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A "keeping Place For Souls": Photo, Body, And Narrative Impulse In Cormac McCarthy's Suttree

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A "KEEPING PLACE FOR SOULS": PHOTO, BODY, AND NARRATIVE IMPULSE IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *SUTTREE*

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Melissa Anne Mondry
22 November 2014

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the treatment of photographs in Cormac McCarthy's novel *Suttree* sheds light on its main character's narrative project, his motivation for writing and his approach to his subjects. It extends the work of critics who have identified the character of Suttree as a burgeoning writer in order to examine what this narrative subplot might indicate about the purpose of narrative in McCarthy's world. It also responds to previous readings of the novel's photo album scene, which have focused on photographs as reminders of death. I argue that Suttree's adverse reaction to photographs is more complicated than fear of death, but has more to do with his fear of the vulnerability of his body and identity after death. In order to show this, I focus on ways in which the photographs in the album are shown to be a poor "keeping place," and on Suttree's initial expectations of narrative by contrast. I demonstrate that the initial motivation behind his autobiographical project is to preserve his identity and the vanishing reality of McAnally Flats for posterity, but that the novel represents his approach to narrative as a dangerous effort to control his subjects in order to preserve his version of reality. By highlighting the adverse effects of Suttree's narrative manipulations on his subjects, the novel emphasizes storytelling as an ethical encounter between individuals. Also, by showing Suttree's effort to memorialize himself to be a false conception of the purpose of narrative, the novel advocates an understanding of narrative as something that changes and decays like any other artifact, and underscores its value as process rather than product.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Art that testifies for the dead is complicated, especially when it has been composed by the body commemorated. Art historian Nigel Llewellyn uses the following words, embroidered on a sampler in 1736, to illustrate this complexity: “When I am dead, and laid in grave, / And all my bones are rotten, / By this may I remembered be / When I should be forgotten” (9). A living voice addresses us and we can see in the stitches the concrete product of hands moving, but the thread shows decay and the words remind us to see the hands’ decay. Somehow the voice that directs our attention to the grave where the body presumably rests is still here. The effect is confusing and a little unsettling, probably purposefully so, as artwork in the *memento mori* tradition (which translates “remember you will die”) often invites the viewer to imaginatively exchange roles with the person commemorated, sometimes subtly and sometimes not so subtly: “In many of these texts, especially those shown on funeral monuments in public spaces, the corpse issues even more direct instructions to the beholder: ‘Behold, I was as you are, and you will be as I am’” (Llewellyn 11). I'm reminded of the prologue to *Suttree* in which the narrator begins with the direct address “Dear friend” and ends by asking us to picture an audience (ourselves?) who sit “webbed in dust” and an “interlocutor” (himself?) long dead within whose “gutted sockets . . . a spider sleeps” (5). In each instance, our attention is split among several places and times, and among “several bodies,” as Llewellyn explains regarding the sampler:

> Though their author exists in [her] present and has a living, functioning body, the words address a future reader who, in that time to come, will be contemplating the past. Several bodies can be inferred in this short rhyme. Nearest to us is the living body holding the needle and responsible for the embroidery. Further away, in the future, there is the dead body, divided in turn into two aspects. The first, the social body after death, is sustained in our memories by artifacts such as this very sampler; the second, the natural body after death, is lifeless, alien and used up. One of the most problematic aspects of the visual culture made to accompany the English death ritual is its habit of obscuring precisely which of these several bodies is its concern. (9)

