn covered an area in the dirt the size of a blanket” (493). The meticulous illustrations are all for naught, however, as a group of local men who had been observing the whole time reveal to the Parhams that “el viejo está loco”¹⁵ (494).

One of these villagers refer to the map as “un fantasma”¹⁶ and continues on to say “that in any case a bad map was worse than no map at all for it engendered in the traveler a false confidence” (494). Indeed, in order for a signifying system to function properly for the individual, the individual and the communicating device—spoken word, written word, or in this case a pictorial map—must participate in the same lexicon and, further, commit to the same definitions of the signs contained in that lexicon. Both must prescribe to the same language. After all, as David Holloway writes, “it is the expropriation and redistribution of meaning—the ownership of language—that structures the form in which histories appear and vanish before us” (192). In his conversation with the heretic at Huisiachepic, Billy is told, “The task of the narrator is not an easy one ... Always the teller must be at pains to devise against his listener’s claim ... He sets forth the categories into which the listener will wish to fit the narrative as he hears it ... the narrative is itself in fact no category but is rather the category of all categories for there is nothing which falls outside its purview. All is telling. Do not doubt it” (McCarthy 463). The heretic is here precautioning Billy against miscommunication, emphasizing the importance of

familiarity with his audience. The narrator/writer/cartographer must be a prognosticator of sorts in order to determine what signs will best communicate his message to his listener/reader/traveler. To do this, there is an assumption that the initiator of a given exchange shares the same linguistic system as his recipient. Without this aspect, the message is meaningless; further, if the initiator's message *appears* to conform to the recipient's prescribed linguistic system but does not truly, it will, as the Bacerca man explains, "[engender] ... a false confidence" (494). This false confidence will encourage the recipient to pursue meanings that do not actually cooperate with the initiator's intended message and, as we can presume from the false map provided to the Parham boys, to follow through will result in confusion and may even threaten their lives should they find themselves stranded.

Such an anxiety-ridden psychological state could easily be described as a neurosis wherein the individual is unable to reconcile his present surroundings with his established system of order, with the psychological context in which he has successfully functioned in the past. Had the Parham boys followed the map drawn by the demential man, they would require serious realignment of their signifying structures to get back on track. First, a realization that the map was false would have to occur, followed by a bearing of their position in a strange territory, and concluded by a reconciling of their earlier system of signification with their present situation. It is a dilemma like this that the psychoanalyst addresses in therapy. Jordan Skinner writes that, for Lacan, "psychoanalysis is the only conceivable rampart against contemporary anxieties." In a 1974 interview for the Italian magazine *Panorama*, Lacan admits that psychoanalysis is a practice "prone to all sorts of ambiguities" due to its lack of concrete rules (Skinner). He describes it not as a prescriptive cure-all but something more like a "symptom—something that reveals the malaise of the society in which we live" (Skinner). In the analysis process, neuroses

are exposed for what they are: fearful anxiety. Obsessive compulsive behaviors, hallucinations, and so on are mutations of the discomfort that accompanies the recognition of failure to comprehend one's surroundings or one's past. Lacan says that psychoanalysis approaches these perturbations through speech by having the patient "speak, recount, explain himself" to the analyst; put another way, "the subject [is] analysing himself" (Skinner). He tells *Panorama's* readers, "Freud defined psychoanalysis as the subject's assumption of his own history, insofar as this history is constituted by the words addressed to another person. Psychoanalysis is the realm of speech, there is no other remedy" (Skinner).

The necessity of the "subject's assumption of his own history" is in line with McCarthy's insistence that everyone must tell his own story. The heretic at Huisachepe declares, "Acts have their being in the witness. Without him who can speak of it? In the end one could even say that the act is nothing, the witness all" (McCarthy 462). The "witness" is not just an observer but also a testifier to an act. In psychoanalysis, experiences must be vocalized so that the patient can arrange it in his constructed narrative; in so doing, the patient completes the two-fold process of becoming witness to his own past—first, experiencing it in the moment it occurred; second, declaring it after the fact.

Psychoanalysis also requires a listener—the analyst—who provides prompts and the occasional question to help the patient determine some kind of meaning from his accounts. Several characters in *The Crossing* warn Billy that telling the story is not quite enough, that there must be an audience, too—people who can absorb his story and share their own. Before his first return to New Mexico, in the mountains west of the mining town of El Tigre, he encounters natives that host him, mending his clothes and providing food for his journey. As he prepares to

leave them, the tribe's shaman steps forward and tells Billy (who does not yet know his parents have been killed):

[A]lthough he was huérfano still he must cease his wanderings and make for himself some place in the world because to wander in this way would become for him a passion and by this passion he would become estranged from men and so ultimately from himself. He said that the world could only be known as it existed in men's hearts. For while it seems a place which contained men it was in reality a place contained within them and therefore to know it one must look there and come to know those hearts and to do this one must live with men and not simply pass among them. He said that while the huérfano might feel that he no longer belonged among men he must set this feeling aside for he contained within him a largeness of spirit which men could see and that men would wish to know him and that the world would need him even as he needed the world for they were one. (442)

The passion of which the shaman speaks could be interpreted as a dangerous psychotic break. Clearly, he is warning Billy that to become solitary is to risk his psychological wellbeing. To “live with men” involves communication; to “come to know those hearts” one must explore others through conversation and storytelling just as the analysand must narrate his past. This accounting, combined with the analyst's prompts and questions allows the analysand to clarify what was once a disjointed series of memories into a more cohesive *tercera historia*.

