

## THE ROAD: TRANSLATING CORMAC MCCARTHY INTO ROMANIAN

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### **Abstract**

*Cormac McCarthy's novels have proven to be favorites with critics and readers alike and have been consequently translated into multiple languages. But McCarthy's style presents many challenges and numerous religious, philosophical, and socio-cultural references are pervasive in all his novels. The present article focuses on the translation of the author's distinctive style into Romanian in the case of McCarthy's 2006 *The Road* and the 2009 Romanian translation by Irina Horea. The primary aim of this paper will be to analyze how the post-apocalyptic American identity portrayed in this novel was translated for a Romanian reader.*

**Keywords:** post-apocalyptic novel, American identity, cultural translation.

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### **1. Context**

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Cormac McCarthy's writing career began in the nineteen sixties with a few typically Southern Gothic novels, which attracted critical interest and acclaim, but not much public success. McCarthy continued in the following decades with a shift towards Westerns, which were received with the same critical praise and quite a bit more public enthusiasm, but it was in the mid two-thousands when he achieved international success with the last novel published at that point, namely *The Road*. In 2007, the author received the coveted Pulitzer Prize for his tenth novel and appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show, in his first televised interview.

This interview delighted critics and readers alike, since it represented a rare glimpse into the mind and writing ethos of a reclusive author. Among many details about *The Road* and details about his career and his methods, McCarthy also reinforced what is considered by critics to be his personal creed: books are made from other books and are meant for individual reading; each reader should have his or her own interpretation of a text, based on individual background, views, and knowledge on a particular subject. As it were, the text offers whatever the writer initially intended, and the reader picks the shades of meaning he or she is comfortable with.

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This notion made McCarthy very reticent to disclose the meaning behind some of his most famous scenes, while critics were ever eager to dig through the dense prose for any biblical, philosophical or literary references which might aid in the interpretation of the author's stories. When it came to readers, it can only be assumed that they did exactly what McCarthy advised and read between the lines in accordance with their own personal understanding.

In this context, the issue of translating Cormac McCarthy's novels into other languages presupposes not only the faithful translation of style and content, but also the facilitation of religious and socio-cultural cues for the non-American reader. And starting from this premise, the present article will make a case study of McCarthy's tenth novel, *The Road*, and its Romanian translation from 2009, with the aim to explore how all the aspects mentioned above were transposed into the first Romanian translation of a McCarthian novel. So, after a few theoretical guidelines in the field of translation studies, the present paper will tackle the comparative analysis of style, references and key concepts from one culture into the other.

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### 1.1 On translation

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The field of translation studies has evolved continuously throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, becoming increasingly interdisciplinary and bringing together a plethora of approaches and avenues of investigation when it comes to the re-writing of a text from one language into another (Venuti, 2000:4).

Still, with so many possibilities for inquiry when it comes to the translated text, one of the pivotal concepts is the role the translator and the goal that he or she needs to achieve. Basil Hatim and Ian Mason (1997) put forth the notion that what unites all forms of translation and all kinds of translators is the singular goal of communicating the original text. Translators, they argue, find themselves under the imperative of exploiting "the potentialities of the language system for particular purposes" (1997:6). As such, the translator comes across as a negotiator who is caught in a permanent state of "dialogue with a source text producer and a likely target text receiver" (1997:12); a translator's job is to conciliate the two texts, the source and the target, and to unite them on multiple levels, including linguistically and culturally.

However, despite the central role the translator occupies as a purveyor of meaning, Lawrence Venuti argues that a translator is most often culturally disregarded or even made invisible by his or her efforts to tame the translation into a fluid and effortlessly readable new version in the foreign language (1995). The effort of bringing the source text closer to the target language is also known as domestication, and is a strategy sometimes employed when a text or author is first introduced through translation in a new language. This will prove important since it is precisely the case of the 2009 Romanian translation of McCarthy's *The Road*. Still, this strategy presupposes a few disadvantages, as it makes the translation as a second-order

representation, and limits the translator's originality to choosing a certain text or certain "dialects and discourses" in response to a certain context (Venuti 1995: 311).