A similar confusion of bodies, places and times can be found throughout *Suttree*. The most famous is probably the *transi* figure found decomposing in Suttree's shack, but there are a number of other descriptions that make us envision Suttree in various stages of decay. He is shown waking himself from Woodlawn Cemetery ("he raised himself," the text reads, from "among the menhirs of the dead") and looking like he belongs there, with an "oxblood stain" seeping through his clothing and his body covered in dirt (302), then later lying "with his feet together and his arms at his sides like a dead king on an altar" (430), or "mummied up in his blanket" (283) in the Gaitlinburg forest where "he'd come to feel that another went before him and each glade he entered seemed just quit by a figure who'd been sitting there and risen and gone on" (287). We watch him pass and repass himself in the form of older and younger doppelgängers who confront him in visions or in reflections in glass or shiny countertops as he wanders in circles around Knoxville. The explanation I would suggest for these several bodies is that *Suttree* functions in a way similar to the sampler: though within the novel Suttree exists in his present and "has a living, functioning body, [his] words address a future reader who, in that

time to come, will be contemplating the past," so we are encouraged to view him at times as already gone. Our attention is split among several places and times and among several bodies.

As in the sampler, we can sense that Suttree's voice in the narrative is also multiple. Somehow, the voice that directs our attention to his decay and memorialization as mummy, menhir, or dead king on an altar is still here. In her book *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy's Tennessee Period,* Dianne Luce analyzes the permeable border between Suttree's perspective and that of the prologue's narrator and concludes that

> the protean quality of the narrative stance in Suttree reinforces the impression that we are not only bleeding from Suttree's free indirect discourse or first-person passage into the "authorial" narrator's perspective, as many critics have suggested, but that Suttree's and the narrator's voices simultaneously invest one another or coexist, one in palimpsest under the other – are in fact twins or different manifestations of the same narrative consciousness, one contemporaneous with the action of the novel and one more retrospective. (205)

Luce believes that the novel chronicles Suttree's transformation as an author struggling to "transform and transcend his past" (217) through autobiographical narrative in a manner similar to John Wesley Rattner in *The Orchard Keeper.* She hears in the prologue's narrator the voice of an older, changed Suttree drawing from and witnessing to his earlier experiences. She notes that Suttree's behavior is what you would expect from an apprentice writer, as he is often engaged in close observation of those around him, reading faces and behaviors to assume "the role of interpreter associated with the writer" (209) and learning to mimic different voices by swapping stories with the residents of McAnally: "Indeed *study* is the verb of choice in many of these passages, suggesting that Suttree is self-apprenticed as a student of life or writer in the making"

(208). She also analyzes the patterns of repetition between the prologue and epilogue and the body of the novel: images such as the macabre theater, the stone wall embedded with fossils, the Teutonic forebears, the hunter with hounds, the insects spiraling toward light, and the water trucks all seem drawn from the observations, fixations, dreams and visions of Suttree the character, "further suggesting a new Suttree as the novel's narrator, who derives the imagery of the narrative frame from his earlier experiences recounted in the novel proper" (210). The fact that the imagery in the prologue is more elaborate also suggests that some time has elapsed since the events narrated, during which Suttree's skills have evolved, resulting in the "authoritative/authorial guide" whom we encounter there (206). As Luce explains,

> All these patterns of repetition characterize the narrator of *Suttree* as very like, even an enlightened version of, Cornelius Suttree himself, emphasizing that the novel represents Suttree's narrative "hallucination" in which, Dante-like, he re-visions his own dream-journey, functioning as the bard of his existence with a doubleness of vision that layers his more mature understanding over his memory/dream of himself as he wandered in the purgatorial/Gnostic/absurd Babylon of Knoxville. (217)

Luce is using "hallucination" here to link the variable narrative perspective she identifies in *Suttree* to precursors in "Wake for Susan," *The Orchard Keeper* and *The Gardener's Son*. It is short for the phrase "hallucinated recollection," by which she identifies a pattern in McCarthy's fiction in which a character comes upon an evocative object (sometimes an historical artifact, sometimes a *memento mori* such as a gravestone, ruin, or photograph, often "provokingly 'mute'" ("They Aint" 22) and begins narrating a story to conjure the lost referent and/or make the mute object speak. This scenario usually occurs within a separate narrative frame as an introduction to the story, but we're made to feel the narrator's presence as a character within the