Further, on his third return to New Mexico, Billy is told by a gypsy that “One could even say that what endows any thing with significance is solely the history in which it has participated” (720). The structure of signification in which a given object, idea, person, and so on is considered meaningful must remain intact if its value is to persist past a given moment. Because he is mentally unstable, the elderly man who draws the Parham boys' map is at odds with any signifying structure with which they and the villagers might make sense. Even if the map is perfectly sounds to the old man, the laborious illustrations are the equivalent of gibberish to those outside of his mind, those who do not share his signifying structure. A similar disconnect is also seen in Billy's misinterpretation of the border patrol's usage of “sign up” when

he makes his final return to the now at-war US. Knowing how a thing came to be of value is necessary if a psychoanalysis patient is to recall the object/idea/person and incorporate it in his self-narrative. Without its accompanying characteristics, the object/idea/person will not feature in the patient's story and may as well never have existed. This is true even of the patient himself; he can have no significance if he does not contribute to and thereby participate in a structure of signification.

The gypsy continues with an example of family photographs his father had obtained—though the long-dead people featured in them were of no relation to him. McCarthy writes, “What he came to see was that as 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 ... In their images they had thought to find some small immortality but oblivion cannot be appeased” (728). Here, the unnamed gypsy reinforces the shaman's counsel; communion with others is necessary if any value is to attributed an individual. The photos collected by the gypsy's father serve as an ominous reminder of our individual worthlessness against the rest of the world; this dreary thought leads to the photos becoming a symbol of bad luck as the gypsy explains to Billy that the other gypsies would “scarcely look at them” (728). Discussing the same passage, Dianne Luce writes, “All value is in the heart. But if the hearts in which value resides are mortal, the value of a life seems destined to die, if not with that life then with the hearts of those who treasure it” (205). This interpretation fortifies the shaman's exhortation that “to know [the world] one must look [in men's hearts] and come to know those hearts and to do this one must live with men and not simply pass among them” (McCarthy 442). The individual must live in a community wherein he participates with others for a sustained period of time, allowing meaning to be first inspired, then shaped and fired like clay

in a potter's workshop. In this manner, the individual constructs and abides by significations that cooperate with those of others. The individual can therefore be understood by others and is far less likely to suffer a sense of lack. To experience such emptiness is to gain awareness of the unobtainable *Ding*, to realize that "the way was lost to us already" as Quijada puts it (702). Constant interaction with others through conversation and the exchange of stories enables us to ignore the gnawing absence at the center of human existence, to delay the awful realization of *das Ding*.

This *Ding*, which eludes signification, aligns with McCarthy's use of the "the world" throughout his novel. Holloway explains that "the resistance of the world to concrete interpretation, its refusal to be altered by having meaning inscribed within itself from without, is the same lesson learned by Billy Parham in *The Crossing*" (188). In Quijada's discourse on language-building, we find a demonstration of the constant *Ding* and man's inability to capture it in a word: "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 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. That they cannot find for us the way again" (McCarthy 702). Here, we see how the most elementary blocks of language—nouns—are the first indication that humans lack something. Naming involves a distance between speaker and thing, a space insurmountable by physical means that therefore must be put into a nonphysical system. Language develops as a means of reference to that which is not present by using a signifier (word) for a thing. The speaker's utterance of a signifier produces a meaning—the signifier's signified—that the listener understands, granted these persons participate in the same language system (English, Spanish,

etc.). Whether spoken or written, language serves this essential function. Likewise, maps make use of language, sometimes literally and sometimes pictorially. As shown, the maps of *The Crossing*, the role of which is to provide direction, serve as a metaphor for the functionality of signification and its purpose in psychological welfare as understood by Lacan.

The gypsy's conundrum emerges here: "How make a world of this?" (726). "This," being an awareness of the differential nature of signifiers and the *tercera historia*, or the signification, they produce is indeed psychological and ontologically stressful. If it is not being told, it does not exist. To carve out a living in a space that requires constant recognition of its evanescence is to always carry a skepticism of what is tangibly observable and what is told, as revealed in the bafflement of the Americans at the sight of Billy upon his return to the US. Furthermore, in regard to the corrido attributed to his brother Boyd, Peebles writes, "Billy resists the country's [Mexico's] assimilation of his brother and insists upon his idea of Boyd's 'true' identity" (134). The combination of Billy's idea of his brother and the Mexicans' version forces an understanding that the reality of Boyd is encompassed by neither but exists beyond them in a third history. In the gypsy's explanation of such a concept, "Billy hears that 'the real' is not physical but metaphysical, that Boyd exists not in the bones Billy carries but in the corrido, however inaccurate, that keeps him alive" (135). The corrido revives Boyd—and as yet another example of the ambivalence of signifiers, all the other *güeritos*¹⁷ ever memorialized by it—every time it is sung by recalling him into its signifying structure. Billy's inability to position his brother in such a structure leads him to regard his brother's death as meaningless, creating a vacuum in whatever sense of personal narrative Billy may have. He can never understand his brother's death and to think of it is to stare at the black hole of *das Ding*, a nightmarish experience best avoided.