This idea is correlated with another important aspect which needs to be considered, namely the range of knowledge available to the readers (Baker 1992: 222). In this vein, texts are constituted not primarily of language but in fact of culture, making language itself "a vehicle of the culture" (Trivedi 2007: 280). This underlines the complex nature of translating any given text, because the act of translating has to be interpreted as almost synonymous with the act of understanding the other culture. And it is precisely this which makes the aim of investigation for many researchers in the field of translation studies: how to first understand and then transpose the text from one language into another.

Talal Asad, a central figure when it comes to cultural translation, argues that a good translation aims to reproduce "the structure of alien discourse within the translator's own language" (2006: 495). At first glance, this may appear to contradict the criterion of fidelity and staying as loyal as possible to the original text, famously postulated by Walter Benjamin (2000). Benjamin, whose seminal work is the basis for many in this field, argues that a bad translation is one which communicates the non-essential. Still, more recent voices in translation studies underline the importance of the readers' understanding and that of the socio-cultural context into which the translation will be published. In fact, Mona Baker claims that, firstly, it is the reader who must "make sense of a stretch of language" and secondly, that the value of a good translation is ultimately measured through the lens of the audience (see 1992: 219), a detail which will help determine the status of the translation to be analyzed in the following sections.

If translation is the negotiation between two languages, then it is only natural to ask how the imbalances between said languages are to be taken into account. In the end of his article, Trivedi (2007) emphasizes that some languages "seem to be equally endangered by the increasing decimation of world languages by the one all-devouring, multinational, global language, English." (287) The comparison with an endangered species present in the text underscores the idea that languages and cultures, for that matter, are not treated equally.

Even if his notion does not mirror Trivedi's precisely, Talal Asad's theory follows the same lines, as he speaks of "weak" and "strong" languages and their respective responses when it comes to changing or borrowing atypical forms, a detail to be remembered in the textual analysis to follow. Lacking political and economic power, as well as the prestige brought on by the financial prosperity of their countries, weak languages tend to allow transformations in the translation process, while strong languages like English tend to be more rigid and intolerant. He further clarifies that the pertinent question should not be about how tolerant the translator's attitude is toward the original author, but rather how tolerant a language can be when assuming "unaccustomed forms" (2006: 496).

Irrespective of the flexibility languages might exhibit, or the attitude of individual translators, translating one culture into another will always raise problematic scenarios. Translating the other presupposes thoroughly knowing the other; and even if this condition is met, there always seem to be almost irreconcilable differences. Examples of the problems which arise in the translating process are provided not only by Trivedi (2007), who analyzes the works of such authors as Salman Rushdie or Jhumpa Lahiri and who speaks about migrants coming to the West, but also by the many researchers who have delved in the field of translation. For the present discussion, it should be noted that, even if the translation moves from English, a stronger language by the definitions above, into Romanian, the specificities and nuances of a ruined, post-apocalyptic American identity may sometimes prove troublesome to translate.

And finally, cultural translation poses another difficult question related to the extent to which translatability is possible. Eva Hoffman argues that one cannot translate wholly from one language to another, that something is lost, that “anyway, translation doesn’t work” (2006: 504). An answer to the conundrum of a perfect translation might be provided by Asad’s hypothesis that we are inclined “to translate cultural languages as texts, not to introduce or enlarge cultural capacities, learnt from other ways of living.” (2006: 498) He claims that the only way someone can translate a culture is to “first read and then reinscribe the implicit meanings that lie beneath/ within/ beyond situated speech” (499), but this appears to be quite a thorny issue.

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### 1.2 On “*The Road*”

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Completely unique from, but also intrinsically related to Cormac McCarthy’s previous novels, *The Road* proposes a grey, post-apocalyptic landscape where a Father and a Son wander eastward from the mountainous area of the former United States towards the coast, searching for food and shelter in a world where no plants and only the odd animal survived an unnamed, possibly atomic, cataclysm. On their way through dead forests and along deserted roads, the Father tries to teach his Child how the world was and what values were considered worthy and good, since the young boy does not and cannot have any recollections of what used to be. He was born in the apocalypse, a clean slate upon which the Man wishes to inscribe the best values of what was once the United States of America.

