“Constructed on no known paradigm”: Novelistic Form and the Southern City in Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree*

Andrew James Dykstal
Bachelor of Arts, Hillsdale College, 2013

A thesis presented to the graduate faculty of the University of Virginia in candidacy for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of English
University of Virginia
April 2017

This thesis is dedicated to my peers and teachers at UVA and Hillsdale College, with particular bows to Jerry McGann—my thesis director—and to Michael Levenson, both mentors whose patience, encouragement, and graceful professionalism have shaped my thinking and my aspirations; to Fred and Carol Langley and the members of the American Legion whose generosity made possible my graduate education; and to my grandfather Cornelius Dykstal, who departed the world on the day I completed this project and whose wry humor and dignity throughout the twilight of his years embody the qualities back cover blurbs are always insisting I ought to find in Cormac McCarthy's books. I would also like to thank friends who read drafts and housemates who tolerated my sometimes excessive monopolization of the kitchen table. Their days of eating breakfast amid unreasonable stacks of books have at long last come to a close.

"Like their counterparts in northern cities, business leaders in the New South came to acknowledge the social disorder of their cities as regrettable byproducts of the very urban-industrial world they had championed. Drunkenness, prostitution, disease, poverty, crime, and political corruption were all understood as symptoms of the moral and physical chaos the lower classes fell into in the modern city….It was the instinctive reaction of the business class to respond with efforts to bring order to the urban world they inhabited."

—Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 260

"Despising for you the city, thus I turn my back. There is a world elsewhere."

—Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, 3.3.134-5

Jay Aaron Beavers begins his recent treatment of God in Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree* with the observation that scholarship has yet to find a stable, dominant set of readings.[1] The problem is not one of critical quality; the various diametrically opposed positions, most obviously inheritors of Vereen Bell's anti-thematic reading and the more mythically-minded interpretations, are a natural product of a work both richly intertextual and possessed of several generic features, and yet unassimilated under any single source, specific literary tradition, or philosophical school. *Suttree*'s position in McCarthy's corpus adds to the interpretive challenge. The novel's texture differs from his previous work even as it retains parallel characters and set pieces, and it bears startlingly little resemblance to the Southwest novels in general and *Blood Meridian* in particular. Scholarship on McCarthy's overall project—already sharply divided—thus faces the question of how *Suttree* fits into this project and, more precisely, whether it marks a significant shift from his first three Appalachia novels. Even a brief survey of current scholarship suggests how unsettled criticism remains regarding *Suttree*, particularly the novel's setting in a historically accurate, detailed Knoxville which is simultaneously mimetically exact and seemingly overrun with mythic associations.

The practical consequence of extant readings is a tendency of McCarthy's Knoxville to disappear, and with it the broader issue of what an urban setting means for the investments and "southernness" of the work that concludes, until the publication of *The Road* twenty-seven years later, McCarthy's cycle of Appalachian novels. While the urban qualities of *Suttree* have not gone wholly neglected, little serious effort has been made to stand this literary Knoxville in relation to McCarthy's hinterland inventions or to understand this setting within the framework of "the southern city." A city/hinterlands

divide (or proletariat/bourgeoisie divide) may or may not be a profitable critical path, but it has been widely assumed to exist between *Suttree* and older works, and even when unpursued as such has likely contributed to a general neglect of examining the role Knoxville plays in the shape of the novel. This is startling, as the Knoxville of *Suttree* is an intensely particular locale that blends mimetic with imaginative work at several registers, and an engine of complexity which contributes significantly, in my judgment, to the novel's formal properties.

There is, however, one extant piece of scholarship which provides a starting point for parsing the city: Louise Jillett's "Flânrie, Vagrancy, and Voluntary Exile in *Suttree*." Jillett examines the character possibilities specific to a successor to Poe's London, tracing the thread through Whitman's New York and the Paris of Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin before arriving in McCarthy's Knoxville (Jillett 145). There,

> we meet with familiar urban and pastoral archetypes: the Ragpicker, the Railroader, the Junkman, the Goat-herder; as well as a few new ones, specific to the American landscape: the Indian, the African American Crone; and of course, we have Suttree himself: the Flâneur (though he is not named as such). (145-6)

The diversity of these figures, dense on the ground of Knoxville, magnify Suttree's class-crossing motion, and the various spaces they inhabit—or are excluded from—provide wide-ranging sites of encounter for Suttree himself, foregrounding his reactions (160-1). Jillett focuses her analysis mainly on memory, but her work suggests the role a persistent past and the capacity for mythopoeia could play in Suttree's engagement with his surroundings. This possibility—that McCarthy's Knoxville is foremost a set of sites of

encounter—opens a series of interpretive avenues that, followed to their conclusion, promise to make sense of *Suttree*'s setting.

First, a focus on the interplay between Cornelius Suttree and Knoxville, coupled with McCarthy's own time in the city and the autobiographical valences of *Suttree*, echoes at a different register Lewis Simpson's argument in his *The Fable of the Southern Writer*, which I will revisit in more detail later in the argument. For now, one of his notes on Faulkner is instructive:

> Indeed, by virtue of a civilized commitment to letters that was still taken for granted, the writer of the twentieth-century American South bore a relation to the large body of writing, imaginative and critical, which for five centuries recorded the complex story of the conquest of the older community by the modern order—and in so doing created out of the drama of differentiation the large, many-faceted secular myth of the self's encounter with history…. As demonstrated by his efforts to express and define it in his early writings and by his complex realization of it in the creation and peopling of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi (a more audacious undertaking than Hardy's creation and peopling of Wessex), Faulkner's involvement in this myth is the major aspect of his career. (Simpson 97)

The (re)creation and peopling of Knoxville, if Knoxville is indeed implicated in "the conquest of the older community by the modern order," marks McCarthy's engagement with a southern mythos which includes the city/hinterlands divide and the rise of urbanization following the fall of the plantation South. *Suttree*'s intertexts, some of them

concerned with failure and decline, certainly suggest this reading. I contend that Knoxville's role is more complex, but the idea of authorial encounter remains central to the following argument—as does a vision of the South as caught in its own history.

The second avenue invited by Suttree's motion of encounter and eventual flight touches on Anthony Dyer Hoefer's *Apocalypse South*. Hoefer traces the form and figure of apocalypse through the southern literary imagination in various incarnations, using the twinned possibilities of judgment and salvation to theorize, among other things, space and place in the South. In his treatment of *Light in August*, Hoefer frames the perceived fragility of Yoknapatawpha before the threat of miscegenation as the motive underlying the racial violence in the novel, and the factitious nature of this fragility provokes revelations beyond the reach of the novel's characters:

> The sum of this multifaceted engagement with Apocalypse is a drive to reconsider history—to reinterpret the signs of the times. This jeremiad, both particularly southern and American, imagines the collapse of a society unwilling and unable to accept the revelations offered by the myriad catastrophes of its past, and it suggests that the consequences of this cycle of disasters are not limited to the South. (Hoefer 24)

Here, Hoefer argues that fragility and instability stem from belief in imminent, destructive change—while that belief itself is responsible for a series of failures. The possibility of sudden change figures prominently in *Suttree* scholarship, usually in readings of the destruction of McAnally Flats to allow construction of an expressway. And the novel is indeed replete with ruins or signs of past social structures already passing into memory. The idea highlighted by Hoefer that most informs my reading of

McCarthy's Knoxville, though, is the false impression that social or personal or political change necessarily annihilates older forms. An impression of the city as the successor to the rural or agrarian is an oversimplification, as is the general identification of the city, and its attendant industrialization, as the antagonist of all features of the pre-bellum South. The city is, in various ways, an avatar of the North, but this does not exclude from its boundaries traditionally southern vices and virtues. In Hoefer's formulation, a southern jeremiad can be an American jeremiad. Nor does an impression of imminent change necessarily have a basis in reality—efforts to politically or philosophically defer an imaginary collapse can produce exactly the signs and symptoms taken as sure proof of the coming apocalypse. The moment of revelation or judgment might be imaginary, and the historical or eschatological arc it implies may remain forever incomplete.

From the complexity of McCarthy's Knoxville, the city's relationship to foregrounded authorial figures in the work itself, and the deferred or ironized apocalypses throughout, I argue that the urban setting of *Suttree* operates less in distinction to an agrarian/hinterland alternative than as a state of perpetual incompleteness, a loosely structured pastiche within which McCarthy builds an account of writing southern literature not reliant on a static, historically frozen image of the South. To this end, I set *Suttree* in relation to McCarthy's previous novels with an eye toward how his artistic techniques evolve in an urban context, examine the persistent past which lingers in McCarthy's Knoxville and other *Suttree* locales, read the resultant indeterminacies in light of Knoxville's "southern" position, and contextualize all these features in light of the novel's narrative peculiarities. In the interest of brevity, significant sections of *Suttree* remain unaddressed, and my goal is not to produce a totalizing or exclusive reading.

Rather, I have chosen the passages and figures which most clearly illustrate how Knoxville works—and how Cornelius Suttree, as a creator and subject of literature, works within it.

Before launching into the argument, I would like to offer two caveats, both concerning the interpretive structures invited by a phrase like "the southern city." First, *Suttree* draws together such southern anxieties as racism, classism, poverty, economic change, and intergenerational tension. As already implied by Hoefer these are not exclusive to the South. Nevertheless, they tend to find themselves embedded in a larger opposition of North and South, the North representing at once the forces of progress and hegemony, the South those of reaction and resistance. The difficulties this macro-level binary poses for scholarship are persistent and perhaps ineradicable. Current investment in the "the global south" as an alternative category to the hegemonically-charged "third world," illustrates the issue, as now the critic is faced with the problem of consciously delineating a global north: a position of ascendancy typically occupied by the very persons and institutions undertaking the problem of definition and thus inextricable from the games of power and complicity they hope to describe. Jennifer Greeson elegantly summarizes this problem early in *Our South*: "Since a large proportion of global development discourse is generated out of U.S.-sponsored organizations, and indeed out of New York City, these presumably neutral geographic terms bear the weight of the entire literary history laid out in this book" (Greeson 12).[2] Northern/Southern is no more a neutral, balanced pair than is industrial/agrarian. History, prior usage, and the position of the writer all emerge to trouble the terminology, and due diligence requires awareness that taxonomy does not exist independent of either its objects or its originating impulses.

When I discuss "the South," then, I accept the problematic side of this methodological tradition along with its advantages, and I would like to note at the outset that a variety of "southern" vices are not confined to the South at all—racism and exploitative economic systems, for example, have their northern incarnations.

Second, and more briefly, I should comment that the following argument includes references to such fixtures of southern literature as decaying mansions, intergenerational strife, and problems with time and history. While I doubt the treatment of these as southern tropes is particularly controversial, I would like to emphasize that they are not here taken as essential fixtures. The rest of this aside may be skipped without compromising the intelligibility of my treatment of *Suttree*, but a brief digression will help illustrate my concerns and why I am open to the idea of McCarthy's Knoxville as a less determined space. Upon his retirement from the University of North Carolina English faculty in 1996, Jerry Leath Mills published an article in *The Southern Literary Journal* entitled "The Dead Mule as Generic Signifier in Southern Literature of the Twentieth Century." Mills considers various attempts to locate the essential southernness of Southern literature, most of which he finds either too literal-minded to be useful or too speculative to remain bound to the heuristically established school of American Southern writers and works. In response, he offers his own criterion:

> My survey of around thirty prominent twentieth-century Southern authors has led me to conclude, without fear of refutation, that there is indeed a single, simple, litmus-like test for the quality of Southernness in literature, one easily formulated into a question to be asked of any literary text and whose answer may be taken as definitive, delimiting, and final. The test is:

> *Is there a dead mule in it?* As we shall see, the presence of one or more specimens of *Equus caballus x asinus (defunctus)* constitutes the truly catalytic element, the straw that stirs the strong and heady julep of literary tradition in the American South. (Mills 4-5)

What follows is hilariously funny if perhaps a shade macabre, as Mills describes the demise of roughly two hundred fictitious mules across a range of authors and works, concluding with the acknowledgment that he has but laid the foundations of more penetrating scholarship. Mills' satire was a significant influence on my mindset throughout the writing of this thesis, an influence I would be remiss not to acknowledge. I am content to work without a set of essential features or definitive structural center, and when I call something southern in these pages, I refer more to a constellation of family resemblances than to rigid, static generic categories.