CHAPTER III

THE LADY AND THE GUNSLINGER:

THE BEAUTIFUL IN COURTLY LOVE AND THE CORRIDO

Similar to the fate of the shewolf, Boyd follows desire to his own death. Billy's younger brother embraces the life of the outlaw, seemingly already cut out for it as evidenced by his uncanny horsemanship, distrust of strangers, and brash moments of bravery. He repeatedly endangers himself in pursuit of his goals. He nearly rides the brothers' horses through fire to rescue a girl he does not know from would-be rapists, and he gets shot stealing back his own horses. He persistently foregoes the common sense which should prevent him from such reckless activities, causing readers to question the value he has for his own life. After he is finally killed in a standoff, Boyd is memorialized in a corrido. As such, Boyd is an example of an *objet petit a*, constantly renewed by the singers of the ballad. The corrido further welcomes a Lacanian reading since the genre evolved from the tradition of courtly love poetry which Lacan thoroughly explores as an illustration of sublimated desire. In a comparison of the two ballad styles, we find an opportunity to explore what Lacan terms "the beautiful" in McCarthy's depiction of Boyd as well. This beautiful masks the obverse side of desire. It hides death from view by highlighting things perceived to be the opposite of destruction and trauma. The beautiful can appear in virtually any form—as concepts like virtue and bravery, as things like paintings and personally meaningful objects, or as people like courtly love poetry's Lady and the corrido's gunslinger. Lacan holds that behind all of these forms death lies in wait, but the power of the beautiful is to obscure it, to protect the individual from its revelation. Indeed, the heroes of the corridos, of

which Boyd is one, serve to distract listeners from their otherwise close proximity to chaos as border dwellers.

The corrido, from the Spanish *correr*—“to run” or “to flow”—is a Mexican ballad that functions as a storytelling device, dubbed so because the tale is told “simply and swiftly, without embellishments” (Paredes xi). Ilan Stavans notes, “The tradition stretches back to the *trovadores*, whose lyrics concerned romantic love. Transferred to the New World during the Spanish colonial period, the tradition spread widely in the nineteenth century” (2463). These romances evolved over time, changing in both structure and content. Early corridos, as Elijah Wald describes them, were essentially “cowboy ballads” (Wald 3). Gaining momentum in the 1860s and most likely developed in the region that would become the Texas-Mexico border, they told the stories of “Indian raids, the struggle to establish a Republic of the Rio Grande, and the guerrilla warfare against Zachary Taylor’s troops” (Paredes 139) as well as stories of “heroic outlaws and gunmen, or of trail drives and horses” (Wald 3). As the cowboy lifestyle began to disappear, “ballads continued to be written along the border about murders and other spectacular crimes” (Wald 3).

Corridos function as records to prevent cultural forgetfulness and follow a relatively standard narrative pattern. Stavans observes, “They announce an important historical or personal event, narrate the incidents that led to it, and conclude with a moral message stressing the universal value of the tale” (2463-2464). Américo Paredes takes issue with this last item, though, as a generalization that does not apply to all corridos. As he explains in his comprehensive study of the genre, there are two types of protagonists: the Border hero—“the man fighting for his right with his pistol in his hand” (149)—and the Border outlaw—a figure that is “quite frankly ... realistic, selfish, and usually unrepentant” (144). He adds, “Nor does the Border outlaw repent,

to furnish a moral for the crowd. The outlaw is either seen frankly as an outlaw, without sentimentalizing, or he is made an actor in border conflict” (150). The heroes are regarded with more respect than are the outlaws. While the latter often meet their end by hanging, Paredes observes, “The heroes are not taken prisoners. They either shoot their way out or die fighting” (145). McCarthy’s treatment of the corrido does presuppose an element of universality as suggested by Stalans’ assessment of the genre. However, because it does not necessarily offer a moral lesson, it still aligns more closely with Paredes’ research in this matter. Further, the circumstances of Boyd’s death prevent a categorization of him into only one class of corrido protagonist. While he is indeed heroic in his endeavors, he consciously embraced the outlaw mode of life, going so far as to join a gang. Thus, he is an amalgamation of the two classes Paredes has outlined and will hereafter be characterized as an outlaw-hero.

McCarthy uses the corrido to demonstrate how one person’s story may be adopted and shared among others to preserve his presence even without his direct contribution, essentially negating the song’s protagonist as a real individual. This is especially true in the case of Boyd when it becomes apparent that the particular song attributed to him existed long before and has undergone many interpretations. Unsure what to make of his brother’s induction into the folk tradition, Billy asks Quijada to explain:

What does the corrido say?

Quijada shook his head. The corrido tells all and it tells nothing. I heard the tale of the güerito¹⁸ years ago. Before your brother was even born.

You dont think it tells about him?

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. It tells the tale of that solitary man who is all men. (McCarthy 700)

The other tellings of which Quijada speaks still feature a *güerito*, but the role is attributed to other boys and young men in similar situations as Boyd (one is hard-pressed not to consider John

Grady Cole of *All the Pretty Horses* as one of these possibilities). Billy is not ready to surrender his idol and last family member as an outlaw-hero for the masses, though, and resists the ballad as an appropriate commemoration of his brother. The ambiguity of the corrido's protagonist is an echo of the form's origins in the *trovadores*, Spanish for "troubadours." These poets wrote and sang about the ideal woman—or, the Lady—in medieval Europe. Lacan highlights this genre in his seminar on courtly love poetry.