In his one interview with Oprah Winfrey, Cormac McCarthy labeled *The Road* to be a simple story, inspired by the love the author had for his youngest son. Still, as the interviewer replied and as many critics argue, such a statement holds only on the surface, as in fact, this novel is only deceptively simple. Compared to the verbose and dark descriptions of his earlier work, *The Road* exhibits a style which can indeed be called simpler, but the issues and questions this novel puts forth could never be labeled as such.

In essence, *The Road* flows along the lines of duality and contrast. In fact, Steven Frye describes this novel in terms of a jarring juxtaposition: the bleakness, melancholy and horror of the post-apocalyptic world is intermingled with the joy of memories and human connection (2011: 179). The ghosts of the past are constant companions for the Father and sources of curiosity and learning for the Son. The pair wish to “hold the fire” of what was once considered good and to resurrect, however futilely, the remnants of the past American lifestyle. Whether they succeed or fail in their endeavor depends, as McCarthy intended, on the personal interpretation of each reader. Still, as Willard P. Greenwood phrases it, the world before the apocalypse can objectively never be recovered again (2009: 80-81).

With its mixture of fractured images and references to the past, *The Road* and what it stands for could be surmised in only one word: palimpsest, a notion which is taken up a few times in the novel itself. To give just one particularly telling example, the journey of the Father-Son duo exhibits the deliberate description of the advertising billboards that are rotten and abandoned along the road. At the beginning of the novel, the advertising board is faded and weathered, but still legible. Towards the middle of the book, similar billboards had been painted white and on top there were messages which warned people away. Still, “through the paint could be seen a pale palimpsest of advertisements for goods which no longer existed.” (McCarthy 2010:135) The Romanian version, “și prin vopsea se putea citi un palimpsest palid de reclame la bunuri care nu mai existau” (McCarthy/ Horea 2009:99), keeps as close to the source text as possible, in order to maintain the same stylistic effect. This board, after the many which remained weathered, but intact, epitomizes the situation of the world in which the Father and the Son are roaming, as well as the core of the novel itself. Past narratives may no longer be relevant in a post-apocalyptic storyline, yet they still peak through undaunted from under the white coat of paint which the collapse mentioned above represents. And, as such, they need to be translated *ad litteram*, but also in spirit, in any language *The Road* is transposed in.

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## ***2. On the Romanian translation***

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While across Northern America, the mid to late two-thousands represented the culmination of a long and critically acclaimed career for Cormac McCarthy, in Romania the same period barely spurred the public interest in the author’s diegesis.

Arguably, the first significant contact<sup>2</sup> Romanians had with any of the author’s works was through the cinematic adaptations of his latest novels at the time, *No Country*

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<sup>2</sup> The first cinematic adaptation of a novel by Cormac McCarthy came earlier, in 2000, but the film was marketed and promoted as a love story, and the fact that the original literary source was McCarthy’s novel or that the text was the first installment of a Western trilogy were not presented as crucial. Therefore, even if the film was picked up by Romanian

for *Old Men*, directed by the Coen brothers in 2007, and *The Road*, which came out in 2009 and had John Hillcoat at the helm. Both movies were widely successful around the world and soon after Hillcoat's movie was released Humanitas Publishing House put forth the first Romanian translation of a Cormac McCarthy novel. As such, in 2009, in a first attempt to introduce McCarthy's novels to the Romanian public, Irina Horea translated *The Road*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize. The translation tried to capitalize on the critical and monetary momentum of the original novel, as well as on the success of the motion picture, whose protagonists featured on the front cover.

After this first translation published by Humanitas, Polirom Publishing House continued the endeavor and between 2010 and 2014 brought to the Romanian public another five translations of McCarthy's Western novels. And just to prove that the popularity of the author's novels hasn't dwindled in Romania, the beginning of this decade brought with it another three translations: the author's last two novels which were published in English in 2022 and translated into Romanian in 2023 at Humanitas, and one of McCarthy's earlier novels which was translated this year, in 2024, at Polirom.