story proper through details like distinctive vocabulary, imagery, and obsessions that seep from frame to story, highlighting the subjective action of the narrator and making the narration part of the plot. The phrase is taken from a description of John Wesley Rattner's action in *The Orchard Keeper*: “He reached out and patted the stone softly, a gesture, as if perhaps to conjure up some image, evoke again some allegiance with the name, a place, hallucinated recollections in which faces merged inextricably, and yet true and fixed (245)” (“They Aint” 26). In *Suttree*, we again get to watch the writer at work shaping his story, but the pattern is less obvious. While we do meet the narrator in the prologue, he isn’t clearly identified for us as he is in the earlier frame-works and neither is the artifact that prompts his narrative, as are the gravestones in “Wake for Susan” and *The Orchard Keeper* or the photos and historical records in *The Gardener's Son*. Luce sees the pattern “nested within Suttree's experiences in the novel proper” as he encounters objects from his past that induce memories, “imaginative visions” or literal hallucinations, explaining that the “frame of the novel as a whole does not work from a provocative icon to the artistic invention/recovery of the past (unless the city itself may be seen as such an icon, as Marius suggests when he regards the novel as ‘a sort of album of a vanished past’)” (*Reading the World* 206-7).

Suttree does seem to engage with the “hallucinated recollection” pattern which Luce has identified in McCarthy's previous works. It doesn't necessarily follow, though, that Suttree must be the one who stumbles upon the artifact and begins narrating a story about it. I would argue that the role occupied in previous novels by the main character/narrator – lone wanderer who has stumbled upon an interesting artifact – is reserved in *Suttree* for the reader. For Luce, the narrative must be evoked by an artifact, but I think that in this novel the narrative *is* the artifact. I would liken it to Llewelyn's sampler, as a piece of art in the *memento mori* tradition intended to

testify for Sutree once he is gone and should be forgotten, and with a provocative opacity and mystery similar to any of the artifacts in McCarthy's previous novels. In the prologue to *Suttree,* a voice from beyond time first assures us that we are encountering the novel alone, despite whatever noise or voices it might inspire us to imagine: "Dear friend now in the dusty clockless hours of the town . . . now in these sootblacked brick or cobbled corridors where lightwire shadows make a gothic harp of cellar doors no soul shall walk save you" (1). His preface to the novel encourages us to view it as a curious object or a fossil, and reminds us that despite whatever outline of life we find inside, it's been trapped in these pages and dead a long time: "Old stone walls unplumbed by weathers, lodged in their striae fossil bones, limestone scarabs rucked in the floor of this once inland sea" (1). He then makes us walk through a cemetery before we get to the novel itself, designating it as one of the many forms of monuments we find there: "Thin dark trees through yon iron palings where the dead keep their own small metropolis. Curious marble architecture, steel and obelisk and cross and little rainworn stones where names grow dim with years" (1). In *Suttree*, Luce would have us see a continuation of the pattern evident in the frames of McCarthy's previous fiction. But McCarthy seems to be breaking from his former pattern in a significant way here by making the novel itself the artifact and putting the reader in the role formerly occupied by Wes, John Wesley Rattner, and William Chaffee.

This is important because it indicates how much control Suttree has over the way his message will be received. In previous frame-works, the narrators' stories compensate for the deficiencies of the artifacts that they encounter, and their efforts are to come to some kind of understanding about themselves or their past. John Wesley Rattner, for example, who has used his story to reconstruct his memories, touches his mother's gravestone and feels that it's "less real than the smell of woodsmoke or the taste of an old man's wine" (*The Orchard Keeper* 245).