The Lady in each of these poems, Lacan notes, "is presented with depersonalized characteristics. As a result, ... all the poets seem to be addressing the same person" (149). This is possible when we consider the Lady as a sublimated *objet petit a*, elevated to the place of *das Ding*. Sublimation, Lacan explains, "raises an object ... to the dignity of the Thing" by enabling the object to function as a signifier, a representative of *das Ding* (112). In accordance with the pleasure principle, an individual creates for himself a support system of signifiers which he embraces and consumes as a preoccupation to avoid the emptiness of *das Ding* which is at the core of his being. In this process, the individual is essentially creating something out of nothing—or, as Lacan refers to it, "creation *ex nihilo*"—because the object gains its definition by its relation to a lack, a vacuole. This occurs in courtly love poetry as the troubadour constructs a Lady who could, it is hoped, satisfy his sexual desire. However, the entire genre of courtly love poetry requires that this Lady be unobtainable, that "the object involved, the feminine object, is introduced ... through the door of privation or of inaccessibility" (149). The subsequent impossibility of satisfaction results in an even more traumatic awareness of lack for the poet.

Further, Lacan finds, "In this poetic field the feminine object is emptied of all real substance. ... the person in question is close to allegory" (149). The poet is able to demean or fantasize the Lady in any way he pleases when she is deprived of actual humanity and

“transformed into a symbolic function” (149). This distortion of the female object, to the point where she is no longer recognizable as a particular person but as an idea of woman is the effect of sublimation. This realization also leads Lacan to find that “all the poets seem to be addressing the same person” just as the corrido sings of a general border outlaw-hero (149). Ultimately, the Lady or outlaw-hero is exposed as nothing more than a signifier, as a creation *ex nihilo*, defined by absence. With this in mind, it does not really matter who the Lady or outlaw-hero actually is; they need only be empty shells by which the troubadour or *corridista* may demonstrate his personal void, his recognition of the unattainability of *das Ding*. It is this presence of *das Ding* behind the mask of the Lady or outlaw-hero that substantiates these characters as examples of the beautiful.

While the people of Mexico revere Boyd in the corrido, Billy is uncomfortable with their adoption of his younger brother. A simple explanation could be that Billy mourns his last family member with a jealous grief, unwilling to share his beloved brother with those who barely—if at all—knew him. Lacan’s exposition on “the beautiful,” however, offers another possibility for Billy’s resistance. Lacan writes, “How can man, that is to say a living being, have access to knowledge of the death instinct, to his own relationship to death? The answer is, by virtue of the signifier in its most radical form. It is in the signifier and insofar as the subject articulates a signifying chain that he comes up against the fact that he may disappear from the chain of what he is” (295). When an individual articulates himself within a signifying chain, he locates himself within a finite structure that requires perpetual reiteration to ensure its limits. In the event that the signifying chain ceases to be reiterated, there is a death also of the signifier(s) within the chain—of which the individual himself is one. The individual’s recognition of this reveals “knowledge of the death instinct”—of inevitable movement toward termination. This is acted out by Boyd’s

role in the corrido. He functions within it and is revived whenever it is sung, an effect that ought to comfort Billy. However, Quijada reveals that this corrido is not really just about Boyd; rather, he is only the latest *güerito* to be attributed this particular ballad, implying that he will eventually be supplanted by another. Billy is upset by this and rightly so as it belittles Boyd, emptying him out as Lacan finds the Lady to be in courtly love poetry. Thus, for Billy, to listen to the corrido and to accept his brother as an empty signifier within the context of the corrido's signifying chain is to detect the futility of Boyd's legacy. It is no wonder Billy shies away from the corrido and what it masks.

Having not been present for the shootout, Billy is informed by Quijada of the events which led to Boyd's death.¹⁹ Quijada explains, "Your brother is in that place which the world has chosen for him. He is where he is supposed to be. And yet the place he has found is also of his own choosing. That is a piece of luck not to be despised" (McCarthy 702). "The world," as in passages dealing with the shewolf, is not merely a physical domain but a philosophical and psychological realm in which humans live and to which they are subject despite its intangibility. This allows one to read McCarthy's "world" as a depiction of the Lacanian Thing. "The world," like *das Ding*, is beyond human conception because it cannot be contained within human thought. One can approach it through thought—which is essentially linguistic as discussed in Chapter II—but it cannot be controlled therein. The world, as demonstrated by its parallel of the shewolf, is a fleeting entity, impossible to truly possess and control through human schemas. As Don Arnulfo once told Billy, "You cannot touch the world. You cannot hold it in your hand for it is made of breath only" (353). The sage's comparison of the world and shewolf to a melting snowflake is especially appropriate as we consider that the fulfillment of desire is perpetually out of reach. To approach an understanding of the world or *das Ding*, to conduct it into human

thought is to invoke a destruction of its purity, to melt the *copo de nieve*.²⁰ We are thus forced to sublimate our desire for das Ding into an *objet petit a*. Boyd's role in the corrido is indeed an example of sublimated desire. As an *objet petit a*, he provides the corrido's singers and listeners with a hero to be admired yet at a safe distance where the song's audience is not risking the death that necessarily accompanies Boyd's role.²¹ The death carried by the corrido's Border outlaw-hero invites an application of Lacan's treatise on the beautiful. Quijada's warning that Boyd's fate is "not to be despised," the resulting implication that it can be considered lucky even, is meant to comfort Billy in that his brother was fortunate to die in the fulfillment of what he wanted most. Succumbing to his injuries, Boyd dies and accomplishes his desire to be a gunslinging hero, subsequently becoming immortalized in a corrido, a hero in Mexican folklore.²²

