*ATLANTIS*
*Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*
40.2 (December 2018): 45-62
ISSN 0210-6124 | E-ISSN 1989-6840
DOI: http://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2018-40.2.03

# Nostalgia and the Sublime in Cormac McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy*

Mahshid Younesi and Hossein Pirnajmuddin
University of Isfahan, Iran
Mahshid.younesi@fgn.ui.ac.ir, pirnajmuddin@fgn.ui.ac.ir

This article discusses the way Cormac McCarthy (1933-) represents the "natural sublime" in *The Border Trilogy* (1992-1998), where the notion is by and large distinguished as a kind of nostalgic experience on the part of characters insofar as the writer foregrounds the unattainable "natural sublimity" of the Wild West as well as its charming pastoral scenes. Drawing on theories of the sublime, particularly those of Edmund Burke (1757), an attempt is made to shed light on the modality of the merging of the sublime with an inconsolable sense of pastoral loss. Foregrounding the characters' desire to live a bucolic life, McCarthy dramatizes the very process of experiencing the sublime on their part. The modality of the protagonists' response to this experience, it is argued, becomes an index of character. The essay also reveals the importance of style in representing the "natural sublime" in these novels, arguing that stylistically their rendering of the "natural sublime" approaches what could be called the "artistic sublime." In this sense, the artistic representation of the object is no longer distinguished from the nature of the object in one's sensation. The sublime, therefore, grounds consciousness in the subject, making that subject believe that sublimity is concerned with the way one apprehends the world or, simply put, the quality of a person's experience. In *The Border Trilogy*, the writer foregrounds the "artistic sublime" by focusing on the loss of the pastoral vision. In this way, McCarthy presents wilderness as the ideal pastoral space of nature.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy; *The Border Trilogy*; pastoral nostalgia; the "natural sublime"; the frontier; the Wild West

. . .

# Nostalgia y sublimidad en *The Border Trilogy* ["*Trilogía de la Frontera*"], de Cormac McCarthy

En este trabajo se estudia la manera en la que Cormac McCarthy (1933-) representa la "sublimidad natural" en *The Border Trilogy* ["Trilogía de la Frontera"] [(1992-1998), donde esta noción se establece a partir de la experiencia nostálgica de los personajes, en tanto en cuanto el autor sitúa en primer plano la inalcanzable "sublimidad natural" del salvaje Oeste, así como sus fascinantes escenas pastoriles. La revisión de algunas teorías de lo sublime, en particular las de Edmund Burke (1757), permitirá entender cómo la sublimidad se combina con un sentido inconsolable de pérdida de lo pastoril. McCarthy recrea en primer plano el deseo de los personajes de una vida bucólica y, de este modo, escenifica su propio proceso de experimentación de lo sublime. El modo en que los protagonistas de estos relatos responden a esta experiencia es entendido en el artículo como un índice de caracterización. El artículo desvela también la importancia del estilo en la representación de la "sublimidad natural" y propone que la proyección estilística de esta deviene en "sublimidad artística." Así, la representación artística del objeto no es percibida sensorialmente de forma distinta a su naturaleza. Lo sublime instala la consciencia en el sujeto hasta el punto de hacerle creer que la sublimidad es un modo de aprehender el mundo o, de manera más sencilla, es una cualidad experiencial de la persona. En *The Border Trilogy*, McCarthy ha llevado al primer plano la "sublimidad artística" centrándose en la pérdida de lo pastoril; de este modo, el autor representa la naturaleza salvaje como el espacio natural ideal.

Palabras clave: Cormac McCarthy; *The Border Trilogy* ["*Trilogía de la Frontera*"]; nostalgia de lo pastoril; "sublimidad natural"; la frontera; el salvaje Oeste

## 1. Introduction

As an American novelist, Cormac McCarthy (1933-) creates fictional characters emblematic of American life in the latter half of the twentieth century. As Harold Bloom notes, if there is "a pragmatic tradition of the American sublime," then, "Cormac McCarthy's fictions are its culmination" (2009, 7). McCarthy, as Willard P. Greenwood points out, is interested in "the mythology of the American West" (2009, 8) or, in simpler terms, "the idea of the west as it exists in American culture" (8) for he believes that a writer should underscore "the soul of the culture" (11). More importantly, McCarthy's "sublime prose style" echoes that of Faulkner" (Bloom 2009, 16) and he might be perceived as "a distinctly regionalist writer" (Hage 2010, 3).

Structurally, McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy—All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994) and *Cities of the Plain* (1998)—offers "conventional patterns of opposition" that endanger the "stability" of its protagonists' world to the extent that they all seem like "a thing wholly alien in that landscape. Something from an older time" (Lagayette 2013, 81-82). In this sense, rather than placating the desire for homecoming or embodiment on the part of the protagonists, the landscape only intensifies the desire for an imaginary American homeland (Dorson 2016, 130). In other words, Dorson maintains, the idea of an American homeland conveys an ordered and safe space that could be compared to the memory of a childhood home which is both fleeting and irretrievable. To be more precise, this is the "loss of the pastoral vision of harmony between man and nature" that constitutes the subject of the narrator's allegories that double back on themselves hinting at the mystic, sublime and uncanny (Guillemin 2001, 95). As such, melancholia and allegory "work in sync" in *The Border Trilogy* because both are concerned with what is "absent, lost, or part of the past" that can be described indirectly to the reader in the form of reports, tales or personal recollections (25).

