Opponent’s Report on M.A. Thesis by
Zdeněk Polívka

“Between Nostalgia and Pragmatism: Cormac McCarthy’s Border Trilogy”

Mr. Zdeněk Polívka constructs in his thesis work a textual space wherein nostalgia and pragmatism may be seen as mediating agencies for the institution of new ways of thinking. The thesis contains 115 pp. across some preliminary matter, five parts, and a Bibliography. There are also some 22 subsections. The chief sections include: “1 General Aims and Structure, 2 Introduction, 3 Part I: Becoming Animal, 4 Part II: Becoming Anomalous” and a last section that to this reader should be “5” but instead reads as “4 Conclusion: Borders, Frontier, American History”.

As for the prose style, it reads well, though there are some unartful glitches. These include the following: “of trilogy” (10) needs to be “of the trilogy”; “brining” (30) should be “bringing”; “It this respect their view” (36) would be better as “It is in this respect that their view”; “od” (39) should be “of”; “is a very similar to” (47) should be cut to “is very similar to”; “as he is said to have” (48) should be “as he is said to have”; “caching” (82) should be “catching” (82); “used to collected” (83) reads better as “used to collect”; “loses” (107) should be “losses”; lastly, this phrase needs a rewrite: “of the what he has been” (65). Also from time to time the language is a bit wordy, and could have been cut down better to size, but all in all it is well written.

More importantly, the thesis works at a high level with very sophisticated critical instruments. Polívka writes with nuance to state his theme, “It will be claimed that the chief formal development lies in the fact that in the trilogy McCarthy traces the historical transformation and rewriting of the horrors of frontier expansion described in BM [Blood Meridian] into a nostalgia for the American frontier past, now transposed onto the modern borderline between U.S. and Mexico. As will be seen, doing so allows McCarthy to underline the insupportability of American identity based on the concept of the frontier and the connected notion of westward movement following the effective disappearance of the physical frontier dramatized at the conclusion of BM” (10). Also we read of the structure of the thesis, “Part one will thus conclude by showing that McCarthy rejects the notion of rooted, organic and pre-established identity, arguing instead for mobile, pragmatic and finally rhizomatic concepts of identity” (13).

The following constitutes a very Gilles Deleuzian / Félix Guattarian perspective that the candidate develops with ample textual support in the thesis. Furthermore in a critical juxtaposition of All the Pretty Horses (1992) and The Crossing (1994): “the narrative complexity of the second novel is a function of a protagonist for whom a conventional western adventure narrative is too small, a protagonist whose world is always in excess of the imagery and narrative devices that are used to capture him” (22). This is an interesting angle point that swings wide open a view onto a character who bursts the bounds of standardized and normalized ways of seeing and of thinking. In another crucial distinction between the two aforementioned novels, “Where there is mostly a relentless pursuit of the frontier ideal in Grady, there are moments of encounter with otherness which affect raptures and silences in Billy’s cultural view of the world. It is precisely this mixture between willingness to
experiment and the harkening back to paternal order, between nostalgia and pragmatism, that make up the complexity of the protagonist and of his novel” (24). This remark ably sheds light on the very title of the thesis and on the two abovenoted novels. Put otherwise, “through his two protagonists McCarthy explores two varying modes of relation to the national past in the 20th century: a craving for nostalgic frontier roots on one hand, and an inclination towards taking on the pragmatic road of experimentation on the other” (24). These are valid points for which the candidate offers both textual support from McCarthy, and theoretical scaffolding from Deleuze.

The chief deadlock and impasse in The Crossing for Polívka? “[H]ow to imagine the American experience without presupposing privileged historical perspectives and narratives and how to escape the idea of an essentialized national identity that produces unbridgeable divisions between subjects and ultimately promotes violence such as the one described in Blood Meridian” (24–25). The very broaching of this question has critical value in and of itself. To be sure, the deployment of Deleuze helps to negotiate this tricky area. In another notable point that begs, in its textual and ideological space, for reflection from the reader: “Billy’s inexplicable attraction to the she-wolf and his choice to flee across the border manifest as a refusal to repeat the attitudes and practices of his community” (27). Polívka continues “and as a willingness to imagine and experiment with different concepts of relationships with the natural world and others, ones that sharply vary from those held by Billy’s community according to whose laws all wolves are to be seen as pest and a threat to the domestic stability” (27). However laudable Billy’s mode of reality may seem to many readers for its capacity to create a cut for a post-Billy situation so to say, would the candidate find anything objectionable about Billy’s choices of existence in the foregoing regard?

In a nice Deleuzian point about Billy’s mode of reality, “McCarthy seems to dramatize the epistemological impossibility of maintaining a unified point of view and the connected ethical necessity of valorizing the fluidity and multiplicity of experience as the only positive corollary of a journey” (28–29). We also learn importantly that, “the writing that Deleuze and Campbell call for could be termed the ‘chaosmos:’ no longer a world moving along a single, necessary linear axis of history but a world where divergences and alternative paths and points of view co-exist” (35). This sort of chaosmos neatly maps onto the ontological reality of McCarthy’s aesthetic universe. Not only this. According to the candidate, for Deleuze and Guattari’s cultural aesthetics, “The main property of language is thus not to identify or represent reality but to create and perform it” (36). In an interesting point about Barry Allen on Deleuze, “Language can thus be said to express and actively perform power relations within a given concrete system, imposing form on content” (37). This contention holds substance. Crucially, for Polívka, “The Border Trilogy in this respect follows the line of Campbell’s critique, looking for ways to affect movements and passages within the seemingly stable, monolithic representation of American West by means of developing increasingly deterritorialized, minoritarian expression” (38–39). To be sure, the candidate demonstrates precisely this.

In a discussion of the creaturely animal: “the animal must be followed to the realm of the unexpected, disruptive and often violent events where the traditionally held views of the world disappear. To become animal in this sense is to engage in the act of genuine creation” (60). This is interesting, yet could the candidate clarify what he
means by “genuine creation”? For instance, is creation something that is done in tandem with another agent so that all creation is co-creation?

In yet another Deleuzian point, the candidate argues: “Instead of a continuous series of fixed points […] Billy’s journey is a discontinuous series of false starts and goals with a distinctly rhizomatic structure” (100). Moreover, “This discontinuous movement leaves the reader in a state of what another of McCarthy’s storytellers, a former Mexican revolutionary, likens to a state of blindness as to the narrative and journey ahead” (101). For my last question, could the candidate elaborate upon this notion of “a state of blindness” with some perhaps practical if not even simple examples of the implications of this for Billy’s life narrative?

The candidate argues too to open a section on “Storytelling” with regard to the very Deleuzian idea of ‘a line of flight’ that, “McCarthy’s valorization of narrative as a line of flight is evident on his prolonged and metafictionally obsessive commentaries on the concepts of storytelling and narrative themselves, thus providing the reader with numerous clues as to how to understand the complex rhizomatic structure of his novel” (103). This is interesting and holds critical substance. Compellingly we read that “McCarthy’s technique […] attempts to outline a mode of thinking about the world. Thinking that is rhizomatic and minor. Billy’s life and world are composed of multiplicities, of countless encounters, journeys and los[s]es” (107). And in another salient moment we learn that, “Like the [sic] Deleuze’s rhizomatic West, McCarthy’s western story is much more of a direction of deterritorialization than it is a destination or a nostalgic attempt at returning to a presupposed prior identity” (107). These are all very convincing points.

In light of the foregoing mentions, I hereby recommend the pre thesis defense mark of a 1 (výborně) for the thesis work.

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