This masking is what Lacan terms "the beautiful"—"... it being precisely the function of the beautiful to reveal to us the site of man's relationship to his own death, and to reveal it to us only in a blinding flash" (295). The sudden invocation of man's temporality (i.e. his mortality) by a signifier the manifestation of an awareness that there is something beyond signification. According to Freud, successful art produces such a reaction, but, as Lacan explains, not all instances of the beautiful are art proper or copies of "ideal beauty" as outlined by earlier philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato (297). Sometimes it is a pair of shoes spotted in the hallway, as will be seen in Lacan's personal example. He writes that the beautiful "is just a signifier of that which is signified by a pair of abandoned clodhoppers, namely, both a presence and a pure absence — something that is, if one likes, inert, available to everyone, but something that seen from certain sides, in spite of its dumbness speaks" (297). In Lacan's anecdote, he is startled to find a pair of shoes in a hotel hallway which belong to a former professor of his. The

shoes mean nothing to the other hotel guests who pass by them. They are “available to everyone,” but it is from the “certain sides” that Lacan uniquely views them that the shoes are suddenly and brilliantly figured into a signifying chain that reveals a simultaneity of presence and absence. The surprise of finding the shoes is an abrupt opening wherein the former professor is called into being despite his absence from Lacan’s current field of vision or previous line of thought. The professor is simultaneously present (a property of life) via the symbolic order’s ability to represent through signification. The professor is yet absent (a property of death) and not signified by the usual signifier (the professor himself) that Lacan uses to identify the professor in the signifying structure of his consciousness. Essentially, Lacan sublimates the professor within the form of the shoes, marking them as beautiful in a fleeting moment “of the capture ... at the very point of the transition between life and death” (297). The “point of the transition” between absence and presence, the simultaneity of these two conditions, renders the shoes as an example of the beautiful for Lacan but not necessarily for other hotel guests.

Earlier in his seminar, Lacan gives another example of this phenomenon; though he doesn’t refer to it as an instance of the beautiful. Rather, he uses Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors* as an anamorphic revelation of death, a realization of *das Ding*. Holbein’s double portrait depicts two men accompanied by numerous pieces of navigational equipment. In the foreground, between the feet of the ambassadors is a distorted image that can only be seen from a particular angle. Lacan explains that the painting is hung in London’s National Gallery in such a way that the skull, an obvious symbol of death, only becomes visible when “you leave the room by a door located so that you see it in its sinister truth, at the very moment when you turn around to look at it for the last time” (140). He uses this as an example of anamorphosis which he describes as “a turning point when the artist completely reverses the use of that illusion of space,

when he forces it to enter into the original goal, that is to transform it into the support of the hidden reality—it being understood that, to a certain extent, a work of art always involves encircling the Thing” (141). Through anamorphosis, the artist accomplished the simultaneity of presence (the signifier/image) and absence (the hidden reality) required of the beautiful. The portrait produced thus exhibits the beautiful from one angle while hiding the indefinable on its reverse side. This is essentially the same task as that of the troubadour who covers a grotesque awareness of absence by his passion for the Lady. Recall Lacan’s observation on courtly love poetry wherein “the object involved, the feminine object, is introduced . . . through the door of privation or of inaccessibility” (149). Likewise, the distorted skull in *The Ambassadors* and the shoes in the hallway are present though meaningless when gazed upon directly; their true form and function are inaccessible. It is only when they are seen from a skewed perspective that the objects before the viewer are revealed for what they are—merely “a symbolic function” (149). The skull, the shoes, the Lady—these all become mere masks for the *Ding* that the individual cannot represent.

In the case of McCarthy’s novel, it is the glimpse of Boyd in the corrido that we regard as the beautiful. When Billy hears the ballad, its protagonist is understood to be Boyd. This is not so for all listeners, however, as we are told by Quijada that this particular corrido has been in existence before Boyd was even born and has been attributed to many *güeritos* like him. Nevertheless, in the case of Billy’s hearing of the corrido, Boyd performs what Lacan requires of the beautiful; he “communicate[s] a sign of understanding that is situated precisely at equal distance from the power of the imagination and that of the signifier” (297). Boyd himself is not equated to Death, just as a pair of shoes are not a direct signifier for Lacan’s former professor. Thereby, Boyd is distanced from the role of the signifier. Nonetheless, Boyd invokes Billy’s

imagination to regard him as a meaningless and anonymous death within the signifying chain of the corrido just as the particular shoes in the hallway invoked Lacan's imagination to render them a substitute for the professor residing in the room they preceded. The equivocation of shoes to professor and Boyd to death, even though neither are actual signifier-signified relationships, displays how the beautiful simultaneously embodies both absence (not actually the sign for what the observer perceives to be signified) and presence (imagined to be the signifier). The response of a witness to the beautiful can vary. One can either embrace the conjunction—as Lacan does the shoes—or turn away—as Billy rejects Boyd's inclusion in the corrido. After all, the beautiful exposes the futility of signification as illustrated by Lacan's gallery-goer who “turn[s] around to look at [*The Ambassadors*] for the last time” and is confronted with an image completely different from what he was confident he had just beheld (140).