The sublime is often described as something great, infinite, void and beyond representation. What is more, the sublime is associated with experiencing the overwhelming magnitudes of space and time that result in infinite abstraction or "moments of mute encounter with all that exceeds our comprehension" (Morely 2010, 12). According to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the sublime is defined as an unbridgeable gulf between an idea and its representation ([1790] 1952, 234). However, Edmund Burke (1729-1797), as an advocate of the "natural sublime," holds the view that the ideas of pain, danger and terror are all conducive to the sublime experience insofar as they create a strong impression of horror on the mind of the perceiver ([1757] 1990, 20). As Umberto Eco avers, the Burkean sublime concerns pain, terror and privation; that is, the sublime "comes into being with the unleashing of passions like terror, [...] flourishes in obscurity, [...] calls up ideas of power, and of that form of privation exemplified by emptiness, solitude and silence" (2004, 290). What is more, the sublime, Burke maintains, is associated with "obscurity, power, vastness, magnificence, difficulty, suddenness, and privation" (Irlan 2006, 521). In this sense, Burke's argument concerning the sublime is for the most part secular,

maintaining that "our knowledge of the world is derived entirely from the evidence of the senses" (Shaw 2006, 49); hence, what we conceive of is inspired by what we see, taste, touch and smell.

The "natural sublime" became important in the eighteenth century when it was applied to descriptions of those aspects of nature that "instill awe and wonder such as mountains, avalanches, waterfalls, stormy seas or the infinite vault of the starry sky" (Morely 2010, 12). Human mind, as Joseph Addison puts it, experiences a "feeling of bafflement," at the view of "a vast, uncultivated desert, of huge heaps of mountains, high rocks and precipices, or a wide expanse of waters," for it "naturally hates everything that looks like a restraint upon it and is apt to fancy itself under a sort of confinement, when the sight is pent up in a narrow compass" ([1712] 1965, 142).

The "natural sublime," as Shaw states, "regards sublimity as a quality inherent in the external world" (2006, 28). Thus, according to the first-century Greek treatise *On the Sublime*, attributed to Dionysius Longinus, it is nature that "seeds the idea of greatness in man, and that inclines us to admire the grandeur of the natural environment" (quoted by Shaw 2006, 28). Drawing on Lockean terminology, while "the rhetorical sublime entails a relation between words and ideas," the "natural sublime" "involves the relation between sensations and ideas" (Shaw 2006, 11). John Dennis asserts in *The Advancement and Reformation of Poetry*, however, that "nature itself could not be perceived as sublime without the operation of mental processes"; in other words, you have to "take the cause and the effects together" and, in so doing, "you have the sublime" (Dennis [1701] 2005, 46; quoted in Shaw 2006, 31). The "natural sublime," as conceived by John Dennis and Joseph Addison, therefore "offers ironic testimony to the triumph of the rational over the real" (Shaw 2006, 38). What is more, Burke argues that the "natural sublime" is associated with "the passion caused by the great and sublime in *nature*" ([1757] 1990, 53; emphasis in the original). He further adds that there follows "[*a*]*stonishment*; and astonishment is the state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (53; emphasis in the original). As Kant observes, we cannot present to ourselves "an account of an experience that is in any way coherent" or we cannot encompass it by thinking, so it remains "indiscernible or unnamable, undecidable, indeterminate and unrepresentable" (Kant [1790] 2002, 16; quoted in Morely 2010, 160). Considering the point that nature, for Kant, is "the source of effect," the sublime, then, is both interpreted and expressed in "human experience" (Kant [1790] 2002, 129; quoted in Morgan 2014, 7).

In other words, the sublime "may be sure to appear in its form to be contrapurposive for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination, but is nevertheless judged all the more sublime for that," Kant asserts ([1790] 1952, 5:245; quoted in Shaw 2006, 129). Sublimity, as Kant himself points out, is not inherent in such natural phenomena as "volcanoes," "hurricanes," "the boundless ocean set into a rage" or "a lofty waterfall on a mighty

river"; rather, we "call" them sublime "because they elevate the strength of our soul above its usual level, and allow us to discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance of quite another kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent all-powerfulness of nature" ([1790] 1952, 5:261; quoted in Culler 2005, 144).

When astonished "at the vastness of a natural object," in experiencing the "natural sublime" the perceiving subject experiences "a consciousness of the vastness of the soul" (Christensen 1978, 11) that might be tantamount to taking part in both the vastness and boundlessness of the natural environs. Given that we cannot fully understand "what is communicated in the sublime," feeling it "confirms in us the unlimited ability in our own nature." Put differently, the subject's own inability, according to Kant, "uncovers in him the consciousness of an unlimited ability which is also his, and that the mind can judge this ability aesthetically only by that inability" ([1790] 1952, 5:259; quoted in Hurh 2015, 14-15). As such, sublimity, for Kant, can only be found in the mind because "what is properly sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though no presentation adequate to them is possible, are provoked and called to mind precisely by this inadequacy, which does allow of sensible presentation" (5:245). It is important to note that the delight in our supersensible faculties can be promoted both by the magnitude and power of the object which Kant describes separately under such headings as the "mathematical sublime" and the "dynamical sublime" (Hoffmann 2011, 6).