Leaving Yoknapatawpha County

An anonymous *Times Literary Supplement* review met McCarthy's debut novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, with a much-quoted backhanded compliment: that McCarthy might "write a much better novel than this: but he will not do so while he confuses his Tennessee with Yoknapatawpha County" ("Americans in Debt" 185). Subsequent and admittedly much better novels lend some credence to the point, though Faulknerian notes persist through *Outer Dark* and *Child of God*. Several of McCarthy's preoccupations have their counterparts in Faulkner: circular journeys (*As I Lay Dying*), unconventional or incestuous amours (*The Hamlet, The Sound and Fury*, *Pylon* [set in a fictionalized New Orleans], and *Absalom, Abasalom!*), anxious relations between spontaneous and legal violence (*Light in August*), and extraordinary sexual violence (*Sanctuary*), for example. But *The Orchard Keeper*, set in Red Branch, Tennessee, is most obviously akin to Yoknapatawpha County; both locales are marked by cultural struggles to adapt to futures which have already arrived, by problems of inheritance, by the plights of significantly post-bellum rural communities as yet poorly integrated into ever more national and global economies. Red Branch carries a sense of belatedness and of lingering agrarian identity, and it is around this identity that McCarthy composes the novel's elegiac moral investment. In subsequent works, portrayals of the rural South and its denizens become more complex, and with *Suttree* McCarthy shifts his focus to 1950s Knoxville and a middle class protagonist. Not coincidentally, *Suttree* is also the novel in which Faulknerian tropes—the decaying manor house, doomed love affairs, and an unhealthy attention to clocks—become visible as consciously quoted devices embedded in a substrate. The split from Faulkner, though, begins earlier. Even construing

Yoknapatawpha County as broadly as possible—as a rural South defined by belatedness and entanglement with its own past—McCarthy's novels begin their departure in *Outer Dark*, gaining complexity and distance from Faulkner's vision of the South. Accordingly, an attempt to set *Suttree* in relation to its rural counterparts requires attention to how both *Outer Dark* and *Child of God* diverge from the world of Red Branch. If McCarthy's South was ever Faulkner's, it does not long remain so, and *Suttree*'s protagonist and environs must be contextualized not within a static and franchise-like fictional world but as following a series of distinct artistic experiments.

Setting Faulkner aside for the moment, I frame the first stage of contextualization as a question: Given their style and content, are McCarthy's first three novels set in the rural South as opposed to the urban South? *The Orchard Keeper* seems to be. The novel follows young John Wesley Rattner, the elderly mountaineer Arthur Ownby, and a bootlegger named Marion Sylder responsible for the death of John Wesley's father. The setting is definitively fixed in place and time: the key locations index from Knoxville and include recognizable features of the Tennessee countryside. For all its Biblical language and figures, *The Orchard Keeper*'s situation in American history and geography does not disappear beneath them, and more to the point, its central conflicts concern the relation of a rural, agrarian world to a more industrial and urban present. An early sentence frames the situation:

> Sundays the Knoxville beer taverns were closed, their glass fronts dimmed and muted in sabbatical quietude, and Sylder turned to the mountain to join what crowds marshaled there beyond the dominion of laws either civil or spiritual. (McCarthy, *The Orchard Keeper* 16)

The entire novel might be summarized as a (re)turn to the mountain, the urban and progressive alternatives having been unmasked as unattractive or corrupt. The return is literal; the novel opens in a Red Branch cemetery finally revealed to be the site of the adult John Wesley Rattner's reverie. In William Prather's reading, everything between these bookends is John Wesley's recollection or construction (Prather 38-9). The overall effect is an elegiac tone toward ways of life independent of state interference and urbanization/industrialization, a tone made possible by a sense of temporal shift. McCarthy is fairly evenhanded in his allocation of grotesqueries, but the book's sympathies are widely agreed to lie with an agrarian ethos articulated by representative figures. John Grammer, David Paul Ragan, and William Prather offer persuasive readings which reflect the novel's sometimes complex engagement with agrarian interests, all of which fit within a mimetic relationship to the history surrounding eastern Tennessee in the 1930s. The landscape may be psychological insofar as it emerges from John Wesley's memory, but it remains realistic.

Outer Dark presents a more complex case. The book is difficult to position in time. Grammer places the events of the story after the invention of firearms but before internal combustion engines (Grammer 35-6). Peter Josyph records Wesley Morgan's more specific guess of "early 1800s" (Josyph 46), a date problematized by the presence of all-in-one shotshells. Nor does the setting offer much spatial precision. Questions about origin and destination recur throughout *Outer Dark*, and the answers are alternately vague or confusing to the inquirer, producing circular or painful dialogue. While the novel's journeys occur within eastern Tennessee, the exact locale is frequently uncertain and always irrelevant to plot. *Outer Dark* follows Rinthy Holme's attempts to find her

infant son, the product of an incestuous relationship with her brother Culla—who, in turn, pursues the wandering Rinthy. Other characters' interactions with the two are strangely unmotivated, Rinthy usually being received with automatic kindness, Culla usually meeting unjustified suspicion and hostility. Three mysterious figures, practitioners of similarly unmotivated violence, recur throughout as a grotesque anti-Trinity. A herd of swine rushes over a cliff in repetition of one of Christ's exorcisms. Other peculiarities include inexplicable lactation, cannibalism, and a violent river crossing more suited to the Styx than to any terrestrial waterway. Such would suit the title; the phrase "outer dark" appears three times in the Matthew account of Jesus' teachings as a description of hell (Matt. 8:12, 22:13, 25:30).

Even a cursory reading of the novel suggests a high degree of allegoresis, and the melancholic and elegiac notes of *The Orchard Keeper* are absent. *Outer Dark* describes less a literal location than a spiritual or existential condition, and if the plot echoes the searching mother of *Light in August*, its structure more resembles a dark retelling of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.[3] Attention to key passages reinforces this sense of detachment from reality. When Culla Holme crosses a river and encounters the anti-Trinity, he refers to his origins. Their leader replies that "We ain't in them places" (McCarthy, *Outer Dark* 174), one of several apophatic, self-referential, or circular turns in the conversation, during which one of the three figures discourses on namelessness and another coerces Culla into trading boots. The little clearing takes on a surreal, claustrophobic quality even within the larger sustained nightmare of the rest of the plot, and it could be anywhere or nowhere, evoking something between Sartre's *No Exit*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and the predatory hell envisioned by Bosch. The sheer

number of possible comparisons—most of them more philosophical or aesthetic than generic, let alone specifically southern—suggests the degree to which the world of *Outer Dark* is unmoored from the reader's historical reality. At the conclusion of the novel, having accomplished nothing on his journey, Culla wonders "why a road should come to such a place" and, reflecting on his ignorance of the road's end, thinks that "someone should tell a blind man before setting him out that way" (242). A journey which begins "in quiet darkness" (5) ends nowhere in particular, having described a series of roads without destinations or fixed coordinates, their only meanings bound up in ironic repetitions of allegories. The failure to arrive at a (celestial) city—in fact, the total omission of major cities—could plausibly read as a rejection of any allegorically satisfying endpoint to the journey, but neither this absence nor the novel's setting among the rural poor invites engagement with the southern conflict between agrarian and industrial outlooks or with the wider North/South rift this conflict frequently represents. What is central in *The Orchard Keeper* is incidental in *Outer Dark*, whose objects and characters have no interiority or reality apart from their roles in a deliberately broken allegorical scheme. *Outer Dark* is set less in the rural South than among the ruins of myths no longer able to preserve their integrity. The novel may be Gothic, but it is a peculiar flavor of Gothic universal within the Western literary, philosophical, and theological worlds, which could be set in the woods of Eastern Europe or England in several different centuries and achieve similar effects.[4]

Child of God, which describes the progressively more extreme depredations of Lester Ballard in rural Sevier County, also incorporates broken fragments of myth, but it returns—in its very last pages—to the historical fixity of *The Orchard Keeper*. Sevier's

removal from Yoknapatawpha County thus follows two distinct axes. The first, in an echo of *Outer Dark*, is mythic. Lester Ballard's sexual predations, retreat through a series of caves, attempted lynching, and eventual "resurrection" invite comparison to several myths. Chad Jewett likens Ballard's exploits to Hades' rape of Persephone. Woods Nash reads him as an anti-Christ. Ashley Craig Lancaster links Ballard to the Frankenstein's Gothic monster, who in turn echoes the Greek myth of Prometheus. More broadly, the novel's depictions of death and rebirth, loosely connected to seasonal cycles, support parallels to whatever dying god the reader cares to name. And, as in *Outer Dark*, the mythic parallels are subversive: Ballard is eventually rendered powerless in his own underworld, is a darkly parodic Christ at most, and is eventually, upon his death and dissection, revealed as perfectly ordinary: if he is monstrous, we are denied any physical or metaphysical etiology. The second axis is temporal: Lester Ballard, in his sequential dispossessions and retreat to a system of caves, slips backward through time, withdrawing from the world of 1960s Sevier County in favor of an atavistic state within which he can re-derive his own society by founding an underground necropolis, composing his discovered or murdered citizens' corpses in imitation of the world above.

And "withdraw" is precisely the correct word. These mythic or atavistic moves index off a realist community and cast of characters. McCarthy's Sevier County, unlike the world of *Outer Dark*, has a human population, a visibly functioning government and economy, and a relationship with the wider world. Its denizens are capable of humor. Their actions have discernible motivations. Further, they are capable of judgment on the central figure of the story; the third-person narrative is broken by interludes of first-person accounts describing Lester Ballard from a local perspective. For his part, Lester

Ballard may be based on real figures; Lydia Cooper notes similarities to James Blevins (I cannot help but recall, perhaps irrelevantly, the ill-fated Jimmy Blevins of *All the Pretty Horses*) and Ed Gein, and she reads this engagement of the real world as a provocation to the reader to confront evil as a fact of reality (Cooper 48). Most critics note the importance of the narrator's early aside that Lester Ballard is "a child of God much like yourself perhaps" (McCarthy, *Child of God* 4). For all its use of mythic structures and resonances, *Child of God* keeps stylistic and narrative anchors in the realist tradition, and its final return to a realistic, historical, and even scientific framework is central to the novel's thesis. In a kind of fearful symmetry, Ballard's own corpse is instrumentalized, becoming a cadaver at a Memphis medical school:

> He contracted pneumonia in April of 1965 and was transferred to University Hospital where he was treated and apparently recovered. He was returned to the state hospital at Lyons View and two mornings later was found dead in the floor of his cage. His body was shipped to the state medical school at Memphis. There in a basement room he was preserved with formalin and wheeled forth to take his place with other deceased persons newly arrived. He was laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and the brains removed. His muscles were stripped from his bones. His heart was taken out. His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations. At the end of three months when the class was closed Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with others

> of his kind to a cemetery outside the city and there interred. A minister from the school read a simple service. (193-4)

While *Child of God* echoes the essentially negative revelations of *Outer Dark*, it does so through the recovery of realism rather than through collapse into mythic free-fall. Ballard is re-absorbed into society posthumously—hence the "simple service" accompanying his burial—and the revelation that there is nothing physically aberrant about him, balanced against the possibility of "monsters worse to come," composes the ineffable problem of evil alongside the efficacy of science and the normal operations of a functioning community—in this case, one complex and inclusive enough to feature a state medical school. The rural South, together with the urban South as represented by Memphis, stand opposite a mythic and atavistic world, framing the conventional Gothic pattern of removal and return.