Billy's reluctance to acknowledge Boyd in the corrido is hypocritical, though, if we consider his brother to be a repetition of the shewolf. They both fulfill the role of an *objet petit a* in the context of Billy's desire. For Boyd to be an *objet petit a*, we recall, requires that someone must desire to possess or to be Boyd. That someone is Billy who, with some jealousy, observes the surety with which Boyd pursues his tasks: his efficiency during their dangerous rescue of the Mexican girl, the subsequent romance between her and Boyd, his quick appropriation of their family horses from a group of cattle herders out of La Babícora, and later again from the group of *vaqueros* led by the *manco*.²³ In the first recovery of their horses, Boyd easily loops Bailey, anticipating the horse's movements. Envious of his brother's skill, “Billy sat his father's horse watching. I could do that, he told the horse. In about nine tries” (McCarthy 554). As they ride away with the recovered horses, “He looked at Boyd. Dirty and ragged with his hat forward against the sun and his face enshadowed. He looked some new breed of child horseman left in

the wake of war or plague or famine in that country” (556). Clearly, Boyd is the person Billy wishes he could be, and Billy’s admiration for his younger brother’s horsemanship follows him into old age.²⁴ Furthermore, when Billy looks at his brother, there is often a shadow or gloominess that obscures either his physical features or psychological state. It is impossible for Billy to completely comprehend him except in the occasional glimpse, usually when they are in serious danger and death lurks just below the surface of Boyd’s heroism, just as the beautiful is a fleeting moment found in the moment *das Ding* is exposed via the Lady of courtly love poetry, an old professor’s shoes in a hotel hallway, or the skull in *The Ambassadors*.

Such occurrences are transient at best as the pleasure principle quickly intercedes to bar one’s access to *das Ding*. The object regarded—or person, in the case of Boyd—is not *das Ding* itself else the observer could not look at it and survive; however, the object is a perceived pathway to the forbidden center of desire. As with each of the cases discussed throughout this chapter, the beautiful is a brief revelation found in an object that is emptied of its usual signification and used by the observer as a substitute. They are all *objets petit a* just as the Border hero of the corrido is for the singers and listeners—something to admire in place of what they cannot behold or obtain.

CONCLUSION

A startling departure from the heroic John Grady Cole in the Border Trilogy's first installment *All the Pretty Horses*, Billy is problematic and frustrating for readers who want so badly to see him succeed at something, anything. The inability of the character to do so launched a psychoanalytical reading of the novel which subsequently determined that the fault lies in his inability to establish a personal narrative, a signifying chain that produces meaning and identity. Without this, Billy has no hope of navigating a world beyond his will and comprehension. Perpetually dislocated and unable to stay in one place for long, Billy's crisis of identity is inevitable. Without settling into the home that a signifying chain provides, he cannot make sense of his itinerancy and is fated to wander without the comfort of self-explanation.

As explored in Chapter I, the tragic results of his pilgrimage with the shewolf indicate that Billy's desire is dangerously one-note. He is unwilling to temper his expectations and goals to the situations with which he is confronted. His insistence on maintaining his pursuit of only one *objet petit a*, instead of redirecting elsewhere (i.e. sublimating) when thwarted, leads him to trespass the pleasure principle again and again. This brings him dangerously close to *das Ding* and indeed results in the shewolf's death at the expense of his desire. As an extinguished *objet petit a*, her death exposes the devout longing that *das Ding* incites, and Billy is never able to escape that sense of "something missed." The resulting *ex-timacy* is depicted in the mechanism of *la matriz* which both estranges and attracts the wolves who are lured to their demise by their own essence. The pursuit of any object shares in this same phenomenon. Recall Chapter III's discussion of the beautiful and how *das Ding* resides behind the *objet petit a*. Any desire for the *objet petit a* is then also a longing toward that object's reverse side, *das Ding*, which Chapter I

has already shown to initiate that same desire. The inability to induct *das Ding* into a signifying chain, however, exposes the structural nature of human desire and, by extension, consciousness.

This structural consciousness is more fully explored in Chapter II's dissection of maps, storytelling, and their role in signification. As the gypsy tells Billy, "what endows any thing with significance is solely the history in which it has participated" (McCarthy 720). Before any *objet petit a* can be desired or regarded as beautiful, the individual must have knowledge of the object and the ability to incorporate it into the structure of his consciousness. He does so via signification, whether it be through spoken word, thoughts, or images, such as those found on maps. Beyond creating meaning for himself, though, he must share his signifying structure with others in order to communicate and orient himself among others. Installing himself among men, as various advisors exhort Billy to do, is of utmost necessity if he is to establish a historical context and familiarity with the signifying structures which make such identification possible. His resistance to conceding his brother's memory to the Mexican corrido exemplifies Billy's unwillingness to participate in the signifying chains of others.