In experiencing the "mathematical sublime," Kant considers the imagination to be "overwhelmed by spatial or temporal magnitude"; in other words, "when faced […] with a seemingly endless sequence of sensible intuitions," the imagination, is eventually, "overcome by the impossibility of ever accounting for the sequence in its entirety" (Shaw 2006, 81). The "dynamical sublime," on the other hand, is characterized by "astonishment that borders upon terror" or by a kind of "holy awe" coupled with "dread" or "fear" in the face of natural forces of any kind (Kant [1790] 1952, 5:269). But Kantian sublimity, according to Ngai, limits the concept of the sublime to "rude nature and explicitly bars it from being applied to products of art" (2005, 265). As Ngai further asserts, sublimity, for Kant, applies only to "a quality or state of the subject's mind, and not to the object that excites that state of mind" (265). In Kant's theory, therefore, the sublime is not concerned with "the object of great magnitude or power that awes the self," but rather the self's "inspiring feeling of being able to transcend the deficiencies of its own imagination through the faculty of reason" (Ngai 2005, 266).

The novels constituting McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy—All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994) and *Cities of the Plain* (1998)—abound in representations of nature, and, generally speaking, McCarthy has a penchant for describing the sublime sceneries of the Wild West. In Nicholas Monk's view, McCarthy's protagonists tend to cross and re-cross "a highly porous boundary which fails to form a meaningful interruption to the contiguous grandeur of the landscape of the southwest" in that McCarthy's south

is both a mythic and a symbolic south (2013, 122). The result, in *The Border Trilogy*, is a "third space" or a zone between the United States and Mexico that is not clearly delimited. The uncanniness or sublimity, therefore, is marked when protagonists seek understanding but more often they are left in a kind of "moral and intellectual swamp, unable to comprehend or to adequately articulate the nature of their condition or circumstance" (Link 2013, 158). What follows in this paper aims to shed light on the very notion of the sublime so that we can elaborate on what is termed "the natural sublime" in these novels.

## 2. The "Natural Sublime" in *The Border Trilogy*

In the frontier myth, the American wilderness is known as a "place designated to be always wild" (Ross 2006, 2). Notably, Americans tend to tout the wild aspects of nature because, as Charles Sanford writes, "the special grandeur of America is expressed by the awesome aspects of nature: by tempests, towering mountains, craggy precipices, thundering waterfalls" (Sanford 1957, 436; quoted in Doak 2002, 13). American landscape, then, foregrounds "the purity of the wilderness uncorrupted by man's artificial constructions" (Nash 1963, 4).

The Southwest is thus a land that affects the mind far beyond the perspectives of individual life (Kirk 1973, 4). As Gail Caldwell points out, McCarthy's *Trilogy* contains "a near-mystical regard for the natural world" (Caldwell 2005, D6; quoted in Hage 2010, 117). Put differently, one finds that there is a tension between the seemingly materialistic view of nature informing the novels, and "the mystical shimmer that radiates through McCarthy's natural world in ways reminiscent of Edmund Burke's sublime" (Link 2013, 154). In Malcolm Jones's view, McCarthy gives priority to "the natural world" insofar as "the fatalistic harshness of the desert fits his temperament like handmade boots" (Jones 1992, 68; quoted in Hage 2010, 117). In other words, the idea of the Wild West is almost always present in *The Border Trilogy* for it might be regarded as an ideal that McCarthy clings to at all costs. Tim Poland asserts that McCarthy employs this wild landscape as "an ancillary character" for

> [i]n much western literature, the usual relationship between character and landscape is inverted. Rather than a landscape that exists as setting for human action and is imprinted with human qualities, the landscape in much western writing functions more like a character in itself and imprints on the human characters its own qualities. (Poland 1996, 197; quoted in O'Sullivan 2014, 159)

On closer inspection, nature in McCarthy's *Trilogy* might be regarded as "an invasive force itself" (Hage 2010, 117). As a driving force, nature, for McCarthy, acts like both "an omniscient" and a "lurking" character that is always "resistant to order" (124-125) and implicitly foregrounds nature's might. Moreover, animals often have an elevated

position in McCarthy's fiction. As an example of the "natural sublime," animals in McCarthy's *Trilogy* represent "a link to an older, natural order and a vanishing—or vanished—way of life" (Hage 2010, 36). Therefore, wilderness, Patricia Ross suggests, is a place where the wild animal is "aware of what a man will do to him" (2006, 35). In this respect, McCarthy's "overarching tendency is to elevate animals to positions of great significance," to a sublime status (Hage 2010, 36). Interestingly, Burke discussed the description of certain animals with regard to the notion of the sublime. This is what he says of the horse:

> In the light of a useful beast, fit for the plough, the road, the draft, in every social useful light the Horse has nothing of the sublime; but is it thus that we are affected with him, *whose neck is Cloathed with thunder, the glory of whose nostrils is terrible, who swalloweth the ground with Fierceness and rage* [...] In this description the useful character of the horse entirely disappears, and the terrible and sublime blaze out together. ([1757] 1990, 83; emphasis in the original)

Horses, of course, figure frequently in McCarthy's fiction, especially in *The Border Trilogy*. The following dialogue between Cole and the old man might be regarded as a case in point:

> You'll see things on the desert at night that you can't understand. Your horse will see things. He'll see things that will spook him of course but then he'll see things that don't spook him but still you know he seen something.
>
> What sort of things?
>
> I don't know
>
> You mean like ghosts or somethin?
>
> No. I don't know what. You just know he sees em. They're out there.
>
> Not just some class of varmint?
>
> No.
>
> Not something that will booger him?
>
> No. it's more like somethin he knows about but you don't.
>
> But you don't! Yes. (McCarthy 1998, 97)

As Robert Clewis asserts, "certain animals, insofar as they are viewed in light of the function of their parts or their place in the ecosystem, can elicit only a mixed judgement of the sublime" (2009, 120); while it does not mean that "these same animals, viewed in another way, could not elicit a free judgment of the sublime as well" (120). In *The Crossing*, for instance, McCarthy elevates the position of a pregnant she-wolf as a being of "great order" because "it knows what men do not" (McCarthy 1994, 35).