Consequently, the population of Sevier County and Lester Ballard become competing everymen in addition to representations of real(istic) societies and persons. Any reading of the novel must account for this chimeric assemblage of genres. Marcus Hamilton, responding to Duane Carr's concerns about stereotypes in McCarthy's southern novels, writes,

> While this often unsettling combination culminates in *Child of God*'s treatment of Lester Ballard as both individual and symbolic everyman, *The Orchard Keeper* and *Outer Dark* also reveal similarly difficult experiments in the overlapping of these [realist, Gothic, allegorical, and mythic] narrative modes. In all three novels, the intrusion of the mythic into the real complicates superficial criticism of McCarthy's portrayal of

> the lower-class white and reveals the subtle but critical identification with and compassion for the lower classes that undergird his fiction. (Hamilton 28)

Hamilton ably describes the difficulty in relegating the first three Appalachia novels collectively to any single narrative mode or tradition, and while he stops short of arguing that the lower-class whites of Sevier County, afforded complete development and subjectivity through their narrative interludes, offer their own everyman identity (the set of human beings who have somehow to survive the Lester Ballards of the world), his description of McCarthy's novels as "experiments" suggests the intellectual flexibility which must accompany any attempt to read McCarthy through any prior genre—the medieval morality play included. Most obviously, each novel contains a different relation between the mythic and real—moral struggle in *The Orchard Keeper*, annihilative mythic supremacy in *Outer Dark*, and the real as the setting for the mythic in *Child of God*. Only in *The Orchard Keeper* does the mythic/real negotiation approach a structural parallel to a rural/urban binary, and even this approach is imperfect; the world of the mountaineer is just as "real" in most respects, as that of modernity, and the periodic digressions into such topics as "wampus cats" do not detract from its immanence any more than the religious and classical echoes in Ballard's underground journeys reduce a Memphis medical school to pure metaphor.

McCarthy's first three novels, then, do not present a unified rural front in opposition to the predominately urban world of *Suttree*. What they offer is a set of distinct temporal/generic horizons—memorial, mythic, Gothic, and atavistic—in various degrees and combinations. The immediate effect of these horizons on the reader is a

sense of controlled anachronism pervading each work. In *Suttree*, though, the anachronisms cued by incursions of the memorial, mythic, Gothic, and atavistic are embedded in a setting which is not only realistic but intensely present. The novel continues the generic experimentation of its predecessors, presenting an urban world not as an alternative to the rural but as an enclosure for processes formerly operating on the rural. More simply, Knoxville provides a visible position from which the literary imagination works, and its realism is both substrate and object of Suttree's evolving subjectivity. Thus *Suttree* is less a departure from the previous three novels than a point of arrival; we can find, either repeated or deconstructed, components of McCarthy's earlier works in his Knoxville, and their new situation reflects an expansion of McCarthy's artistic repertoire and an added layer of complexity in his approach to genre. Some of these complexities necessitate an engagement with urban/rural divides, but such divisions are not the most significant fault line between McCarthy's first novels and *Suttree*. *Suttree* is urban, and its urban qualities are significant—but they are so primarily in relation to artistic and formal techniques rather than to rural alternatives.

Fragments and Ruins: Knoxville and Mental Landscapes

Suttree's opening offers the first clues to Knoxville's role as a repository of other forms, a role it assumes alongside immediate narrative complications:

> Dear friend now in the dusty clockless hours of the town when the streets lie black and steaming in the wake of the watertrucks and now when the drunk and the homeless have washed up in the lee of walls in alleys or abandoned lots and cats go forth highshouldered and lean in the grim perimeters about, now in these sootblacked brick or cobbled corridors where lightwire shadows make a gothic harp of cellar doors no soul shall walk save you. (McCarthy, *Suttree* 3)

The opening is playful even for McCarthy—the oblique "you," the lyric excess, the shipwreck metaphor, the invocation of the Gothic, the overwrought euphony of "cellar doors." Even better, the "clockless hours" seem to reflect a specific time of day, the "lightwire shadows" can be taken in two nearly opposite senses, and the narrative perspective excludes itself by placing "you" alone in the setting. Paradoxical multiplicity is present from the beginning, and it continues through sentences describing this "Encampment of the damned" as a

> city constructed on no known paradigm, a mongrel architecture reading back through the works of man in a brief delineation of the aberrant disordered and mad. A carnival of shapes upreared on the river plain that has dried up the sap of the earth for miles about. (3-4)

The past is present in the city—in fact, depending on what is meant by "dried up…for miles around," it might be present nowhere else, and its forceful self-assertion differs

from the recollections of *The Orchard Keeper*. Similarly, various mythos appear via intertextuality—most obviously in the allusions to *Heart of Darkness*, *Inferno*, and *Hamlet*—but both receive only glancing attention before the narration moves on. Though "Beyond in the dark the river flows in a sluggard ooze toward southern seas…," the description rebounds, turning back toward the city itself, remaining within "the world within the world" (4). And of course "The rest indeed is silence" comes at the beginning of a paragraph—and at the beginning of the novel itself (5). The final sentence of the opening, "Ruder forms survive," summarizes the paradox: everything is simultaneously present, and while degrees of refinement or decay are visible, the ironic turns of language preclude immediate decisions about the novel's underlying themes—if such themes even exist, a point Vereen Bell would dispute. We are presented at the outset with a set of objects and forms but not the tools to arrange them sensibly.[5]

This is precisely the condition in which Cornelius Suttree finds himself when he abandons his wife and young son to live in the slums of McAnally Flats, taking for his habitation a houseboat on the river. Even so, Suttree attempts to make sense of his world, an ongoing project which has inspired various existentialist readings. Philosophy aside, excursions from the multivalent Knoxville into more straightforward spaces or generic habits tend to occur as shifts into Suttree's memory or imagination. A retreat into memory, for example, transpires when he visits his Aunt Martha's home and examines a photo album, eventually encountering a photograph from the youth of a dead relative: "That's Elizabeth again, said the old lady. That's as old a picture as there is, I reckon" (130). The photograph, if we take Martha's pronouncement at face value, represents the far limit of a specific type of record—a horizon beyond which the photographic past

cannot exist in the present. Within this horizon, negotiations between artifact and memory become possible, and Suttree's recollection of Elizabeth's funeral creates a moment of disruption in the usually third-person narration: "Between the mad hag's face and this young girl a vague stellar drift, the wheeling of planets on their ether trunnions. Likenesses of lost souls haunt us from old chromos and tintypes brown with age…I would not cry. My sisters cried" (130). This is a decidedly southern moment—the sense of haunting, the appearance of an intergeneration framework, the cosmic texture of time. Walking through the ruins of a southern manse, Suttree experiences a similar moment of haunting recollection, this time of a racehorse's speed being described as "…a thing against which time would not prevail" (136). The scene invites comparison to Quentin Compson III's own difficulties with time and clocks. Certainly the icons are Faulknerian; the decaying manse and the store of memory maintained by a family matriarch fairly demand a page or two (or several hundred) of analepsis. But, after a paragraph of blended mythic and historical imagining provided by Suttree himself, the narrative departs the confines of Suttree's head and moves on: "Suttree went out through the kitchen and through the ruined garden to the old road" (136). While not as opaque as *Blood Meridian*'s relentlessly paratactic "they rode on," Suttree's departure from the manor and immediate recovery by the world of 1950s Knoxville reflects a similar refusal of the novel to be contained or defined by any single episode. Memory, being but one of the available frameworks adumbrated in the novel's opening, is contained even as it operates on objects and spaces. The past is present and mediated through both physical objects and subjective recollection, but it is not radically transformative of Knoxville or—in this moment—Suttree's psychological makeup.

This pattern of encounters with historical detritus continues when Suttree and one of his drinking companions find themselves seated at a table made of an old gravestone displaced by the activities of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

> Richard ran a yellow hand beneath the marble slab, up among the twobyfours in which it sat. It's a gravestone, he said.
>
> What does it say?
>
> Richard smiled nervously, the paleblue clams in his eyesockets shifting under the useless lids, his ears tuned like a fox's to the world as he hears it. He slid his palm beneath the table and fished a cigarette from his shirtpocket with the other hand. Eighteen and forty-eight, he said.
>
> Nineteen ought seven. (369)

Richard's discomfort is general and undirected, and Suttree views the stones as a curiosity, suggesting that they move and read another one:

> They rose and fumbled their way to the next table and sat again, Suttree steering him by the elbow through the chairs.
>
> Who are they? said Richard.
>
> They're just stones. They came off an island down the river before it was flooded.
>
> Richard shook his head. Thisn dont say who.
>
> It must say something.
>
> He read the stone again, he shook his head. It's wore, he said. Near naked.
>
> His face wrinkled….We ought not to be doin this. Drinkin off folks' gravestones.

Why not?

I dont know. (369-70)

The first gravestone actually belongs to William Callahan, presumably an ancestor of Billy Ray Callahan, a friend of both Richard and Suttree. The general unease Richard experiences could therefore stem from either an abstract ethical problem or the specific transgression of drinking off that particular gravestone. In either case, a physical artifact of the past is present in Knoxville but not assimilated: the question of exactly what the dead, their works, and their memorials are *for* remains open. The TVA, rather than annihilating the past beneath artificial lakes, displaced it, and now it is drifting untethered in Knoxville. Richard is sensitive to the problem but lacks the categories to articulate the exact nature of his anxiety. Suttree, for his part, lacks the blind man's ability to read the stones by touch and is oblivious to the personal connection until Richard explains it. Even then, the reader is left uncertain as to whether Suttree views the grave markers as more than "just stones" following this revelation. Suttree's reaction is not described, but the next time he sees Richard, he avoids conversation: "The blind man called again but he could not find his way down to the river and Suttree turned his back on him and his cries and went in and shut the door" (373). The moment, like the stones themselves, is difficult to read—largely because the reader is denied access to Suttree's attempts at interpretation.