On that note, Chapter III's revelation that Billy turns his younger brother into an *objet petit a* is disconcerting due to the jealous nature in which he does so. His reluctance to share the memory of Boyd with others or to allow him to be relegated to an interchangeable signifier is reminiscent of his possessive regard for the shewolf. This selfishness is hypocritical however. If one allows Boyd to become a replacement for the shewolf in the trajectory of Billy's desire, he nevertheless is an interchangeable *objet petit a* in the style of courtly love poetry's treatment of the Lady. The actual woman becomes irrelevant; after all, the ballads continue to be revered and studied though the women who inspired them are long forgotten. To combine Billy's desires for both the shewolf and his brother is the reader's production of a *tercera historia* in which we

create a comprehensive narrative for Billy. This interpretation may or may not be the truth of what McCarthy intended, but it nevertheless provides a structure in which the two signifiers find meaning in the context of *The Crossing*. Such a *tercera historia* allows for the construction of a comprehensive signifying chain to be made of a novel crisscrossed by so many narratives.

McCarthy performs something of this same nature in the third novel of the trilogy, *Cities of the Plain*, where he brings his two Border protagonists together. *All the Pretty Horses*' John Grady Cole tells Billy, "You cant tell anybody anything, bud. Hell, it's really just a way of telling yourself. And you cant even do that. You just try and use your best judgment and that's about it" (McCarthy 964). Billy's disenchanted response follows: "Yeah. Well. The world dont know nothin about your judgment" (964). John Grady acknowledges this: "I know it. It's worse than that even. It don't care" (964). What marks the two men as opposites is not so much a matter of Billy's failures and John Grady's triumphs but the latter's willingness to construct logic for himself—a signifying chain—despite the possibility of its irrelevance to a grander scheme.

Throughout *The Crossing* and in moments like this in *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy makes it clear that self-narrative is far more important than absolute truth. Storytelling gives comfort and sensibility in an otherwise chaotic world. In the end, it's all anyone has: a logic that gives one meaning by generating a structural context that locates one within the world. As long as that signifying structure maintains a sense of order for the individual, it does not matter if it is based on falsehoods. As discussed in Chapter III, the corrido offers such stability to its singers and listeners without necessarily being concerned about truth or specificity. Because the corrido's story is a complete narrative with a justified message, the interchangeability of *güerito*²⁵ heroes does not lessen its functionality. Its only requirement is that it be remembered and retold from time to time.

On a similar note, Holloway finds that “the stories of John Grady and Billy Parham form an analogue for the deeper historical story of the Trilogy, which is ... what has happened to language in our time; or rather, what has happened to the way we and McCarthy think about language ..., its limits and its potentialities. ... McCarthy’s narrative always points beyond itself into a web of signification” (189). Indeed, every time a reader encounters *The Crossing*, he conjoins his signifying chain with that of the various narrators in the novel and with that of McCarthy as author of the completed work. Out of these multiple perspectives, a *tercera historia* emerges which continues to multiply through subsequent re-readings and retellings. This repetition is necessary for the survival of any meaning in the novel. This same process is embodied in the corrido as discussed in Chapter III. However, Billy is unable to accept the corrido’s resurrective qualities. Choosing not to listen to it, or at least not to credit it with his brother’s memory, Billy refuses to participate in the “web of signification.” Billy prefers instead to keep the memory of Boyd to himself, sharing memories of him only rarely in the third novel of the Border Trilogy.

In *Cities of the Plain*, Billy finally does attempt to merge signifying structures. However, in his attempt to adopt John Grady as a younger brother, Billy has clearly not been able to contextualize Boyd’s death into a signifying structure. If he had been able to come to terms with the loss, he would not be inclined to seek out Boyd in another person. Elisabeth Andersen writes, “Billy reappears as sidekick to John Grady, a man who reminds Billy ‘more and more’ ... of his fallen brother Boyd: The one will stand in for the other” (118). He is reminded of Boyd as he admires John Grady’s uncanny horsemanship and witnesses the development of another dubious romance. To Billy, the signifier that was his brother and the signifier that is John Grady appear identical, and he attempts to substitute one for the other. This is, of course, a doomed enterprise

because John Grady's signifying chain—or narrative as McCarthy might put it—and all its contingencies cannot truly be those of Boyd despite their apparent similarities. Billy tries to make a complete substitution where he should have made a *tercera historia* as outlined in Chapter II. The death of John Grady, then, is another rupturing of Billy's poorly bound personal narrative. Once again, as with the deaths of the shewolf and Boyd, McCarthy reveals that there is “something missed” in Billy's life.

Having lost two brothers now, it is no wonder that shortly after John Grady's death, Billy leaves his job and wanders until he runs out of money and is forced into homelessness. In the epilogue to *Cities of the Plain*, we see Billy in a state of absolute despair and displacement:

A week later he was somewhere in central Arizona ... He sat beneath a concrete overpass and watched the gusts of rain blowing across the fields ... The east-west traffic passed overhead with a muted rumble. He wrapped himself in his blanket and tried to sleep on the cold concrete but sleep was a long time coming. His bones hurt. He was seventy-eight years old. The heart that should have killed him long ago by what the army's recruiting doctors had said still rattled on his chest, no will of his ... In the night he dreamt of his sister dead seventy years and buried near Fort Sumner ... He woke and lay in the dark and the cold and he thought of her and he thought of his brother dead in Mexico. In everything that he'd ever thought about the world and about his life in it he'd been wrong. (McCarthy 1010-1011)

Billy has been brought here as a consequence of his inability to accept the connections that draw each man into an inescapable web of significations. As explained by the gypsy's treatise on the *tercera historia*, these significations cannot be reduced to the polarities of true and false. Billy is unable to move past this complication, insisting that there must be one true account.