McCarthy employs the "natural sublime" in *The Border Trilogy* by juxtaposing the sublime state, dedicated to both animals and the Wild West, with the protagonists'

limited ability to comprehend this external grandeur despite their persistent nostalgia for the Old West. Thus, the novels' protagonists tend to "reconcile their desire for an idealistic pastoral lifestyle with the reality that naturalistic forces are arrayed against them, making that dream unattainable" (Cameron 2011, 6). In other words, McCarthy's fiction marks "the datedness of the traditional pastoral cosmology at the same time as it keeps invoking it" (Guillemin 2001, 108). Considering the restorative nostalgia that this virgin land fosters, there is always a desire for the authentic experience of nature that gives the virgin land myth its emotional force (Dorson 2016, 136). Nevertheless, feelings of inauthenticity in McCarthy's protagonists tend to deepen, not because the myth offers them only symbolic experiences, but because it always leaves them gasping for more.

*All the Pretty Horses* (1992), the first novel in the trilogy, is set in west Texas in 1948. The novel tells of John Grady Cole, a sixteen-year-old cowboy, who tries to adapt himself to the changing social circumstances of the American West. Cole grows up on his grandfather's ranch. Soon after the death of his grandfather the family ranch is sold and, as a result, he is left bereft of his future. So, Cole and his best friend, Lacey Rawlins, decide to steal away from their hometown to Mexico on horseback.

*All the Pretty Horses*, Hage maintains, wraps the reader up in "Cole's journey from innocence to experience," while all the time intimating that "there is no moral, lesson, or even redemption" (2010, 23) in that it tells the reader nothing about "the way the world was or was becoming" (McCarthy 1992, 17). Here, the sublime finds its most evident manifestations in the spectacle of a gray, "darkening landscape" where there is "no sun nor any paler place to the sky where sun might be" (175), for, as Burke puts it, "darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light" ([1757] 1990, 63). In this desolate, dark desert, Cole watches how "stars trace the arc of the hemisphere and die in the darkness at the edge of the world" (McCarthy 1992, 214). This ever-present darkness is associated with "pain" or "terror" insofar as the blackness of the desert makes it difficult, for both Cole and Rawlins, to know where they are going. Cole and Rawlins' relationship with nature would seem to be the strongest and, at the same time, the most important to the novel; they are always coming up "out of the river breaks riding slowly side by side along the dusty road and onto a high plateau where they could see out over the country to the south, rolling country covered with grass and wild daisies" (31). In this connection, it is important to note, however, that McCarthy seems to develop a great interest towards the highest degree of the sublime because many scenes in the novel are actually set at night. The terrific "natural sublime" therefore is experienced by both Cole and Rawlins at night when they lay out on their blankets and look out:

> [W]here the quartermoon lay cocked over the heel of the mountains. In that false blue dawn the Pleiades seemed to be rising up into the darkness above the world dragging all the stars away, the great Cassiopeia all rising up through the phosphorous dark like a sea-net. (50)

This "total darkness" is considered a cause of the sublime for characters who, to use Burke's description, do not know in what degree of safety they stand (Burke [1757] 1990, 130) for they look "as wild and strange as the country they were in" (McCarthy 1992, 52). While staying in this wilderness as a last resort, nightfall finds Cole and Rawlins and at that moment they hear what they had not heard before, "three long howls to the southwest and all afterwards a silence" (50). As Burke maintains, the "power in sounds," produces "a sort of surprise" or tension that can be brought "to the verge of pain" because when "the cause has ceased, the organs of hearing […] continue to vibrate in that manner for some time longer; this is an additional help to the greatness of the effect" ([1757] 1990, 126). Aptly, hearing in this novel figures significantly; as Barbara Claire Freeman observes, "hearing may entail entanglement in a way that seeing does not" (1995, 30). The image of night, thus, for McCarthy is considered a source of the sublime in that it is, in effect, the combination of "all general privations," enumerated by Burke, "Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence" ([1757] 1990, 65). In other words, Cole and Rawlins experience nothing but the horror and amazement that serve as the ruling principles of the sublime feeling. And of course, this silence, as a sign of "a higher meaning," is "inaccessible to ordinary minds, and beyond the reach of words" (Cole and Swartz 1994, 151).

Although this wilderness, Mario Praz ([1930] 1966, 18) and Andrea Battistini (1981, 198) claim, presents itself as unusual, wild and desolate, it appears to the observer as a "lonely," "melancholic" land (quoted in Scaramellini 1996, 51). The following passage from the novel illustrates the point. It describes the way Cole

> dreamt of horses in a field on a high plain where the spring rains had brought up the grass and the wild-flowers out of the ground and the flowers ran all blue and yellow far as the eye could see and […] in the dream he was among the horses running and in the dream he himself could run with the horses and they coursed the young mares and fillies over the plain where their rich bay and their rich chestnut colors shone in the sun and the young colts ran with their dams and trampled down the flowers in a haze of pollen that hung in the sun like powdered gold and they ran he and the horses out along the high mesas where the ground resounded under their running hooves and they flowed and changed and ran and their manes and tails blew off of them like spume and there was nothing else at all in that high world and they moved all of them in a resonance that was like a music among them and they were none of them afraid horse nor colt nor mare and they ran in that resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised. (McCarthy 1992, 135)