With nine out of McCarthy's twelve novels translated into Romanian to date, can Irina Horea's translation still be considered a good starting point? Does it manage to recreate a very complex fictional world in all its intricacies? And how does the Romanian text translate McCarthy's style and the culture that seep through between the lines of *The Road*? To answer such questions, the following subchapters will follow some criteria which make up the dominant traits of McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel and the manner in which they were rendered in the target language. The first criterion will deal with the author's distinctive style, while the second will try to approach the complex image of an American society in ruins and will bring up a few pertinent socio-cultural references which appear throughout the novel.

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### 2.1 Style

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In *The Road*, a third-person omniscient narrator describes the scenery, as well as the actions and thoughts of the characters, making predominant use of a Past Tense narrative. Dense, lyrical and multi-layered descriptions intertwine with the austerity of the dialogue, which is functional, informal and concise. And throughout the novel there is a blatant lack of punctuation marks, a characteristic which McCarthy prided himself on, stating in his Oprah Winfrey interview that a text well written only needs minimal punctuation.

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cinemas and later TV channels, the name Cormac McCarthy was still rather unknown at that time.

In terms of vocabulary, McCarthy blends together informal or slang terms with neological or literary words. He prefers to use adjectives and builds his complex sentences with participials, reduced structures or absolute phrases, which give his prose a curt and fragmented feel. All these traits contribute to a highly recognizable writing style, which may appear simple at first glance, but which needs a closer look to reveal itself fully. And, if these traits were to be considered in turn, the translation Irina Horea proposes clearly acknowledges all of them and attempts to bend the Romanian language into the mold Cormac McCarthy puts forth.

As a first example, when it comes to dialogue lines, McCarthy leaves them unmarked by inverted commas whether they are part of a larger and more complex passage or stand alone in a conversation. Irina Horea follows this pattern and breaks away from orthographic convention by leaving out the dash symbol which marks direct dialogue in Romanian. Furthermore, as the language used by McCarthy's characters tends to be informal and take accuracy as a guiding principle, the Romanian translation abounds in informal vocabulary as well: "okay" is the Romanian "OK", "Papa" becomes the diminutive "tati" or "tăticule" in the appellative. At times, Horea also overemphasizes this informal and fractured aspect in dialogue with, for example, future forms like "o să faci"/ "o să mergem" or myriad contracted forms like "doișpe" ("twelve") instead of the standard "doisprezece", which appears only in the descriptive passages.

Expletives and curse words are also translated as faithfully as possible and, with minimal modifications, they flow naturally in the Romanian language. For instance, in a conversation with a cannibal, the Man asks "Where are you going?" and the cannibal answers "I was going to take a crap." (McCarthy 2010: 65) The translation shortens the lines, but keeps the spirit of the natural exchange of lines with "Încotro?" / "Să mă cac." (McCarthy/ Horea 2009: 52) Alternatively, in the case of the insult "chickenshit" in "I think you're chickenshit." (McCarthy 2010: 68) the change becomes more significant with the translation of "Că ești căcat pe tine de frică." (McCarthy/ Horea 2009: 54), whose backtranslation is closer to 'You shat yourself with fear'. Overall, the bluntness of the vulgar words is rendered in most such instances, with the requisite alterations in Romanian. It is clear that this is a conscious decision on the part of the translator, as the harshness of the words sustains the jarring dichotomy between the dialogue Father and Son and the Father's exchanges with strangers or hostiles.

Mistakes and non-standard forms which appear in the speech of certain characters also find their way in the Romanian version of the story, but not always to such great stylistic success, mainly because of a mismatch in register. For instance, "You aint got but two shells. Maybe just one." (McCarthy 2010: 66) is rendered as "N-ai decât două gloanțe. Poate numa' unu." (McCarthy/ Horea 2009: 54) The informal character of the exchange is referenced in Romanian by the abbreviated "numa' unu"/ "only one", but the non-standard "aint got" also suggests a low level of education or formal

instruction on the part of the interlocutor. In order to keep this extra layer of meaning, an emphasis of the non-standard aspect may have been more helpful in Romanian, perhaps with the incorrect use of the adverbial “decât” with an affirmative verb form, i.e., “Ai decât două gloanțe.” Similarly, “Nu merg nicăierea.” (McCarthy/ Horea 2009: 54), which is the proposed translation for “I aint goin nowhere’s” (McCarthy 2010: 67), could have been exaggerated to a possible “Nu-mi merg nicăierea.”