This dependence on Suttree to convert objects or settings into symbolic entities is a key feature of the work, one that continues across *Suttree*'s engagement with myth. Just as the work's *Orchard Keeper*-like plays with memory become visible more in Suttree's interpretive and recollective moves than in the material things themselves, so too does the

novel's play with myth occur at one remove. Though James Potts makes fine points in his account of *Suttree*'s ties to Irish myth, and Rick Wallach ties Suttree's journey to the complex associative net of *Ulysses*, locating a dominant mythic structure is surprisingly difficult. *Outer Dark* is plausibly a journey through some sort of ironized Judeo-Christian hell, but *Suttree* resists mythological unification from without, and when Cornelius Suttree mythologizes from within, results vary. Even considered apart from Suttree's asides and visions, the novel's riverside setting and engagement with suicide suggest parallels to Dante's *Inferno* and to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and "The Dry Salvages." Through *The Waste Land* the reader likewise encounters the figure of the Fisher-King (Suttree does spend rather a lot of time fishing) and analogs to *Suttree*'s mysterious, impossible-to-place apparitions, who might be borrowed from a variety of mythologies. Actually pinning down the Tennessee River's textual antecedents, though, is surprisingly difficult—one can make more or less equal cases for Dante's Acheron and Styx, the classical Styx, Eliot's Thames and Mississippi—if it is, in fact, the Mississippi that appears in "The Dry Salvages"—or, if one is feeling particularly clever, Mark Twain's Mississippi. The figure of the ruined city, with its denizens picking through the rubble, is less ambiguously resonant with *The Waste Land*, but the parallel is not particularly useful as an interpretive tool. As Bell would be quick to point out, the people and places of McCarthy's Knoxville are too fully themselves to suffer absorption into an external paradigm.

Bell's objection aside, the passages which most directly invoke an archetypal landscape of ruin traffic with Suttree's subjectivity. For example:

> Suttree passed by, in these days moving through the streets like a dog at large. Such old things strangely new, the city seen through eyes unscaled. The repetition of its own images had washed out and leveled it and he saw upright and arrant on the dead alluvial grimmer shapes, city of his remembrance a ghost like him and he himself a shape among the ruins, prodding dried artifacts like some dim paleontrope among the bones of fallen settlements where no soul's left to utter voice at what has passed. (246)

Here we find possible allusions to most of the sources above—*The Waste Land*, "The Dry Salvages," and most interestingly *Inferno*, which opens the possibility that no soul may testify to the state of ruin. But nothing in the immediate landscape itself demands these comparisons; the links are all products of Suttree's chosen metaphors. Even when the passage returns to description of the city itself, a clear line remains between the objects or people and Suttree's account of them:

> The galley of indolents draped among trashcans and curbstones pointed and croaked. Give it to your mammy, she told them, and the black mummer mimed masturbatioin at her, two hands holding an imagined phallus the size of a lightpole while the watchers hooted and slapped their knees. To Suttree they appeared more sinister and their acts a withershins allegory of anger and despair, clutches of the iniquitous and unshriven howling curses at the gates and calling aloud for redress of their right damnation to a god who need be interceded with bassackwards or obliquely. (246)

The only gates of hell here are conjured by Suttree's allegory, and his subsequent musings highlight the very absurdity of the vision—the allegory itself is "withershins" or counter-clockwise, backwards, inverted.[6]

Nevertheless, Suttree retains the suspicion that he is living in hell. The suspicion has more to do with his own history, though, than with literal fixtures of the landscape, as indicated by his first sustained musings on his spiritual condition:

> No, for we were alike to the last hair. I followed him into the world, me. A breech birth. Hind end fore in common with whales and bats, life forms meant for other mediums than the earth and having no affinity for it. And used to pray for his soul in days past. Believing this ghastly circus reconvened elsewhere for alltime. He in the limbo of the Christless righteous, I in a terrestrial hell. (14)

Suttree's angst involves a twin who died in utero, and his reaction is predictably paradoxical: he draws a distinction between the living world and the "elsewhere" of the afterlife, then recombines the two in a "terrestrial hell." This conflation of earth and hell continue throughout Suttree's imaginings. Consider three examples:

> By the side of a dark dream road he'd seen a hawk nailed to a barn door. But what loomed was a flayed man with his brisket tacked open like a cooling beef and his skull peeled, blue and bulbous and palely luminescent, black grots his eyeholes and bloody mouth gaped tongueless. The traveler had seized his fingers in his jaws, but it was not alone this horror that he cried. Beyond the flayed man dimly adumbrate another figure paled, for his surgeons move about the world even as you or I. (86)

> Outside darkness has begun and the hounds' voices are chimes in the distance that toll seven and cease. They wait for the waterbearer to come but he does not come, and does not come. (136)
>
> Somewhere in the gray wood by the river is the huntsman and in the brooming corn and in the castellated press of the cities. His work lies all wheres and his hounds tire not. I have seen them in a dream, slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravening for souls in this world. Fly them. (471)

Each vision is complex enough to support a wealth of readings, and they suggest different metaphorical engagements—death as a surgeon or cannibal, the hunting hounds of a southern gentleman, the hounds that roam Dante's wood of suicides. Usually they share only tenuous connections to anything literally present in McCarthy's Knoxville. The first is prompted by a hangover and temporary incarceration, the second by the abandoned manse already discussed above. The third is a notable exception, provoked as it is by an "enormous lank hound…like a hound from the depths" (471). This is the last paragraph of the novel, and it marks one of the few moments when the third-person narrator and Suttree reach perfect agreement. That this final alignment is even possible, though, suggests the complexity of the relationship between Suttree's in-world subjectivity and the reality described by the narrative voice.[7]

Knoxville, then, remains a location for myth rather than a mythic location. The same holds true for non-urban locales in *Suttree*. As in *Child of God*, deep excursions into atavistic and mythic spaces can include some degree of physical remove. In *Child of God*, a series of caves supplies the alternative space. In *Suttree*, the woods near

Gatlinburg serve a similar role, though by the end of the episode it becomes clear that physical locations matter less than states of mind. Suttree spends approximately forty days in the wilderness one autumn,[8] and toward the end of his experience, "He crouched like an ape in the dark under the eaves of a slate bluff and watched the lightning" (287). His slide back in time is accompanied by elven apparitions and fairy lights (284-6) and visions of prehistoric creatures with carnival-like company:

> A mesosaur followed above on a string like a fourlegged garfish heliumfilled. A tattered gonfalon embroidered with stars now extinct. Nemoral halfworld inhabitants, figures in buffoon's motley, a gross and blueblack foetus clopping along in brogues and toga. Attendants attend. Suttree watched these puckish revelers pass with a half grin of wry doubt. (287-8)

These are figures of Suttree's starvation and inner demons, not features of the Gatlinburg woods. The temporary departure from Knoxville is significant, but the different set of nightmare visions is more a reflection of Suttree's mind operating on a location than it is of the location itself. In the city, Suttree tends toward infernal visions involving judgment and pursuit. In the woods, he tends toward fairy tales, prehistory, and balladic narratives. Certain threads remain, but he frames them differently. Drowning, for example, is a physical, extant fact in Knoxville. In the wilderness, poetry intervenes:

> In old grandfather time a ballad transpired here, some love gone wrong and a sabletressed girl drowned in an icegreen pool where she was found with her hair spreading like ink on cold and cobbled river floor. (283)

Presumably Suttree is recalling one of the myriad variations of "The Lass of Roch Royal." And, in keeping with the pattern of *Suttree*, "The Lass of Roch Royal" has nothing to do with most of what follows.[9] The tilt toward woodland hauntings, both human and elven, suggests that different locations do tend to produce different occasions for Suttree's imagination, but the resultant ideas and visions remain unstable—like the city, the woods are a sufficiently open environment for Suttree to play associative games and so invoke a wide range of images, which is what allows flying mesosaurs and carnival processions to appear in the same vision. Nor do the woods wholly exclude his visions of judgment; one of Suttree's most memorable woodland imaginings is nearly indistinguishable from those that plague him in the city:

> Some doublegoer, some othersuttree eluded him in these woods and he feared that should that figure fail to rise and steal away and were he therefore to come to himself in this obscure wood he'd be neither mended nor made whole but rather set mindless to dodder drooling with his ghostly clone from sun to sun across a hostile hemisphere forever. (287)

The ghost of the twin returns, and with it the "hostile hemisphere" and "obscure wood" of a hell akin to Dante's. The passage also includes a prescient echo of *Blood Meridian*'s famous early massacre scene, whose violence is worked by "those vaporous beings in regions beyond right knowing where the eye wanders and the lip jerks and drools" (McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 55). The threat, in Suttree's wilderness sojourn as in the deserts of northern Mexico, is a form of insanity located beyond all possibility of self-expression—but this is an artifact of human consciousness and action, not of place simply.[10]

Further evidence of the significance of human consciousness over location is Suttree's eventual epiphany, which occurs not because of a new surrounding or some cataclysmic change to the world of Knoxville but as a near-death experience complete with vivid hallucinations. The apocalyptic moment is heavily ironized, as it invokes death and judgment while Suttree truly experiences neither, except at the hand of his own unconscious, and when he awakens, nothing about his overall situation has changed. A key turning point of the novel is therefore severed from the physical world, unfolding instead within a condition of temporary madness—"down in the nightworld of his starved mind" (McCarthy, *Suttree* 460). In fact, the turn likely relates to Suttree's discovery of the space between his imagined judgment and the physical world:

> He touched a hand attending him and smiled at its withdrawing. The freaks and phantoms skulked away beyond the cold white plaster of the ceiling. A tantric cat that loped forever in a funhouse corridor. He'd see them again on the day of his death. (461)

Lying in a hospital bed, Suttree distills his metaphorical figurations to the personal but universal apocalyptic prospect of individual history ending in death. While he still occasionally connects his haunting to features of the outside world, consciousness of memory and invention become more prevalent at this point in the novel, and his reactions to places become more controlled.

Location, then, is not so much generative of mythic resonance as receptive to it. The landscapes of Suttree's mind are not to be confused with those of his environs, and while meaningful analysis of the distinctions between McCarthy's wilderness and his Knoxville is possible, it builds on narrower ground than the reader might expect. The

woods of Gatlinburg, like Knoxville, are a repository of historical detritus: the ruins of a New Deal-era CCC camp, an old logging road, and a bridge with a history of accidental violence (285). The scene suggests an amber-like trapping of artifacts, but the readings these features invite do not coincide with Suttree's psychological experience. An attempt to build on the city/hinterlands divide must work from the narrative distinctions between, for example, the old manse and the CCC camp. Both lie in ruins and neither appears again in the novel. The present objects have so little traction within the world of *Suttree* that interpretive work beyond noting their presence risks wandering into a void. It is possible to read the woods themselves as a radically prior space—pre-Christian, pre-colonial, pre-industrial, et cetera. But even setting aside the extant signs of modernity still found in the wood, this is less an urban/hinterlands distinction than a more general human/natural distinction. The river running through Knoxville invites the same reading, indicating how broad the categories become before they fit accurately—and how many different mythic or symbolic references a reader can impose on the locales in question. McCarthy allows the reader to undertake a project parallel to Suttree's, and we are free to mythologize whatever features of the landscape we choose, but the resultant readings are difficult to draw together into a larger whole or even a useful interpretive lens. As in Suttree's own case, the experiments tend to tell more about the reader than the object ostensibly being read.[11]

History and Form: Knoxville as a Southern City

If I seem to belabor the point that the geography of *Suttree* stands at some remove from Cornelius Suttree's imagination, so does the book. *Suttree*'s shifts in register and tone are as dramatic as anything McCarthy writes before *Blood Meridian*, and the most disorienting of these involve descriptions of the world in elaborate, mythic, and Faulknerian convolutions set alongside straightforward prose and realistic dialogue—to say nothing of the conventionally southern fixtures interrupted by visions of airborne mesosaurs and irruptions of E.E. Cummings. These interruptions stem from two different sources: Suttree's visions and the operations of at least one discrete narrative intelligence. Both Suttree and this intelligence negotiate a geography unlike those of McCarthy's previous novels, as Knoxville contains former experiments in history and myth without being absorbed by them or—as in *Child of God*—relegating them to a geographically distinct space. Knoxville retains an openness and indeterminacy unavailable in, for example, the mountains above Red Branch or the nightmare world of *Outer Dark*.