In this magnificent sentence, McCarthy reminds us of the natural uniqueness of the Southwest. He emphasizes that, although the old wilderness no longer exists as it used to, it still evokes sublime feelings. Further, wilderness, for McCarthy, is a place where the wild animal has an elevated position because "the souls of horses mirror the souls of men more closely than men suppose" (93). McCarthy's narrator tells the reader to what

extent Cole's thoughts "were of horses" and "of the open country and of horses. Horses still wild on the mesa who'd never seen a man afoot and who knew nothing of him or his life yet in whose souls he would come to reside forever" (99). Stylistically, the long, non-stop, breathtaking sentence imparts the sense of the uniqueness of the world and the uniqueness of experiencing it, of its sublimity "which cannot be spoken but only praised" (135). The very rhythm of the sentence, its incantatory quality, betokens the sense of adoration involved in this experience.

Likewise, what is most remarkable about Cole is his relationship to horses and the way their grandeur affects him because, to him, "horses" are always "the right thing to think about" (172); thus, "he did not stop talking to the horse at all, speaking in a low steady voice and telling it all that he intended to do" (88). In his view, "among men there was no such communion as among horses and the notion that men can be understood at all was probably an illusion" (94). At this point, he is found to be at one with nature based on what he is obviously experiencing on the mesa, which is a kind of transcendent experience or, simply put, the sublime feeling in that he is completely preoccupied with this wilderness.

*The Crossing* (1994), like its predecessor *All the Pretty Horses*, is considered a bildungsroman set in the border between the US Southwest and Mexico in 1938. The plot focuses on the life of Billy Parham, a teenage cowboy, and his three trips out of New Mexico into Mexico. In the first trip, Billy tries to repatriate a she-wolf; in the second, Billy and his younger brother Boyd set out to recover horses stolen from their father's ranch; and in his final trip, Billy is alone and desolate, attempting to discover the whereabouts of his lost brother, Boyd. Billy Parham also encounters nature. In much the same way as Cole in *All the Pretty Horses*, Billy encounters nature where "other than the sound of the horses blowing and stamping all was silence" (McCarthy 1994, 153). This "silence" thus evokes the sublime feeling because "anything that becomes accessible to narrative understanding, loses its sublimity" (Bromwich 2014, 79). In this "spooky kind of place" (McCarthy 1994, 198), the "plains" are "blue and devoid of life" (187) and Billy can see nothing: "there aint nothing to see. It's just dark on dark and then more of it" (184).

To refer to Burke again, the "ill effects" of darkness or blackness "seem rather mental than corporeal" ([1757] 1990, 133). Burke further maintains that total darkness has "a greater effect on the passions" and hence is consistent with the idea of the sublime (66). The images of darkness enhance the sense of the "natural sublime" in this novel, manifested in descriptions of "the broad dryland barrial and the river and the road and the mountains," over characters "as entertainments to keep the world at bay" (McCarthy 1994, 210). As an old man warns Billy, "the light of the world" is in "men's eyes only" and the world itself moves in "eternal darkness and darkness was its true nature and true condition and that in this darkness" it turns with "perfect cohesion in all its parts" but that there is "naught there to see" (210). As such, this world, the old man further explains, is "sentient to its core and secret and black beyond men's imagining" and its

nature does not "reside in what could be seen or not seen" (210). As McCarthy would have it, "the world cannot lose darkness"; nothing "has power to cut and shape and hollow out the dark form of the world surely if wind can, if rain can. But which cannot be held never be held and is no flower but is swift and a huntress" to the extent that "the wind itself is in terror of it" (91).

Another source of the sublime, in this howling wilderness, comes upon Billy in the form of a she-wolf. Billy is enthralled with this wolf and dismisses all his father's efforts to ensnare it. In McCarthy's rendering, the she-wolf, like the wild horses, is a sublime creature as it is "a being of great order that knows what men do not; the wolf is made the way the world is made. You cannot touch the world" (35). Edmund Burke, in his *Philosophical Enquiry*…, offers similar views regarding wolves, asserting that "on account of their unmanageable fierceness," they are not excluded from "grand descriptions and similitudes"; hence, we are affected by their strength, their "natural power." This "natural power," Burke explains, is commonly concerned with "an awe which takes away the free use of [one's faculties]" ([1757] 1990, 50). Indeed, this "natural power" is associated with "terror" and "terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime" (40). According to Hage, Billy's intimacy with the pregnant she-wolf is, in part, as already mentioned, reminiscent of Cole's relationship with the wild horses (2010, 37). The following description clearly indicates the point: "[when] he touched her skin ran and quivered under his hand like a horse's. He talked to her about his life but it didn't seem to rest her fears. After a while he sang to her" (McCarthy 1994, 67). Alongside the road to San Diego, Billy is sitting in empty desert crossroads, trying to speak to God about his brother and after a while he sleeps. Soon, he wakes up from a "troubling dream."