However, just as Eva Hoffman claimed, sometimes aspects of style cannot be translated due to an inherent difference in cultural understanding. When arguing about the future, the Man’s wife tells him that she cannot continue in this post-apocalyptic world and that she wishes to die. What follows is an obvious English analogy between Death and a man, as the woman says: “You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I’ve taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot.” The Man replies that “Death is not a lover.” And the woman counters with “Oh yes he is.” (McCarthy 2010: 58). The Romanian translation flows naturally at first, “N-ai decât să mă crezi o târfă necredincioasă. Mi-am luat un amant. El îmi poate da ceea ce tu nu poți.”, but stumbles with the Man’s reply: “Moartea nu e un amant.” The grammatical gender of the Romanian noun “moartea” is feminine and sits uneasily with the masculine “amant”. The woman’s last line, “O, ba da, este” can omit the subject and keep the verb in the third person singular, with no marker for either feminine or masculine (McCarthy/ Horea 2009:47), bringing back some of the natural language flow in Romanian.

In the same vein, the numerous descriptive passages pose a greater challenge and are harder to translate in a style similar to the original. On the one hand, the wide range of vocabulary becomes problematic in context, while on the other hand, the word order and the condensed nature of the narrative and descriptions make it difficult at times for the Romanian translation to follow the same succinct pattern as McCarthy intended. In this too, the general approach that Irina Horea employs is to keep the truncated structures, perhaps sometimes to the detriment of a typically Romanian flow of prose. For instance, the snippet describing the Man’s imagining of a stone beast at the beginning of the novel, “Crouching there pale and naked and translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in shadow on the rocks behind it.” (McCarthy 2010: 2), is transposed almost word by word, with the addition of commas to bring a sense of order to the Romanian structure: “Ghemuit acolo, albinos, despuiat, translucid, cu oasele ca de alabastru, turnate în umbră pe rocile din spatetele său.” (McCarthy/ Horea 2009:7)

The omission of active verb forms in both the original and the target language of the translation is of course intentional, enforcing through this writing style the fragmented state of the post-apocalyptic world. And in the case of finite forms, the translated story-telling generally seesaws between the Romanian Perfect Simplu, for singular events and narrative sequences, and the Imperfect for habitual situations or descriptions, and is also aided by the use of the Mai-mult-ca-perfect for pre-preterite



contexts. Just like in some of the examples mentioned above, the Romanian Perfect Compus is also used, generally for singular events. As a final example, the comparison of the paragraphs below is quite telling when it comes to the style of the original English novel and the Romanian translation:

*They ate the little mushrooms together with the beans **and** drank tea **and** had tinned pears for their desert. **He banked the fire against the seam of rock** where he'd built it **and** he **strung the tarp** behind them to reflect the heat **and** they sat warm in their refuge **while** he told the boy stories. (McCarthy 2010: 41-42)*

*Mâncară ciupercile împreună cu fasolea, băură ceai **și**, ca desert, mâncară o conservă de pere. **Împinse tăciunii aprinși mai la adăpost sub pragul de stâncă**, unde făcuse focul, **fixă prelata în corzi** în spatele lor, ca să reflecte dogoarea, **și** stătură acolo, în căldura refugiului lor, **iar** el îi spuse băiatului povești. (McCarthy/Horea 2009: 36)*

The finite verb forms in both passages above follow the typical pattern of narration, but while the English original links its verbs with the coordinating conjunction “and”, dispensing with the need for commas, the Romanian translation cannot achieve this and still maintain the same word order. In Romanian, the conjunction “and” is sometimes reinforced by and sometimes omitted in favor of coordinating commas. Dependent clauses in the translation are often separated with commas from their determiners and sometimes the Romanian translation requires a shift from dependent to coordinated main clauses, or vice versa. All in all, even if the structure of the passage changes little, the effect McCarthy achieves, and which was detailed in the paragraphs above, is only partially conveyed in Romanian.