It does, at least, for Suttree and McCarthy's narrative intelligence. In keeping with previous novels' habit of negative revelations, *Suttree* communicates much through what is absent or unrealized, and through the gradual collapse of the Knoxville community in which Suttree embeds himself. The urban world does not supersede the flaws of the rural or successfully assert itself against predations with their roots in past social structures. McCarthy's Knoxville invites a continuation and expansion of John Grammer's anti-pastoral reading of McCarthy's early novels, a continuation made possible by the recognition that *Suttree* is more an expansion and reframing of the artistic techniques deployed in its predecessors than a radical shift. The urban setting, with its accumulation

of historical objects and its mythological uncertainty, functions as a pastiche, not as a complete alternative to a rural or idealized pastoral history. The pastiche is visible to Suttree and the narrative intelligence present throughout the work, but to the figures caught in their moments, each discrete episode is a trap, a site of failure with limited or non-existent alternatives. The form of the novel, which at times becomes jarringly episodic, contrasts with the plight of the people within it—with the peculiar exceptions of Suttree and his nameless narrative accomplice. This tension arises from the condition of McCarthy's Knoxville, and it contributes to the novel's metafictional and genre-challenging properties.

Grammer introduces his argument for McCarthy's anti-pastoral alignment with an example from *Suttree*:

> If in general terms the ruined mansion in *Suttree* represents the southern past, more specifically it refers to the failure of the pastoral dream with which the South has identified itself since the settlement of Virginia. This was a dream, essentially, of an escape from history….The South, guided by pastoral and republican imperatives, has persistently attempted to portray itself as a region somehow outside of time and change, a permanent refuge of order in a chaotic world. (Grammer 30-1)

Grammer's reading is cogent, and its treatment of McCarthy's first three novels as diagnoses is persuasive, though tempered by *The Orchard Keeper* and slightly troubled by the sheer strangeness of *Outer Dark*. In *Suttree*, the tension between stasis and flux may be slightly more complex than represented by Grammer's reading. Grammer points out, correctly, that Suttree distinguishes himself from many of his compatriots in his

ability to imagine the world differently. But Suttree is also in a position of power relative to most of his friends, and other, unseen actors are still more capable of effecting controlled change. Nor is stasis/change perfectly analogous to desirable/undesirable. The southern agrarians are not popularly dismissed as having failed to survive in "a chaotic world." Objections to a work like *I'll Take My Stand* start with racism and classism and work outward from there, the implication being that the southern stance either ran afoul of some natural law or was on the wrong side of history. The slaveholding South is not odious because of a Gnostic heresy but because, from a modern perspective (and certain Northern contemporary perspectives), it was doing something *wrong*, whether it was clinging to the wrong moment or transgressing some ostensibly transcendent standard. The accidents of stasis, more than stasis itself, offer grounds for practical or moral objections. These accidents can be historically persistent, but their human agents do not disappear—though they may, as *Suttree* suggests, lose consciousness or succumb to false ones. Treatment of *Suttree* thus requires attention to exactly which realities are continuing a static existence and which are evolving or being redesigned.

Further complicating the situation is the way in which these realities tend toward the background until set in relation to Suttree or the narrative intelligence, and how, as background, they remain tied to blurred distinctions between urban and southern traits. Perhaps because of the "unfreedom" of so many characters, the bleaker facts of the world tend to remain rather flat. They exist, but they do not seem to imply anything, and their most interesting properties have more to do with the history of literary approaches to both urban and Southern vices than with stasis and flux. This history has the added effect of merging different types of social problems, resisting attempts to delineate particularly

"southern" cases of stasis. Startling parallels are possible between northern urban centers and the plantations of the South, particularly as imagined by reformers such as William Lloyd Garrison. The imaginary link between urban North and agrarian South is, in the case of Garrison, a rhetorical instrument. His *Magdalen Facts*, as described by Jennifer Greeson, provides the northern conceptual anchor:

> These catalogues brought together in a single volume tens or even hundreds of exposé vignettes, culled by an editor from a wide range of sources (including newspapers, fiction, testimonials, interviews, and rumors), and assembled with little attention to continuity of style or chronology. Such volumes in the 1830s thus stood as strikingly modern assemblages, raising expectations of coherence and then immediately undermining those expectations as each item in the catalogue proved related to the next only in terms of shock value, discursive mode, and alleged location—the book bound only by the claim that all the hidden horrors it documented took place within a single metropolis. (Greeson 134)

Garrison's work bears a striking resemblance to *Suttree*, which runs for long stretches as grotesque or carnivalesque accounts of Suttree's exploits in bars and brothels. Said exploits end variously with Suttree being urinated on (McCarthy, *Suttree* 79), soiling himself as he is being knocked unconscious with a floorbuffer (187), taking up with a prostitute who eventually suffers a mental collapse (411), and eventually contracting typhoid, the progress of which is recounted in nauseous detail (448-51). Nor is Suttree an exceptional epicenter of suffering:

> A season of death and epidemic violence. Clarence Raby was shot to death by police on the courthouse lawn and Lonas Ray Caughorn lay three days and nights on the roof of the county jail among the gravels and tar and old nests of nighthawks until the search reckoned him escaped from the city. What dreams did he have of the lady Katherine? Suttree saw her one evening in the Huddle with Worm Hazelwood. She had no need to travel about the country robbing people. And news in the papers. A young girl's body buried under trash down by First Creek. Sprout Young, the Rattlesnake Daddy, indicted for the murder. (416)

The sins of the urban North, whether products of industrialization or urbanization in itself, are repeated in the urban South in McCarthy's Knoxville as a cycle of sexual and alcoholic excesses described in loosely connected episodes. But Garrison, in documenting—or embroidering—the sins of the urban North, creates a vocabulary of moral outrage that, with suitable anecdotes, translates to the plantation South:

> As Garrison described the operations of southern slavery for his readers in terms of their very own nightmare visions of their industrializing cities, he inaugurated a truly immediate abolitionist discourse for readers at the center of U.S. print production. By the beginning of 1833, he removed the colonial-tropical engravings from his pages; at the same time, he shifted the focus of his textual content from analytical editorials and moral catechisms to graphic anecdotes of sex and violence. (Greeson 129)

Specifically, Garrison's publications focus on sexual assault of (black) slaves by (white) masters, entangling racism and power dynamics with violations of sexual norms and the

patriarchal nuclear family (128-9). The echoes of this linkage throughout the southern literary imaginary, with its fixations on incest and miscegenation, suggest the resonance of the chord struck by Garrison. If they are equally at home in the city, the implication is that the sins of the rural South, at least as formulated by popular abolitionists, are sins of the South simply; the plantation is the location but not the essence of the offense. And insofar as they closely resemble the problems of the urban North, these offenses become American or, more plausibly, global. The urbanization and industrialization of the South, which began to accelerate rapidly following federal investment during World War II, did not eradicate any condition essential to either Jim Crow or its associated horrors.[12] The city is perfectly compatible with the most problematic aspects of the southern legacy—the question is one of exact form.[13]

That McCarthy's Knoxville remains overshadowed by classism and racism is therefore a foregone conclusion. More interesting opportunities for reading appear when key structural features of the novel come into play. Consider, for example, racism. Initially, Knoxville's racism reads as a simple historical fact. Gene Harrogate, a newcomer to the city, encounters the division within "Knoxville's sadder regions" (McCarthy, *Suttree* 99) after several hours of wandering: "He'd come from the dwellingstreets of whites to those of blacks and no gray middle folk did he see" (101). Harrogate himself, though starving, unemployed (and unemployable), possessing a criminal record, and without connections, drinks from the "White" fountain three paragraphs later (101). Such is the backdrop of much of the novel. But race penetrates matters beyond setting, and the most striking scene of racial violence involves narrative choices as much as it does the actions of characters in-scene. Ab Jones, a black man and

one of Suttree's compatriots, is discovered drunk by Suttree late at night, and during the latter's attempts to escort him home, the two are stopped by police. Ab insults the officers, and he is subsequently chased down, shot, and beaten to death. While the incident involves clear racial motivations—the police are far more interested in Ab than in Suttree even before they recognize him as a wanted man—the acrimonious exchanges between Ab and the police are devoid of racial epithets (440-3). It is the narrator who refers to Ab twice simply as "the black" and once as "like some huge black pervert" while he struggles with his antagonists (442). The image of Jones coming "to bay" when cornered by his pursuers is similarly charged, simultaneously conjuring an animal image—a fox or boar brought to bay during a hunt—and the historical figure of the escaping slave being chased with hounds (442).[14] McCarthy's narrative intelligence, operating beyond Suttree's envelope of awareness in the later stages of the altercation and eventual killing, reinforces and complicates the racial dynamic in play, drawing to the surface what would otherwise require inference. A fact of McCarthy's Knoxville becomes, through the language of the narrator, a contingent fact of *Suttree*. This language, which has ample precedents throughout the novel, could denote a conscious racism—or at least indelicately packaged racial awareness. The narrative intelligence contrasts with the automatic, seemingly reflexive racial violence of the police, and thus preserves the space between the world of the book and voice(s) interpreting it. Within the narrator's attention to race and choice of metaphor lies an awareness of alternative possibilities and motivations—a set of descriptive choices reflecting the possibility that the world could be otherwise, either in fact or in interpretation. b

At the same time, the events playing out reflect an unconscious re-enactment of racist violence: “A bloody dumbshow and no word spoken” (442). The episode follows a script known to all its participants and unfolds with a sense of inevitability. Ab Jones is radically constrained and so, in a sense, are the police who kill him. He mounts a violent and somewhat effective resistance, issuing a direct challenge to their authority. Preserving that authority depends on a display of excessive force. This is not simply a copy of pre-bellum oppression, but it is an evolution, as the changes in society and even the physical environment of Knoxville relative to the plantation South inflect the operation of power. The newer rituals surrounding events like Ab Jones’ murder and the historically accurate renderings of urban segregation reflect a society evolving methods and practices to contain the perceived threats of racial equality and integration. But on an individual level, the characters involved do not approach the narrator’s consciousness of historical parallels and the possibility of shedding them. While I hesitate to follow Grammer and argue that Ab Jones and his killers have placed themselves beyond history, the weight of their confrontation indicates how totally they are contained by their moment. McCarthy’s Knoxville organically incorporates racism, and while the narrator maintains some distance from its (re)enactments, actors in the text have no clear avenues of escape. The narrator is free. Most of the characters are not.