> He'd trudged in his dream through a deep snow along a ridge toward a darkened house the wolves had followed him as far as the fence. They ran their lean mouths against each other's flanks and they flowed about his knees and furrowed the snow with their noses and tossed their heads and in the cold their pooled breath made a cauldron about him and the snow lay so blue in the moonlight and those eyes were palest topaz where they crouched and whined and tucked their tails and they fawned and shuddered as they drew close to the house and their teeth shone that were so white and their red tongues lolled. At the gate they would go no further. They looked back toward the dark shapes of the mountains. He knelt in the snow and reached out his arms to them and they touched his face with their wild muzzles and drew away again and their breath was warm and it smelled of the earth and the hearth and the heart of the earth. (218)

At this point, Billy's intimate relationship with the pregnant she-wolf intimates that he is at one with nature; he "tried to see the world the wolf saw," we are told (39). Put differently, wilderness offers the opportunity to "talk and think as a natural, and not an artificial man" because characters tend to live in harmony with nature (Nash 1963,

5). Worthy of note here is that this wilderness with its dark and gloomy mountainscapes never fails to excite a sense of grandeur in Billy. Here is a description of its vastness or greatness of dimension when Billy is standing in an "inexplicable darkness."

> [T]here was no sound anywhere save only the wind. After a while he sat in the road. […] he bowed his head and held his face in his hands and wept. He sat there for a long time and after a while the east did gray and after a while the right and godmade sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction. (McCarthy 1994, 313)

In the face of such natural forces, Billy becomes aware of his "causal insignificance," to borrow Schopenhauer's words, since these forces seem to reduce one to "nought" (Young 2005, 116). The "darkening shapes of the mountains" (McCarthy 1994, 81) are both grand and impressive in that, as Burke puts it, "the effects of a rugged […] surface seem stronger than where it is smooth and polished. It would carry us out of our way to enter in this place into the cause of these appearances; but certain it is they afford a large and fruitful field of speculation" ([1757] 1990, 56). In this respect, Billy is found to retreat deeper and deeper into nature:

> [H]e looked out down the road and he looked toward the fading light. Darkening shapes of cloud all along the northern rim. It had ceased raining in the night and a broken rainbow or water gall stood out on the desert in a dim neon bow and he looked again at the road which lay as before yet more dark and darkening still where it ran on to the east and where there was no sun and there was no dawn and when he looked again toward the north the light was drawing away faster and that noon in which he'd woke was now become an alien dusk and now an alien dark and the birds that flew had lighted and all had housed once again in the bracken by the road. (McCarthy 1994, 313)

This landscape excites the ideas of the sublime time and again and Billy's solitude makes him more amenable to them because, "in solitude even the most beautiful surroundings have […] a desolate, dark, strange, and hostile appearance" (Schopenhauer [1818/1819] 1958, 198; quoted in Young 2005, 117). In other words, natural forces and the sublime, in *The Crossing*, give birth to each other. Style-wise, the verb-laden, flowing, relentless prose of this novel seems to uncannily capture the restlessness involved in the encounter with the sublime.

*Cities of the Plain* (1998), the final novel of *The Border Trilogy*, set in 1952, brings together the individual heroes of the previous two novels, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham. They work together on a cattle ranch in New Mexico. In this novel, McCarthy once again offers a sublime depiction of nature in its wildest aspects. To be sure, "the dark shapes of the mountains of Mexico standing against the starlit sky" (McCarthy 1998, 4) as well as "the surrounding dark" that forms "the outskirts of the city," or

"the desert plains beyond" (50-51) can provoke the sublime ambiguity insofar as "they fill and overbear the mind with their excess" or "infinity" (Hope Nicolson 1959, 210). What is more, the very title *Cities of the Plain* is biblical in origin, referring to "Sodom and Gomorrah" (Genesis 19:29), thus underscoring corruption and decadence in contrast to both the purity and unattainability of the Old West.

While passing through the mountains Cole and Billy Parham seem to contemplate their surroundings, the rocks, the mountains and the stars which are "belied above them against the eternal blackness of the world's nativity" in that there is something "august and stately in the Air of these things, that inspires the mind with great Thoughts and Passions" (McCarthy 1998, 214, 217). In other renditions of the "natural sublime" in this novel, as is the case with the previous two of the trilogy, characters are dwarfed by the immensity of this wilderness. Here is an example:

> [A] pass in the mountains. A bloodstained stone. The marks of steel upon it. Names carved in the corrosible lime among stone fishes and ancient shells. Things dim and dimming. The dry sea floor. The tools of migrant hunters. The dreams enchased upon the blades of them. The peregrine bones of a prophet. The silence. The gradual extinction of rain. The coming of night. (223)

Considering the above passage, it might be safe to claim that the sublime is concerned with speaking merely of "things in themselves," to borrow Schopenhauer's words, "no longer of phenomena" ([1818/1819] 1958, 185; quoted in Young 2005, 96). In *Cities of the Plain*, however, unlike the two preceding novels, McCarthy sometimes attributes the "natural sublime" to the unnatural so that his protagonists often find themselves in "a wilderness of spiritual trial and transformation" (Frye 2013, 8). For instance, there are descriptions like "the lights of the cities burning on the plain like stars pooled in a lake" (McCarthy 1998, 174) or when city lights "lay shimmering in their girds with the dark serpentine of the river dividing them" (123).