Moreover, the underlined phrases in the examples above also show some of the hurdles in terms of vocabulary. Omissions, like in the case of the first underlined words “little mushrooms”/ “ciupercile”, or alternatively, paraphrases such as the other two underlined phrases, mark part of the Romanian translation. In the latter case, accuracy in meaning is the guiding principle. The verb “to string” becomes here “a fixa în corzi”, or “to tie or fix in place with cords or ropes”, a more cumbersome manner of expressing the same notion. Assumedly, the translator prized precision of meaning over an option such as “a prins prelata”, i.e. “he fastened/ tied the tarp”, which would have simplified both the structure and the intended connotation of the English original. In most such instances, the overall stylistic effect is somewhat different with multiple Romanian words per English one, but the clarity in meaning is conveyed in full.

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## *2.2 American identity in the Apocalypse*

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If the previous subchapter dealt with the manner in which Cormac McCarthy’s recognizable style was transposed into Romanian, this second subchapter will shift the focus to the references and symbols which depict the image of American identity,

post-crisis as it were, and to how well these nuances are relayed for the Romanian readership.

As mentioned in the first part of this article, Cormac McCarthy's prose is frequently infused with references which range from the religious, to the literary and the mythological. In fact, this propensity to imbue his own words with the ghosts of myths and various modern mythologies is what gives McCarthy's oeuvre a sense of unity (see Cant 2008: 7-9). Whether conspicuous or very obscure, a reader can always come across a reference to another work, a different time or a certain philosophical trend in one of McCarthy's novels. For instance, in *The Road*, religious connotations could be as obscure and controversial as the true symbolism of the self-named character Ely, who appears as a broken old man in this novel, or as obvious as the association between the Child and the figure of a messiah, as he is the man's "warrant"/ "chezășia" and as "If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (McCarthy 2010:3)/ "Dacă el nu este cuvântul Domnului, atunci Domnul nicicând n-a cuvântat." (McCarthy/ Horea 2009: 8).

However, the present discussion will bypass philosophical and religious mentions, with the express aim to focus on the American socio-cultural references which would be part of any English-speaking reader's common knowledge. So, for the purposes of this discussion, the examples will follow issues which make up the cultural identity of the ruined United States. Universally recognizable symbols such as the Coca Cola can that the Boy drinks at the beginning of the story will be put aside, irrespective of their overall significance as topoi in the novel. Rather, the scope of this investigation will coalesce around focal points related to the cityscapes and landscapes which are typically American and the ways in which these appear in the Romanian translation, as well as to the twisted reflections of American culture which can be read between the lines.

On the one hand, American scenery is associated with majestic views, a great diversity of flora and fauna, as well as urban sprawls which make up veritable artificial ecosystems. And for a novel whose premise is the death of the natural world, *The Road* still succeeds in highlighting the diversity and local specificity of the places the Father and Son pass by. But instead of clear and vibrant images which sometimes come back in the Man's dreams or memories, most of the descriptive passages offer the melancholy and mutilated version of what was once alive.

Some mentions of natural elements can be more easily transposed for the Romanian imagination, despite any difficulty that their contexts may pose. For instance, "roadside hedges were gone to rows of black and twisted brambles" (McCarthy 2010:20) is easily understood as "gardurile vii de pe marginea drumului se transformaseră în șiruri de rugi negri, contorsionați." (McCarthy/ Horea 2009: 21). In the same vein, "birchtrees that stood bone pale against the dark of the **evergreens** beyond" becomes "mestecenii se înșiruiău albicioși ca niște oaze, pe fundalul întunecat al **merișorilor**" and "a **riprap** of twisted stumps, gray and weathered" is