The issue of class produces similar effects, though most center on Suttree rather than the narrator. Suttree is conscious of class, and the issue first enters the foreground through his relationship with his father. In the father/son divide as elsewhere, class remains a powerful but vague construct. Traces of the southern investment in distant ancestry remain in memory if not in living persons, though exactly which criteria are in

play is more difficult to discern. Speaking to his maternal uncle, Suttree relates both his father's and grandfather's views on the subject:

> Look, said Suttree, leaning forward. When a man marries beneath him his children are beneath him. If he thinks that way at all. If you werent a drunk he might see me with different eyes. At it is, my case was always doubtful. I was expected to turn out badly. My grandfather used to say Blood will tell. It was his favorite saying….I'm saying that my father is contemptuous of me because I'm related to you. (19)

Both class and a broadly genetic understanding of character are represented here, but exactly what Suttree (or his father) means by "beneath him" is unclear. Suttree's father is a member of the middle class, and his outlook on social power is fairly pragmatic:

> In my father's last letter he said that the world is run by those willing to take responsibility for the running of it. If it is life that you feel you are missing I can tell you where to find it. In the law courts, in business, in government. There is nothing occurring in the streets. Nothing but a dumbshow composed of the helpless and the impotent. (14)

This is a departure from "Blood will tell," at least in part, and it carries suggestions of meritocracy. The word "dumbshow," later repeated in Ab Jones' final moments, is particularly striking, as it implies that the distinction between those who run the world and those who merely inhabit it is a function of performance and language. It is among the helpless and impotent than Suttree spends most of the novel, and the exploits of his crew certainly feel like a show; their conduct is extreme, their personas colorful, and their taste in whisky extremely questionable: "Small twigs, debris, matter, coiled in the oily

liquid. He shook it. Smoke rose from the yellow floor of the bottle" (22). They also assume personas and seem to spring fully-formed into being, reinforcing the theatrical texture of their world. Matthew Potts, writing on acts of mercy in *Suttree*, questions whether they are any more authentic than Suttree himself:

> In the end, all relations reduce to distantly observed moments and static reifications. Notably, all the characters of McAnally Flats use false names or nicknames. The history of each of these characters is obscured from both the reader and from fellow characters in the novel. Suttree's own history is perhaps the most obscure and mysterious of all. (Potts, "Mercy" 71-2)

The key distinction, though, is that their roles are genuinely constrained by their socioeconomic reality and even an organic part of it; the ability to slip from name to name has incontestable survival value when one is living as a fugitive from the law, for example. Suttree's performance is an affectation.

Thus, strictly speaking, it is Suttree who performs theatrically in these contexts, complicating efforts to place him in any given class. As Jillett's reading notes, he is both free as a flâneur and free not to be one (Jillett 143,6). He, unlike his drinking buddies, has alternatives. He repeatedly declines to leave the city and pursue other options, though he is educated and still has the support of several family members. As Daniel Traber, Robert Rudnicki, and Forrest Robinson note, Suttree is looking for something among the poor of McAnally Flats, but he cannot be fully assimilated or his bourgeoisie origins erased as long as his condition is self-inflicted. Suttree has realistic options and ready access to other ways of being. His companions, generally, do not, and by the end of the novel, most

are dead or imprisoned. Those who fare better are absorbed—perhaps—into blue collar jobs elsewhere:

> J-Bone was still in Cleveland. Others from McAnally gone north to the factories. Old friends dispersed, perhaps none coming back, or few, them changed. Tennessee wetbacks drifting north in bent and smoking autos in search of wages. The rumors sifted down from Detroit, Chicago. Jobs paying two twenty an hour. (McCarthy, *Suttree* 398)

This summary account of part of the McAnally cohort appears during one of Suttree's temporary absences—this time, while he maintains a parodic middle class relationship with a prostitute named Joyce who supports him financially. Even in this relationship, though, Suttree is merely playing a part, and he eventually abandons Joyce without visible compunction or regret. His faux respectability is twin to his faux poverty, and in both cases, to borrow Rikard's language, Suttree is essentially an impostor.

In the meantime, the community of McAnally Flats is deteriorating under its own excesses, police opposition, and finally urban reorganization: the Flats are demolished to build an expressway. Though the novel depicts the results of their operations, it never enters the law courts or business or government, and Suttree remains both irrelevant to them and largely indifferent to their works. Nor does the existence of nebulous classes create a useful system for structuring the novel or its world in any transcendent sense. Nicholas Monk, describing the impact of modernity—a term he is careful to avoid reducing to a monolithic block—allows for the role of chaos and indeterminacy:

> *Suttree*'s Knoxville is an example of an environment whose existence is predicated on the infinitesimal acts of the local in the context of the

> massive preglobal pressures of modernity that bear down and project randomly into the novel at crucial moments. (Monk 33)

The key word is "randomly." The reader never gains access to clear reasons or processes or mechanical, deterministic accounts of why the world evolves as it does. An analogy to radioactive decay suggests itself—the event is bound to occur, but randomness and a certain vagueness of causality are inescapable. This vagueness is compounded by Suttree's distance from any implied center of action. The changes of the novel transpire around him, and his performance has no discernible effect on their timetable or scale.

So, as much as it plays with issues of class and the difficulties of social mobility, *Suttree*'s reach is defined and paradoxically constrained by Suttree's habit of wandering between classes without ever fully rejecting or embracing his ways out—whether through suicide or finding a job other than subsistence fishing. When Suttree finally departs Knoxville after his mysterious epiphany, his status relative to the class structures around him remains uncertain. Having accumulated various trinkets from the river and its people, he leaves them behind and takes "for talisman the simple human heart within him" (468). And yet, upon watching the demolition of the Flats, he thinks, "He knew another McAnally, good to last a thousand years. There'd be no new roads there" (463). Memory outlasts the thing remembered, and that recollection presumably accompanies Suttree beyond Knoxville. He is outsider, performer, and witness, and in these offices becomes a more immediate interpretive problem than the class structures in which he moves. His insistence, after nearly dying of typhoid, that "there is one Suttree and one Suttree only" (461) remains problematic in light both of these offices and the presence, at this moment

and throughout the work, of two rather different Suttrees: Suttree and *Suttree*. Multiplicity survives.

And so the attempt to read McCarthy's Knoxville as "the southern city" tends more toward instability than resolution. It is an assemblage of historically and mythically rich objects and fixtures, the very density of which precludes a totalizing mythology or metanarrative. As a city, it contains the history of the rural and repeats similar conflicts. Its inhabitants are trapped and, with rare exceptions, unable to imagine or attain significant changes in status or outlook, while its protagonist and narrator both offer such varied and chaotic interpretations and myth fragments that, arguably, changes in status and outlook are the only thing they have to offer. Knoxville fails to become a sanctified successor to the old South, but precisely what it is instead remains an open question, and even the visible sins of the old South are rendered unstable by the uncertain roles of the narrator and protagonist in relation to them. They can be articulated as historical facts within the world of the novel, but arrival at *meanings* is more challenging.

In light of the difficulties associated with interpreting McCarthy's Knoxville, the temptation is to escape it in favor of the historical Knoxville whose physical landscape (and in some cases inhabitants) McCarthy reproduces in his novel. Peter Josyph and Jack Neely both offer scholarship on the relationship between the historical Knoxville and McCarthy's work, and Josyph in particular is skeptical of attempts to involve philosophy or intricate readings:

> Interesting how critics are often more comfortable the farther they are from the facts of McCarthy's fiction. They love trying on philosophical systems. That's fine, but you've no idea how contented I am to read

> *Suttree* as *a book about a guy*—a guy who a guy like me has a lot in common with in what he's trying to do with the time that he's alive. (Josyph 46)

This is hardly a simplification—Josyph has, in words of one and two syllables, reiterated with impressive freshness the commonly accepted position that *Suttree* depicts an existential crisis—and the "facts" of McCarthy's fiction do not become less potentially sweeping when accompanied by awareness of their material counterparts. Josyph, with his knowledge of Knoxville geography and firsthand experience of many locations described in *Suttree*, is still drawn into symbolic claims:

> After the brief prologue, *Suttree* begins with an animated description of the worlds that are under and around these great old bridges over the Tennessee. You get the feeling that Suttree is always rowing under them. And the sense that it's more than just bridges up there: it's civilization. (49)

The possibilities of everything encountered in *Suttree* are difficult to ignore, and the particular force of each thing in itself does not exorcise intertextual links or historical parallels or mythological types. The critic is thus left contemplating the book while caught between equal and opposite problems: the anti-thematic properties described by Bell, and the overabundance of interpretative opportunities afforded by the world of the novel in its becoming.

Suttree, Suttree, *Suttree*, and McCarthy: Exactly as Complicated as it Sounds

Given the problems described above, *Suttree* can be described as a mess, and so it has been, in milder terms, by a variety of critics.[15] But it can be described more fruitfully as a series of stages in a writing process frozen and presented simultaneously, a perspective suggested by the novel's long gestation alongside three completed works. When *Suttree* is viewed as a book about writing—and specifically about writing in the South—several otherwise problematic pieces slot into place, not least of them the tension between the mimetically exact Knoxville and the narrative and artistic turns which so complicate the reader's access to it. The work offers an account of its own existence and the conditions for its creation without falling entirely within the *Künstlerroman* genre, instead approaching metafiction through a self-referencing arrangement of narrators and matter.

Two of the narrators are Suttree—at least for a given value of Suttree. One narrates from a position after the events of the novel, and the other, whom I will call the character Suttree, is permitted asides within the world of the novel proper. Again, a parallel to Dante's *Comedy* suggests itself, in which Dante figures as both narrator and pilgrim, and as narrator can, for example, recall what the pilgrim forgot in the waters of the Lethe atop Mount Purgatory. In *Suttree*, the introduction is delivered by Suttree to himself, a letter of self-defeating advice reflective of his typical preoccupations and metaphors within the novel proper:

> The night is quiet. Like a camp before battle. The city beset by a thing unknown and will it come from forest or sea? The murengers have walled the pale, the gates are shut, but lo the thing's inside and can you guess his

> shape? Where he's kept or what's the counter of his face? Is he a weaver, bloody shuttle shot through a timewarp, a carder of souls from the world's nap? Or a hunter with hounds or do bone horses draw his deadcart through the streets and does he call his trade to each? Dear friend he is not to be dwelt upon for it is just such that he's invited in. (5)

The instruction not to think of death for fear of letting him in echoes the threat of suicide present throughout the book and, more tellingly, matches the final paragraph:

> Somewhere in the gray wood by the river is the huntsman and in the brooming corn and in the castellated press of the cities. His work lies all wheres and his hounds tire not. I have seen them in a dream, slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravening for souls in this world. Fly them. (471)

Set beside each other, these two passages indicate a narrator who has already decided, as the character Suttree does at the end of the novel, to flee death. The narrator is simultaneously, though, revisiting death's territory; the speaker of the opening ends his monologue "Here from the bridge" (5), an ominous position given the suicide who leaps from a bridge immediately before action of the novel begins and is recovered in the first scene (9-10). As we are never given an opportunity to re-situate this narrative Suttree, the moment of decision at the bridge rail remains a constant.[16] But at the same time the decision has always already been made. That the book continues for four hundred and seventy-one pages—and even ends on a positive note—is compelling proof of the ongoing choice to live. Everything that the character Suttree encounters and imagines culminates in the being of *Suttree* and a man who—unlike the Quentin Compson analog

found with his watch still running (10)—does not jump off a bridge. By the time there is "one Suttree and one Suttree only," the character Suttree has converged with the narrator Suttree, and whether the closing paragraph is delivered from the same physical location as the introduction is a matter for speculation and largely irrelevant, as it is presented from the same existential viewpoint.