Elsewhere, the writer draws our attention to the south where "the distant lights of the city lay strewn across the desert floor like a tiara laid out upon a jeweler's blackcloth" (66). The encroaching of the cities (civilization) on the wilderness is stressed time and again as this means the loss of the "natural sublime." For instance, in a passage describing the wolves, in the story recounted to Cole by an old seer, this is lamented:

> The day after my fiftieth birthday in March of nineteen and seventeen I rode into the old headquarters at the Wide well and there was six dead wolves hanging on the fence. I rode along the fence and ran my head along em. I looked at their eyes. A government trapper had brought em in the night before. They'd been killed with poison baits. Strychnine. Whatever. Up in Sacramentos. A week later he brought in four more I aint heard a wolf in this country since. I suppose that's a good thing. They can be hell on stock. But I guess I was always what you

> might call superstitious. I know I damn sure wasn't religious. And it had always seemed to me that something can live and die but that the kind of the thing that they were was always there. I didn't know you could poison that. I aint heard a wolf howl in thirty odd years. I don't know where you'd go to hear one. There may not be any such a place. (99)

Given that wild wolves no longer exist in this dark wilderness, McCarthy directs our attention to the threatening presence of feral dogs, instead. Their loud barking could thus evoke the sublime feeling on the part of characters when "their cries trailed off down the side of the mountain and sounded again more faintly and then faded away where they coursed out along some rocky draw in the dark" (66).

Further, the wild horses in this novel, like in *All the Pretty Horses*, serve as another source of the sublime; they are, to reiterate, elevated to "positions of great significance; they inhabit a space that, while often overlapping with the human realm, is distinctive and important" (Hage 2010, 36). More importantly, the wild horses in *Cities of the Plain* occupy "a high moral and ethical ground" (Hage 2010, 36) on account of both Cole and Billy believing that "a horse knows what's in your heart" (McCarthy 1998, 64). In this sense, these cowboys are, in turn, "accustomed to the ways and the needs" (142) of the wild horses. A good horse, Cole believes, "has justice in his heart, can understand what you mean, he likes to be able to hear you, and you can see what's in his heart" (40). In attributing this moral greatness to horses, as discussed above, McCarthy tends to mark this simple sublime spark between them and the characters and the way in which the characters "instill confidence" (143) in these animals. Put differently, as George Guillemin points out, Cole's "continuity with the horse cannot be named. The continuity thus allegorized invokes the lost harmony between man and nature" (2001, 122).

Something remarkable about McCarthy's protagonists is that they have developed "not in American pastoralism in general but in *western* American pastoralism" which involves "virtually unattainable wilderness as nature's last stronghold against man" (118; emphasis in the original). In a sense, McCarthy implies that the extent to which Cole and Billy are affected by both animals and natural forces is solely related to the protagonists' ideas and the way in which they experience such unmentionable grandeur.

## 3. Conclusion

Arguably, the Wild West, for Cormac McCarthy, serves as a model for the United States in that it underscores both the original values of America and the unique circumstances that could not have been duplicated elsewhere. The wilderness therefore is recognized as the dominant sign of the sublime mode in McCarthy's *The Border Trilogy* insofar as it marks the characters' wonder and terror when they happen to encounter nature's infinitude.

It is important to note, however, that the way in which McCarthy attributes natural grandeur to this wilderness calls to mind memories of the Old West, foregrounding a sense of pastoral nostalgia on the part of the characters. Emphasized is the point that the natural boundlessness of the Wild West is beyond any attempt to make it understandable and that nature is the primary source of the sublime experience. What is more, the writer implies that the extent to which characters are affected by the natural forces and the wild animals depends on their own ideas as well as the way in which they experience such ineffable grandeur. That is, at issue here is the subjective nature of sublimity.

In McCarthy's *Trilogy*, the desolate wilderness is, in effect, capable of overwhelming the observer by virtue of its unfathomable grandeur. What is most remarkable about this wild setting is McCarthy's rendering of the sublime and the horrible through such notions as infinity, natural grandeur, silence, terror and darkness; the wilderness is represented as instilling sublime feelings into the characters through its awe-inspiring vistas. Intriguingly represented is how characters come to realize that they are too insignificant to conceive the grandeur of this wilderness. That is, the writer dramatizes the very process of experiencing the sublime on the part of the characters. Moreover, arguably the modality of the response to this experience becomes an index of character. Cognitively this applies to the reader too. McCarthy manipulates his reader's perception in that their imagination is moved to awe based on his description of the sublime sceneries in the Wild West; the readers are to vicariously experience what his characters see out there in the wild.

Representations of nature as sublime in American literature are numerous, indeed. What marks McCarthy's rendering, however, is the uncanny quality of the style deployed. The depiction of the "natural sublime" in these novels is arguably artistically sublime too. That is, the length and complexity of the passages literally constrain the reader from finding meaning. McCarthy's "artistic sublime," in other words, slows down the readers' processing of thought which, ultimately, results in their bafflement.

## Works Cited

Addison, Joseph. (1712) 1965. *The Spectator*, No. 412, Monday, June 23. Edited by Donald F. Bond. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Battistini, Andrea. 1981. "Italia ed Europa: I Luoghi Bifocali dei Viaggiatori Settecenteschi," In Andrea Battistini, *Paesaggio: Immagine e Realtá*, 71-75. Milan: Electa.

Bloom, Harold. 2009. *Bloom's Modern Critical Views. Cormac McCarthy: New Edition*. Edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom. New York: Infobase.

Bromwich, David. 2014. *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence.* Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP.

Burke, Edmund. (1757) 1990. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, edited by Adam Philips. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP.

Caldwell, Gail. 2005. "Lone Star Cauldron." In *The Boston Globe*, July 24, D6.

Cameron, James. 2011. *Border Wars and Armageddon: Contemporary American Literary Naturalism in Cormac McCarthy's Western Novels*. Washington DC: Georgetown UP.

Christensen, Jerome C. 1978. "The Sublime and the Romance of the Other." *Diacritics* 8 (2): 10-23.