translated as “un **vălmășag** de buturugi contorsionate, cenușii, mâncate de vreme” (McCarthy 2010:11; McCarthy/Horea 2009:14). “Birchtrees” and “stumps” correspond perfectly to “mesteceni” and “buturugi”, while the quantifier “a riprap of” is only a vague correspondent for “vălmășag”, which emphasizes in Romanian the random distribution of the items, instead of the fact that they had become part of the landscape itself, and a barrier against the destructive forces of nature, which “riprap”/ “prundiș” originally suggests in English. Moreover, the term “evergreens”, which is used here to signify various categories of plants whose leaves stay green throughout the seasons, sits uneasily with the Romanian “merișor”. And although it is true that “merișor”, here synonymous with “cimișir”, also refers to the species *Buxus sempervirens*, an evergreen shrub, the Romanian reader would most probably think of *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*, namely the cranberry. Therefore, a better option which would avoid any misinterpretations would have been the imperfect synonym “conifere”/ “coniferous trees”.

Still harder to translate are the mentions of some endemic species which offer little point of reference for a Romanian reader. In the passage: “A rich southern wood that once held **mayapple** and **pipsissewa**. **Ginseng**. The raw dead limbs of the **rhododendron** twisted and knotted and black.” (McCarthy 2010: 40), “mayapple” refers to *Podophyllum peltatum*, or American mandrake, not to be confused with Mediterranean mandrake, which would be “mătrăgună” in Romanian. “Pipsissewa”, or *Chimaphila umbellata*, is another plant species which is native to some regions of North America and bears little importance in the collective Romanian imagination, unlike the next two bolded plant species, “ginseng” and “rhododendron” which can be found in the Romanian language, and which raise no difficulty in translation. If we look at the version Irina Horea proposes, “O pădure sudică bogată, în care odată se găseau **păducei** și **merișori**. **Ginseng**. Rămurișul mort, descojit, al **rododendronilor**, răsucit, înodat, înnegrit.” (2009:35), it becomes clear that “păducel” and “merișor” bear no connection, in species or aspect, to the plants mentioned by McCarthy. While “pipsissewa” is informally known as “verdeța-iernii” in Romanian, a term which could be used here despite its unofficial status, “mayapple” has no other identification than its scientific name in the Romanian language. Apart from a translation which involves the Latin name, and which would not be desirable, another possible solution for this conundrum would be to translate it with either “dracilă” or “talpa-leului”, two other species which belong to the same Berberidaceae family. Needless to say, this option is far from ideal, and the lack of Romanian counterpart detracts from the characterization which Cormac McCarthy intended.

When it comes to the ruins of cities and towns, McCarthy’s illustrations are just as detailed and specific for the American way of life. The novel abounds in descriptive passages which are packed with mentions of everyday items, from bottles to shopping carts, household tools and pieces of technology, from kinds of preserves to types of roads. The dizzying array of objects builds a grand and detailed image of

American life before the apocalypse: excess, good quality and even opulence are traits which can be deduced through these frequent descriptions. Houses have parlors and mudrooms, windowsills, drainpipes and trellises, they hold wicker baskets and mason jars, and some even come equipped with fully stocked bunkers. “China in a **breakfront**”, “an antique **pumporgan**” or “an old handmade cherrywood **chifforobe**” are only three of a list of very particular household items mentioned when the Man is looking for shelter one night (McCarthy 2009:21). Highly specific in nature, these vivid images are mostly translated into Romanian with the aid of paraphrasing. The first term becomes “porțelanuri într-un **dulap fără uși**”, when perhaps the Romanian “bufet” would have worked better, and “pumporgan”, which is intentionally spelled as one word, is translated as “o **orgă hidraulică străveche**”, when a “pump organ” or “reed organ” would be better served as “armoniu” or even “orgă mica”/ “a small organ” in Romanian. In the case of the third phrase, “chifforobe” describes a type of wardrobe with hanging space on one side and drawers on the other and is translated in Romanian with “garderob”, in “un **garderob** vechi, din lemn de cireș, cioplit de mână” (McCarthy/ Horea 2009:21)

In these passages, American identity seems embedded in the objects that were left behind after the cataclysm, and the obsessive enumeration of former bounty is meant to contrast with the reality of the post-apocalyptic world. As such, feats of science or engineering are almost always depicted together with the image of death and desolation, which has come to represent the new norm. For example, a typical description of a town or city reads like this:

*By dusk of the following day they were at the city. The **long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchanges like the ruins of a vast funhouse** against the distant murk. [...] The **mummified dead** everywhere. The **flesh cloven along the bones**, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires. Shriveled and drawn **like latterday bog-folk**, their faces of boiled sheeting, **the yellowed palings of their teeth**. (McCarthy 2010: 23)*

*A doua zi, în pragul înserării, se aflau la marginea orașului. **Lungile curbe de beton ale intersecției autostrăzilor interstatale parcă erau ruinele unui uriaș tunel al groazei**, proiectate pe întunericul din depărtare. [...] Peste tot, morți mumificați. **Carne desprinsă de pe oase**, ligamente uscate ca niște hamuri, întinse ca niște sârme. Zbârciți, supți, **asemenea cadavrelor ce umpleau mlaștinile în acea vreme**, fețele lor ca niște pânze scrobite, **zăplazurile îngălbenite ale dinților**. (McCarthy/ Horea 2009: 23)*

The bolded phrases in the excerpts above showcase how human made objects are associated throughout the novel with the image of a horrendous death, especially in the case of the last image. But, for the present avenue of inquiry, the underlined snippets are even more illustrative. As a typical attraction at an American fair, the funhouse is associated with both amusement and a feeling of fear. The term “funhouse” invokes in this context a mixed feeling of both dread and anticipation,

along with the sense of un-reality. When entering a funhouse, you accept the fright but are also convinced that you cannot be harmed by the horrors you see. Read like this, “funhouse” is an intricately loaded term which is only partially defined by the Romanian “tunel al groazei”. In the translation from English into Romanian, the focus shifts from ambivalence to uncomplicated horror, and the complexity of the reference is partially lost. Likewise, the term “bog-folk” is a term which would sound very geographically specific to any American ear. The bog is associated with the American South and a certain type of cultural heritage. The Romanian translation, although well executed, misses on the finer cultural implications of the term, since “bog”, “swamp” or “marsh” would be translatable with the same Romanian word, “mlaștină”. Moreover, “bog-folk” indicates a particular kind of mummified body, a nuance which the translated phrase cannot keep. “Asemenea cadavrelor ce umpleau mlaștinile în acea vreme” is closer in meaning to “like the bodies which filled the swamp/bog in that time”, and with this back translation it is easy to understand how the cultural charge of the original description is literally lost in translation.

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### ***3. Conclusions***

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*The Road* by Cormac McCarthy offers a layered and tangled image of an American world which has found its end. With its characteristic writing style and multiple references to anything from cultural phenomena to religious images, this novel makes for a difficult assignment for any translator tasked to introduce McCarthy to a new and foreign audience.

Irina Horea’s 2009 translation seems to bend the Romanian language into the typical patterns McCarthy prefers, but the resulting translation is a mix of domesticating and foreignizing techniques. She is very careful to maintain the author’s writing conventions and, wherever possible, his word order. Horea errs on side of caution when specific vocabulary is employed and tries to render the full scope of meaning through paraphrases. Instances of untranslatable constructions notwithstanding, the translation has some vocabulary misses and a few missed opportunities. And as a general propensity, older or even archaic forms are prevalent in her translation (“răsăritean”, “chezășie”, “toiag”, “calabalâc”, “blid”, etc.)

When it comes to translating the cultural aspects of the novel, Horea is aware of the implications, but perhaps inevitably, some things are lost for the Romanian reader. In some situations, perhaps the translated text would have benefitted from a few explanatory or informative footnotes. With these supplementary notes, a diligent reader could have perhaps grasped more cultural references.

Still, to answer the questions this article raised, Irina Horea’s work represents a good starting point for the translation of Cormac McCarthy’s novels in Romanian. Her translation mirrors McCarthy’s difficult and highly emblematic style and provides Romanian readers with enough details to understand what lies beneath the words.

And, if something is indeed lost, perhaps we should heed Eva Hoffman's words and accept that translation is an imperfect tool.

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