The novel's resistance to theme and refusal to dwell artificially on southern tropes reflects this personal evolution. McCarthy's Knoxville, as experienced by the character Suttree and recollected by the narrator Suttree, is mediated through an autobiographical process, one which resists absorption into, for example, pure southern Gothic literature. Knoxville is a setting for encounters which inform the known final condition of a single man, and this known final condition places a human horizon on the role southern icons—or any other symbolic objects—can play. Lewis Simpson, in his *The Fable of the Southern Writer*, frames the effect clearly:

> What is missing, one senses, is the literary power generated by the encounter between the imagination…and the historical society of the South. The tension produced by this encounter—the quarrel within the self of the artist and between the artist and society that Yeats saw as the essential condition of great poetry and drama—had charged the notable writers of New England in the nineteenth century, but it had been largely absent in writers living in the semiclosed society of the nineteenth-century South. When the literary imagination of the South at last became openly responsive to the tensions of the southern historical situation, it was capable of creating the famous scene in *Absalom, Absalom!* in which

> Quentin Compson protests to Shreve that he does not hate the South….
>
> (Simpson xv-xvi)

The narrative Suttree is a fictional storyteller, but the same description applies. In Suttree's articulation of his experience of photo albums, decaying mansions, repurposed gravestones, and bridges over the river, it is each encounter that matters rather than the thing itself, and the narrative habits of the book reflect this. Having been composed as a novel, Suttree's life takes on the feel on someone gathering material for one, and the character's oft-repeated "I've got to go" (132, 169, 206, 237, 245)[17] take on a structural counterpart in the narrative's immediate departure from objects without regard for some imagined external calculus of significance—or the editing procedure an author might follow in writing a consciously southern novel. *Suttree*—within the frame of narrator Suttree's project—arrives at a condition in which authorship is possible, not one in which a second, polished artistic project has reached completion. Accordingly, it is exactly as full of detritus and unassimilated matter as the character Suttree's experience of McCarthy's Knoxville, and the peculiar attempts of the character to build a mythos into his experiences are as much the products of an immature artist as they are the outworking of an existential crisis. In a self-referential loop, *Suttree* includes such gaps between landscape and mental experience precisely because it is about and by the sort of person who would leave those gaps intact when recounting his life.

Suttree thus contains, in descending order of artistic intervention, Suttree as a retrospective narrator with an autobiographical project and discrete position, the character Suttree's conscious accounts of his own experiences, and the narrative Suttree's accounts of physical and historical experiences (a category in which I include Suttree's

hallucinations in intoxication or illness). To rephrase in Simpson's language, the novel aspires to present a historical situation, a figure implicated in this situation, and that figure's conflict with both the situation over time and with himself—conflict which defines his progress and emergence as an artist. The pastiche-like qualities and general plotlessness of the novel (considered as narrator Suttree's project) reflect narrative interests paralleling the character Suttree's choice to live in McAnally Flats, and the selection of human portraits is no more or less systematic than Suttree's movement through that world. Gene Harrogate, the most obvious example, remains a fixation of the narrator for the same reason that Suttree keeps being drawn into his schemes: he fascinates Suttree, and trying to build for Gene a larger role than this risks missing the reality that his status as comic relief extends with equal efficacy into character Suttree's life and narrator Suttree's account of it. The range of narrator Suttree's interests and his refusal to discriminate among them in the interest of unity thus leaves the novel with its rough, unfinished texture and absence of dominant themes. As an author, Suttree has refused to specify final, organizing judgment of his own relation to reality, embracing instead a wilder, unsystematized affirmation of how he has arrived at the possibility of continued being.[18]

This still leaves the matter of McCarthy's Knoxville, and with it McCarthy's own role in the non-Suttree narrative intelligences at work in the novel. I stop short of calling *Suttree* a *Künstlerroman*, because it is as much about the figures who do not attain Suttree's artistic position as it is about Suttree, and because a layer of artistry operates throughout the novel to which neither the narrator nor character Suttrees gain access. One can comfortably imagine Stephen Daedalus writing all of *Portrait of the Artist as a*

Young Man. It is more difficult to picture Suttree as the sole mind behind *Suttree*, and we are not meant to. Jay Beaver notes one autobiographical note in *Suttree*, matching Suttree's lapsed Catholicism to McCarthy's, and James Potts is significantly more specific in his account of Irish myth:

> Furthermore, there are at least some biographical similarities between the author, the king, and the title character: Suttree's irresponsibility recalls McCarthy's own failed marriages, his abortive academic career, and his wanderings in Knoxville; Suttree's abandonment of his family for the McAnally Flats slums is perhaps intentionally paralleled with the Irish king's habit of wandering as his kingdom declined. Moreover, since McCarthy was at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville shortly after Vernam Hull's 1949 article on King Cormac was published in PMLA, he could easily have found it on the Library's periodical shelves. (Potts 25-6)

The person of McCarthy is hard to eliminate from the novel, both in his similarity to his protagonist and his habit of building his characters around real people he knew in Knoxville during and after his time at the University of Tennessee.[19] But McCarthy's presence in the novel is less a parallel to Suttree than a periodic interruption of a higher authorial presence, one possessed of a still more complete view of the pastiche than the narrative Suttree's. To McCarthy, after all, *Suttree* is less straightforwardly autobiographical, and it contains more invented elements than does Suttree's version, most obviously Suttree himself.

These interruptions and hints of artistic intervention also denote possibilities outside narrative Suttree's frame of reference. In the only moment definitively narrated

by a subjectivity apart from McCarthy's bodiless presence or an iteration of Suttree, the farmer who shoots Harrogate for sexually assaulting his watermelons is capable of regret and, crucially, of imagining acting otherwise:

> Now beg God's mercy, lecher. Unnatural. Finger coiled, blind sight, a shadow. Smooth choked oiled pipe pointing judgment and guilt. Done in a burst of flame. Could I call back that skeltering lead. (McCarthy, *Suttree* 35)

Consciousness, within *Suttree*, accompanies the ability to imagine alternatives.[20] Suttree himself seems paralyzed by this capacity. The farmer's case is milder, as it invites consideration of the novel without Harrogate. The farmer's cognizance of possibilities brings into focus the creative choices prior to the narrative Suttree which populate both Suttrees' world. Doubled figures produce a similar effect. The suicide in the first scene marks a way *Suttree* could have failed to come into being. A prostitute named Ethel has a tattoo referring to a Wanda distinct from the one Suttree eventually has a relationship with (75), a doubling which reinforces the contrast between Joyce—the prostitute who takes Suttree in—and Wanda—the young girl with whom he develops a less mechanical, if no less troubling, romantic bond. And the corpse Suttree discovers in his own bed before his departure from Knoxville, which has apparently produced some confusion in the neighborhood as to whether he is still alive, reflects another averted outcome (469-70).[21] These moments, and the light architecture they lend to an otherwise picaresque novel, indicate the present of a mature artistic intelligence capable of quietly introducing elements of order. While much of *Suttree* is recounted, these outcrops of literary expression feel composed, and they gesture both toward the other, radically different

novels *Suttree* could have been with different initial creative choices and toward the polished, unified novel it could have become had such been the author's intent. They also contrast the mimetic side of McCarthy's Knoxville against the sculpted, controlled side, adding another dimension to the pastiche and rendering it yet more complex through the possibility of order.

This formal property distinguishes *Suttree* from works with geographic similarities. Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* both spring to mind as useful examples. Both are set in the urban South shortly after major wars, both feature young male protagonists struggling to make sense of the world, neither of whom are satisfied with the financial security or the prospect thereof, and both of whom have relationship problems with women. Both novels show automobiles as failed avenues to freedom alongside Catholic iconography and carnival-like urban gatherings and processions. Hazel Motes of *Wise Blood* even has a Harrogate-esque sidekick and double in the form of Enoch Emery. But unlike these novels, which are informed by two visions of Catholicism (in Percy's case, one inflected by existentialism, in O'Connor's by the Gothic), *Suttree* refuses to allow its features and setting to suffer subordination to a single paradigm. The kind of openness represented by *Suttree* is not an inevitable product of its urban setting but a deliberate choice to permit traits of the city—and the South—to influence its form. As a category, "the southern city" is general, and the variety in novelistic representations is corresponding broad. Entries along these continua are plentiful (Robert Penn Warren, William Faulkner, Martin Delany, James Agee, Kate Chopin, John Kennedy O'Toole, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur, Wendell Berry, and other have written novel-length works set partially or entirely in southern cities) but

McCarthy stands out in his successful foregrounding of urban qualities without becoming trapped in either simply cosmopolitan or city/hinterlands concerns or allowing his city to remain a passive setting.

McCarthy's Knoxville, with its present past, tension between spontaneous and designed orders, and perpetual incompleteness, mirrors the structure (and refused structure) of *Suttree* itself. This complexity allows *Suttree* to contain variations on McCarthy's previous literary experiments without committing to them, instead leaving them open as possibilities available within an unfinished novel which coexist alongside the objects his experiments describe, contextualize, and mythologize. Pinning *Suttree* into a stable binary by calling it a novel of the southern city rather than of the South simply defeats the purpose of its urban setting—the southern city is distinct from the agrarian/rural/hinterland aspect of the South precisely because it lacks both a stable identity and claims of a stable identity. Insofar as the novel partakes of Simpson's autobiographical impulse, it does so with the caveat that the South is not a fixed entity, taking as its point of contact the historical legacy playing out in contingent and immediate ways. The historical Knoxville is a site of McCarthy's encounter with the South, and his fictional counterpart reflects the continuing history of the region as a literary imaginary not confined to set icons or lost (anti)pastoral landscapes. McCarthy's Knoxville is visibly becoming, alongside its protagonist, without being destroyed or completed, its position in the southern apocalyptic tradition that of the "now and not yet.

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[1] McCarthy's first three novels have instigated their due share of disagreements, but these disagreements are at least intelligible as such, stemming from different analytical choices within a shared frame of reference. More or less everyone agrees, for example, that *The Orchard Keeper* relates to the pastoral tradition, that its conflicts concern two models of civilization, and that it touches such traditionally Southern tropes as problems of

inheritance, male initiation, and tempered elegy. The conversation unfolds with these reference points in mind. In contrast, my attempt to locate the shared tenets of *Suttree* criticism tended toward commonalities so general as to be nearly useless, and I eventually abandoned the effort with only two shared postulates: *Suttree* is unusual among McCarthy's Appalachia novels in its urban setting, Knoxville, and its protagonist, Cornelius "Buddy" Suttree is unusual among McCarthy's Appalachian characters in his educated, bourgeoisie background.

The significance even of these distinctions remains open to debate. Vereen Bell, for example, prefers to read *Suttree* as a continuation of a single world developed across McCarthy's earlier Appalachian novels, setting and character choices notwithstanding:

> Cornelius Suttree is more sophisticated and reflective than McCarthy's other characters, and he lives in the city rather than the country; but the world that he must make his way in is ultimately the same as theirs, and he achieves his marginal transcendence of it only to the degree that he possesses a more effective array of human resources than they do. (Bell 70)

Bell's relegation of city life and personal sophistication to the background of a novel about "death and affirmation" (69) distills geography and history to a background of facts: "Whatever is happening in *Suttree*, the world in itself is always insisting upon its own reality; it is there to be dealt with as itself and not simply at the subordinated service of ideas" (77). City and bourgeoisie origin exist, but they do not represent larger forces, trends, or philosophical tenets. They inform the action of the novel, not some plane of argument operating beneath diegetic reality. Not that the critic must embrace Bell's anti-thematic approach to elide the differences between *Suttree* and earlier works; a reader can take Bell's contention that the city and country are "ultimately the same" world to its conclusion, ignoring the concrete distinctions between *Suttree*'s environment and the rural settings of its elder siblings, and still mount theoretical readings on the low but common ground of a genre claim (shared realism, participation in the southern Gothic tradition, naturalism) or a proposed philosophical or religious matrix (existentialism, Gnosticism, Catholicism, protestant Christianity).