Clewis, Robert R. 2009. *The Kantian Sublime and Revelation of Freedom.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Cole, Lucinda and Richard G. Swartz. 1994. "'Why Should I Wish for Words?': Literacy, Articulation, and the Borders of Literary Culture." *At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural, Feminist, and Materialist Criticism*, edited by Mary A. Favret and Nicola J. Watson, 151-169. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP.

Culler, Jonathan. 2005. "The Hertzian Sublime." *MLN* 120 (5): 969-985.

Dennis, John. (1701) 2005. *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry: A Critical Discourse.* Michigan: Michigan UP.

Doak, Robert. 2002. "The Natural Sublime and American Nationalism: 1800-1850." *Studies in Popular Culture* 25 (2): 13-22.

Dorson, James. 2016. *Counternarrative Possibilities: Virgin Land, Homeland, and Cormac McCarthy's Westerns*. Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag.

Eco, Umberto. 2004. *On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea*. Translated by Alastair McEwen. London: Secker & Warburg.

Freeman, Barbara Claire. 1995. *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*. Berkeley: U of California P.

Frye, Steven. 2013. "Histories, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the Art of Philosophy." In Steven Frye, ed. 2013: 3-27.

—. 2013, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Greenwood, Willard P. 2009. *Reading Cormac McCarthy*. Santa Barbara, CA and Oxford: Greenwood Press.

Guillemin, George. 2001. "Sorrow, Allegory, and Pastoralism." In *A Cormac McCarthy Companion: The Border Trilogy*, edited by Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce, 92-130. Jackson: UP of Mississippi.

Hage, Erik. 2010. *Cormac McCarthy: A Literary Companion*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland.

Hoffmann, Roal. 2011. "The Sublime. An Introduction." In *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, edited by Roald Hoffmann and Iain Boyd Whyte, 3-20. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP.

Hope Nicolson, Marjorie. 1959. *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP.

Hurh, Paul. 2015. *American Terror: The Feeling of Thinking in Edwards, Poe, and Melville*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP.

IRLAN, Shaun. 2006. "The Sublime." In *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Poetry*, edited by Christine Gerrard, 515-533. Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

JONES, Malcolm, Jr. 1992. "Literary Lion in the Desert." In *Newsweek*, May 18, 68.

KANT, Immanuel. [1790] 1952. *The Critique of Judgment*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP.

—. [1790] 2002. *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, edited by Paul Guyer. Translated by Eric Mattews. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

KIRK, Ruth. 1973. *Desert: The American Southwest*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP.

LAGAYETTE, Pierre. 2013. "The Border Trilogy, The Road, and the Cold War." In Steven Frye, ed. 2013: 79-94.

LINK, Eric Carl. 2013. "McCarthy and Literary Naturalism." In Steven Frye, ed. 2013: 149-160.

MCCARTHY, Cormac. 1992. *All the Pretty Horses*. New York: Vintage.

—. 1994. *The Crossing*. New York: Vintage.

—. 1998. *Cities of the Plain*. New York: Vintage.

MONK, Nicholas. 2013. "All the Pretty Horses, the Border, and Ethnic Encounter." In Steven Frye, ed. 2013: 121-132.

MORELY, Simon. 2010. *The Sublime* (Documents of Contemporary Art). Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press.

MORGAN, Joseph E. 2014. "Nature, Weber, and a Revision of the French Sublime." *Síneris. Revista de musicología* 15: 1-34. [Accessed online on November 13, 2018].

NASH, Roderick. 1963. "The American Wilderness in Historical Perspective." *Forest History* 6 (4): 2-13.

NGAI, Sianne. 2005. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP.

O'SULLIVAN, James Stephen. 2014. *Cormac McCarthy's Cold Pastoral: The Overturning of a National Allegory*. PhD diss., University of Sussex.

POLAND, Tim. 1996. "A Relative to All That Is: The Eco-hero in Western American Literature." *Western American Literature* 26 (3): 197.

PRAZ, Mario. (1930) 1966. *La Carne, La Morte e Il Diavolo Nella Letteratura Romantica*. Florence: G.S. Sansoni.

ROSS, Patricia A. 2006. *The Spell Cast by Remains: The Myth of Wilderness in Modern American Literature*. New York and London: Routledge.

SANFORD, Charles. 1957. "The Concept of the Sublime in the Works of Thomas Cole and William Cullen Bryant." *American Literature* 28 (4): 434-448.

SCARAMELLINI, Guglielmo. 1996. "The Picaresque and the Sublime in Nature and the Landscape: Writing and Iconography in the Romantic Voyaging in the Alps." *GeoJournal* 38 (1): 49-57.

SCHOPENHAUER, Arthur. (1818/1819) 1958. *The World as Will and Representation*. Translated by E.F.J. Payne. New York: Dover.

SHAW, Philip. 2006. *The Sublime*. London and New York: Routledge.

YOUNG, Julian. 2005. *Schopenhauer*. London and New York: Routledge.

Received 10 March 2017 Revised version accepted 15 January 2018

Hossein Pirnajmuddin is an Associate Professor of English literature at the University of Isfahan, Iran. His research interests include Renaissance literature, literary theory, contemporary fiction and translation studies.

Mahshid Younesi has recently received her MA in English Literature from the University of Isfahan, Iran. She is particularly interested in the figurations of sublimity in postmodern fiction.

Address: Department of Foreign Languages. University of Isfahan. Azadi Square. 8174673441, Isfahan, Iran. Tel.: +98 3137932137.