As in Chapter II's analysis of *The Crossing*'s usage of maps, the above passage's brief mentions of geopolitical spaces call to mind McCarthy's emphasis on the superficialities of naming. We observe that Billy is in the center of Arizona and an entire state, complete with its social and historical contingencies, is called into the reader's consciousness, establishing a

signifying chain by which we might interpret the scene. Yet, McCarthy might not have bothered with the state's name if he did not intend to name the central city as well. The fact that he nevertheless does indicate the state enables us to explore the relationship between the signifying structure evoked by "Arizona" and its *Ding*-like unnamed central city. The lack of a particular city's name has a destructive effect to the signifying structure of "Arizona," leaving the reader at a loss as to where exactly Billy sits. As mentioned in Chapter II, *das Ding* is unnamable, and it is this inarticulability which causes it to elude signifying structures. In spite of this, *das Ding* is at the heart of an individual's otherwise symbolic-dwelling consciousness. Thus, as we see Billy sitting beneath an underpass, the reader's inability to name the city destroys any comfort of orientation to be found in the signifying structure provided by the state's name. As a metaphor for *das Ding*, Billy sits ex-timate to the signifying structure he nevertheless occupies by McCarthy's mention of Arizona. To complete this point, in McCarthy's image, signification is beyond Billy. He recalls his long-dead siblings but is unable to situate them in a meaningful self-narrative. Unable to justify their deaths to himself, they are little more than absences at the heart of his being, an impossibility for which he longs as the wolf might sniff the air for an already-evaporated *matriz*. Billy's state of homelessness—itsself an example of the inability to orient one's self in the "home" of a signifying structure or personal narrative—is an inevitable and sadly fitting end to his seventy-eight years. As a result, a Lacanian reading concludes that McCarthy purposefully sets the character with whom readers spend the most time sympathizing against impossible odds and renders him in a state of utter despair, and that he does all this to expose humanity for what it truly is: a dissatisfied heap of longing. The closing image of *The Crossing* encapsulates this perfectly as Billy falls to his knees in the middle of a road and weeps for all he has lost and the grim future of further disappointment before him.

END NOTES

¹ the Thing

² white/fair-skinned boys

³ snowflake

⁴ paragon

⁵ Having thoroughly tracked the shewolf's movements with the help of his father, Billy determines she has come from the southeast. Considering a wolf's natural habitat and the limited presence of such forested environments in the largely arid geography of northern Mexico, he settles on the Sierra Pilares as her likely "home."

⁶ Billy tells Don Arnulfo: "El señor Sanders me dice que el señor Echols es medio lobo el mismo. Me dice que él conoce lo que sabe el lobo antes de que lo sepa el lobo" (McCarthy 352). (Translated: "Mr. Sanders told me that Mr. Echols is half wolf himself. He told me that he knows what the wolf knows even before the wolf does.")

⁷ After she is taken from Billy, the shewolf is seriously wounded in a Mexican dogfighting arena. Unable to remove her from the arena, he finds her afterward and shoots her as an act of mercy. He then trades his rifle for her body, so he can still take her corpse to the Sierra Pilares. He carries her lifeless body on his horse and buries her under the stones from the mountainside, taking the time to construct a cairn on top of the rubble. McCarthy closes this funerary image with the slow and quiet death of the pups inside her womb. (McCarthy 431-36)

⁸ "The wolf is an unknowable thing ... That which you have in the trap is no more than teeth and fur. The wolf itself you cannot know. The wolf or what the wolf knows."

⁹ third history

¹⁰ orphan

¹¹ gypsy

¹² "The third history, said the gypsy, is this. It exists in the story of the histories. Ultimately, it is that the truth cannot be anywhere else but in the telling."

¹³ open wound

¹⁴ Keno is one of the Parham family horses.

¹⁵ the old man is crazy

¹⁶ a phantasm

¹⁷ white/fair-skinned boy

¹⁸ white/fair-skinned boy

¹⁹ Quijada is the Yaqui Indian overseer of the Nauerichic area of La Babícora. He had previously made possible the temporary restoration of the Parham horses to the boys.

²⁰ snowflake

²¹ As noted by Américo Paredes, the Border heroes and outlaws of corridos all die, making this detail an apparent standard of the genre.

²² Quijada reveals that Boyd fell in with a gang led by Casares. His involvement with this gang leads to a gunfight that results in his death. Boyd asks Quijada, “They didnt take very good care of him, did they?” (McCarthy 699). To which Quijada responds, “He didnt want to be taken care of. He wanted to shoot people” (McCarthy 700).

²³ The *manco* (one-armed man) is the *jefe* (leader/boss) of the *vaqueros* (Mexican cowboys) who had acquired the horses Niño, Bailey, and Tom. Billy and Boyd steal the horses back and later face-off with the *manco* and his men who come to retrieve the horses. This exchange results in the *manco*'s paralyzation and a chase which ends only when Boyd is shot, Bailey and Tom are lost, and Billy is forced to leave his brother in the care of strangers as he makes his own escape.

²⁴ At the end of *Cities of the Plain*, the final installment of the Border Trilogy, a seventy-eight year old Billy reminisces about his long dead brother: “He was the best. . . . He was awful good with horses. I always liked to watch him ride. Liked to watch him around horses” (McCarthy 1037).

²⁵ white/fair-skinned boy

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