While the approaches described above produce different flavors of critical analysis, they share one consequence—a tendency to bracket the novel's distinguishing characteristics as such in favor of other interests. Consider Thomas Young or Lydia Cooper, each of whom fits *Suttree* into a broad category before undertaking an analysis tangential to its situation in Knoxville. Young notes *Suttree*'s urban setting and the educated, upper-middle class background of its protagonist and even suggests that the two are closely related (Young 97-9), but then embarks on an analysis of Cornelius Suttree's existential condition which has little to do with either of these properties. Similarly, Lydia Cooper offers a sound reading of the Gothic across McCarthy's early works but declines to dwell on the implications of setting Gothic preoccupations and thematic structures within a city (Cooper 48-50). The pattern is fairly consistent: while critics have noted the potential significance of the novel's focus on Knoxville and its middle class protagonist, only rarely have these characteristics attracted sustained critical treatment, and only recently have scholars begun to elucidate the relationship between urban setting and bourgeois character first sketched by Young.

Even these newer readings, though, focus more on individual and/or economic class divisions than a possible city/hinterlands divide. Gabe Rikard offers a heavily Foucauldian reading of Suttree's status and decision to leave his privileged lifestyle to live along the Tennessee River: "Though Suttree leaps into this underclass social situation, he is an impostor, a bourgeois slummer whose presence in the Flats calls attention to the dynamics of power" (Rikard 120). Rikard avoids flattening Knoxville into another blank backdrop for existential crises—all too often the critical fate of McCarthy's landscapes—but the totalizing tendencies of Foucault trouble an otherwise thoughtful reading. For example, Rikard recounts Knoxville's role in the post-bellum "hillbilly diaspora" (88), which I suspect is a key feature of the novel, but then shifts toward an account of how capitalism, figured within a broadly Marxist history, assimilates the Appalachian mountaineer, and Knoxville disappears from his reading. Likewise, Rikard's sharp observation that the roads of Knoxville reflect asymmetric power relations (61) stops short of a crucial point: the roads that help generate circular or futile journeys throughout McCarthy's early novels (and, for that matter, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*) actually have intelligible origins and destinations due to their embedding in Knoxville's patchwork social geography. Rikard's work exemplifies Beavers' original point: *Suttree* is sufficiently complex and sprawling to afford ample space for confirmation bias, both positive and negative, such that Vereen Bell finds the "forces of oppression…kept pretty much offstage throughout" (Bell 83) while the Foucauldian lens discovers everywhere the instruments of class warfare.

In another recent case, Forrest Robinson offers an excellent account of McCarthy's interest in human constructions of meaning:

> Just as Suttree loathes the bad faith of the wealthy and the righteous, he is irresistibly drawn to the authenticity of the poor, the disabled, the mentally ill, and the dispossessed, with whom he shares quarters in McAnally Flats. (Robinson 98-9)

The motif of dispossession runs throughout McCarthy's early works: Arthur Ownby, Culla and Rinthy Holme, and Lester Ballard all suffer literal unhousings in their respective novels. Mental illness and disability appear with slightly less regularity. Poverty is nearly universal. The shift of these conditions and operations to an urban world, though, may represent a change in how they challenge the mainstream realities that McCarthy, according to Robinson, is interested in interrogating. But the altered economic and geographic spaces of Knoxville receive little attention in favor of a higher-level reading Suttree's arc through the book—a reading which might be slightly too distant. In his treatment of the novel's final paragraph, in which Suttree directly addresses the reader, Robinson links the shift to first-person to Suttree's escape from compromised constructions of reality: "How significant that in this final, unflinching encounter with death, Suttree should launch himself at last, and with evident self-confidence, into the first person" (101). Suttree has been making first-person asides for much of the novel even as he remains caught in competing constructions, suggesting that his evolution may be more complicated than simple emancipation. The urban setting, with its coeval and competitive visions of the world shifting into and out of equilibrium, seems integral to understanding this added complexity, but it remains largely untouched in favor of a more abstract, general account of class conflict. For Robinson as for Rikard, *Suttree* offers a

world of such complexity and mimetic resolution to permit readings founded as much on Marxist philosophy and contemporary social problems as anything in the novel itself, and while these readings fit the novel and are certainly defensible, they are not readily contained by it. *Suttree* becomes a Rorschach test, and essays tend to reveal as much about critical paradigms as they do about the work under consideration.

[2] I might outline yet worse asymmetries in such fields as animal studies (to which, to the best of my knowledge, non-human animals have yet to make significant publishable contributions) and religious studies (most of the gods' publications being old, subject to disputes over authorship, or both). That enthusiastic research and publication continues suggests that perfect symmetry is not a gatekeeping criterion for the academy, but cognizance of the state of the affairs is probably well-advised.

[3] For a complete explication of the parallels, see Russell Hillier's article, "'In a Dark Parody' of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*: The Presence of Subversive Allegory In Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*."

[4] John Grammer offers the intriguing possibility that *Outer Dark* is located at a discrete "Machiavellian moment" in history—that is, a moment when a society has become untenable and is poised for some violent change (Grammer 37). While the twin southern specters of racism and incest are present within the novel, and Grammer's argument about fatal insularity is striking, I maintain that the universe of *Outer Dark* is nihilistic beyond simple diagnosis. It is apocalyptic in a purely negative sense: institutions, explanations, and (meta)narratives fall in succession, but nothing emerges to replace them. The novel is not so much in history—dialectical or otherwise—as it is a showcase of universal entropy.

[5] Béatrice Trotignon extends this resistance to a "Platonic whole" to the novel's extensive use of detail throughout (Trotignon 89). Her point is well-made, but I focus here on the paradoxes and rapid, disorienting shifts rather than the profusion of detail itself—after all, it is possible to imagine intensely detailed descriptions of objects which still enjoy substantial unity.

[6] And in the meantime, objects within the text sometimes point toward conditions in which allegory and thought become impossible. John Longley, writing on atavism in McCarthy, remarks that "These creatures [catfish] exemplify what it would take to live in such a world: prehistoric, antediluvian, mindless; swimming easily in the ambient filth, or resting quiescent in the frozen mud" (Longley 81). The total negation of mythopoeia remains a possibility in the background of *Suttree*—the great irony being that this possibility is suggested via metaphor.

[7] Not that the narrative intelligence operating within the novel is devoid of judgments or artistic interventions—that much should be clear from the novel's introduction and occasional flourishes of humor which place the characters in literary or mythic constructs of which they never become aware. Suttree encounters a "goatman," for example, who is lifted straight from E.E. Cummings' "in Just-" (McCarthy, *Suttree* 195-200). In a drier case, Suttree quips that "People in hell want ice water" (148), and when he finds Gene Harrogate, the "city mouse" lost in the caves beneath Knoxville, Harrogate unknowingly fills out the metaphor: "I'd give ten dollars for a glass of icewater, said the city mouse. Cash money" (277). In both instances, though, the tone is strangely playful, and neither allusions lends itself to building a totalizing reading of the novel.

[8] While the parallel to Christ's forty days in the wilderness is tempting, the connection is easy to oversell. First, the "forty days" are approximate; Suttree leaves in late October and returns on December third (291), so his ordeal's length lies somewhere between thirty-four and forty-eight days. More to the point, the episode shares no structural similarity to Christ's temptation in its broader context. Suttree does not emerge from the experience changed or prepared to begin some brand of ministry, and all his suffering is reducible to another failed attempt at transcendence. We might, following this episode, call Suttree a failed Christ, but this is not a final interpretive key to the rest of the novel. Nor is this the only mythology in play. As William Spencer notes, Suttree's sojourn bears resemblances to Native American traditions of the vision quest and the wanderings of mad King Lear (Spencer 90).

[9] Yes, Suttree's young lover is eventually killed in a rockslide, but attempting a link to the ballad strains credulity. Had she drowned, the parallel would be more suggestive.

[10] See Spencer's "Altered States of Consciousness in *Suttree*" for a complementary treatment which places psychology in dialogue with the prior mythic landscapes and figures on which Suttree (and McCarthy) draw. His examination of William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is particularly engaging.

[11] In due acknowledgement of an alternative view, I should note that John Rothfork places mythic or atavistic elements in the landscape itself: "the familiar urban world curtains a more elemental and Freudian world that borders on sleep, dreams, and poetic language." (Rothfork 387). To this, I add only the caveat that we are confronted by Suttree's personal elemental and Freudian world, and that whatever space he happens to encounter seems to be both curtain and provocation.

[12] A brief historical digression: In fact, severe divides did exist between the rural and urban post-bellum South, and while the cities remained soundly racist and segregated, they did so as part of a complex and heterogeneous process which may be partially attributable to agrarian movements and the overall failure of the South to develop a mature trade network among its cities and then stand it in healthy relation to a worthy agricultural economy. As noted by Lawrence Larsen in his work on the emergence of the urban South, the essentially colonial dynamic between North and South continued throughout the end of the nineteenth century, and with *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Williams v. Mississippi* (1898), the Supreme Court accepted and codified the trend of allowing the South to continue racist policies, a move which reinforced southern legal autonomy even as its economic dependence on the North remained (Larsen 145-7). The one point on which urban and rural interests could agree in the 1890s was the need to preserve the supremacy of the white race.

[13] And not solely the southern city. As racial problems continue in northern cities with discrimination in law enforcement, *de facto* school segregation, and socioeconomic disparity, attempts to impose an imaginary geographical quarantine on racism are obviously pointless. I focus on the southern city because Knoxville is in Tennessee, not because the North is free of related problems.

[14] This is not the only time McCarthy uses this figure. Lester Ballard is loosely compared to a boar brought to bay by hounds, and in *The Crossing* the wolf Billy Parham attempts to take into Mexico is killed in a wolfbaiting pit. In both cases, the reader's sympathy is

guided to the person/animal at bay, and in both cases, that sympathy requires careful examination, being after all a relative thing.

[15] See, for example, Douglas Canfield's remarks about *Suttree* really being McCarthy's first novel (Canfield 685-6).

[16] John Wesley Rattner, whose recollections in a graveyard likely comprise most of *The Orchard Keeper* is in a similar situation, one distinction being that his remembered self does not apostrophize. The difference between narrator and character is significantly more stable in *The Orchard Keeper*, and if we accept the premise that John Wesley is narrating, so is the line between memory and fantasy.

[17] Instances noted here with gratitude to Jillett, who compiled the list as part of her analysis of Suttree's movements (Jillett 148).

[18] Amusingly, this includes setting aside a systematic anti-system commitment. As Brewton Vince points out,

> Suttree's hard-won perspective invokes finally a farewell to arms that seems more permanent than any before. In the end, Suttree appears to bid farewell to some of his relentlessly uncompromising resistance to the organizing principles of his world, a stance he had long maintained out of some authentic alienation that refuses spurious consolation—the distinctive apartness common to McCarthy's characters as the price of maintaining their original humanity. (Vince 129)

[19] See Josyph for a more complete account of McCarthy's use of real people in *Suttree*.

[20] William Spencer notes three other cases of non-Suttree consciousnesses emerging into the foreground, two involving Gene Harrogate and one Joyce (Spencer 87). These instances, though, are not as threatening to Suttree's narrative supremacy, as they concern information he could acquire or thought processes he could insert for his own ends. The moments of competing subjectivity and sketched structures enclosing Suttree's life are more compelling evidence of authorial presence.

[21] For a thoughtful reading of doubling throughout *Suttree*, see Terri Witek's "'He's hell when all's well': Cormac McCarthy's rhyming dictions."

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