The story is given primacy over the artifact because memory and imagination are more alive than a stone. But the story is also a means to an end and once it has served its purpose it is abandoned. Luce explains of the scene,

> As he walks in the cemetery looking for his mother's marker after speaking to the workers, John Wesley recollects and invents the story that is this novel. By the time he finds his mother's gravestone, the story has done its work and 'he no longer cared to tell which were things done and which dreamt (245); he does not need the marker to evoke again the hallucinated recollection. ("'They Aint" 26)

John Wesley gets what he needs from his narrative and moves on, leaving both the story and stone behind him. Luce would have us see in Suttree's storytelling a similar purpose and a similar view of narrative: as she explains "It is not until Suttree as narrator can create the imaginative recollection we infer the whole novel to be that he is able to transform and transcend his past as John Wesley does" (*Reading the World* 217). But it seems to me that Suttree's intentions for his story, at least initially, are quite different from this. Unlike Luce, I see in Suttree's initial narrative efforts a desire to control future interpretations of the past rather than transcend the past. We can see this difference clearly in a scene in his boathouse toward the end of the novel where Suttree, talking to himself, admits a mistake he would take back: "I said that I would take my own part against the slander of oblivion and against the monstrous facelessness of it and that I would stand a stone in the very void where all would read my name. Of that vanity I recant all" (413). It seems that, at least originally, Suttree views what he's doing as a way to erect a monument for himself against time. His explanation of his purpose – to "take [his] own part" – and the interesting phrase "slander of oblivion" hint that his anxiety is about more than just disappearing but being vulnerable to misrepresentation after he's gone. The goal of his narrative,

then, would be to control his story and identity after death. By treating narrative in this way, as a legacy and final word, Suttree aligns himself more closely with the Gregg family in *The Gardener's Son,* who carefully construct an official record around their own version of the novel's events in order to maintain their legacy free of reproach, than with William Chaffee or John Wesley Rattner. His goal is to prevent the sort of story that John Wesley tells, to make sure that his remains aren't mute so that no one can spin their own tale out of them. By placing the reader in John Wesley's role, though, the narrator implies that this probably won't work; whatever Suttree's narrative intent, the story we make out of the book in our hands will be our own "hallucinated recollection," just as it would with any other kind of monument or artifact.

If Luce doesn't notice Suttree's critique of his initial purpose, it's maybe because she seems so invested in the idea of the transformative power that narrative imagination has for him. For Luce, the story is Suttree's redemption from his obsession with death and the mistakes of his past. As she explains, "recognition of Suttree as a narrative artist confirms his transcendence that we sense in the epilogue's imagery. 'Old Suttree ain't dead' . . . he has become the 'bard of his own existence'" (*Reading the World* 207). One interesting simplification this leads to can be seen in her interpretation of Suttree's reaction to photographs. As she explains it, photos and photographic imagery in the novel act for Suttree "merely as a *memento mori*" (218). She calls them "tropes of death" (220), and "projection[s] of his own obsessions . . . specifically his own reluctance to face death" (225). And because for her narrative is nothing but Suttree's redemption, the main problem that she sees this posing for him is writers block – the "paralyzing influence of these fixed images of mortality" (225) on his consciousness. His self-concern when faced with reminders of his death thwarts his ability to write, to identify with others, and "to transform and transcend his past." As she explains the problem, "Despite the poetic sensibility

that informs Suttree's prolonged meditation on the metaphor of the photograph . . . his capacity for imaginative identification is blocked for the time being, foiled by his compulsive imaging of his own death" (224).

I would argue, though, that Suttree's adverse reaction to the photographs is more complicated than that. A close look at one of his strongest reactions, to a postmortem photograph of a baby, shows that Suttree is horrified by this picture because it is no more sufficient as a "keeping place for souls" than the body it represents:

> Suttree turned up a tinted photograph of a satin lined wickerbound casket with flower surrounds. In the casket a fat dead baby, garishly painted, bright fuchsia cheeks. Never ask whose. He closed the cover on this picturebook of the afflicted. A soft yellow dust bloomed. Put away these frozenjawed primates and their annals of ways beset and ultimate dark. What deity in the realms of dementia, what rabid god decocted out of the smoking lobes of hydrophobia could have devised a keeping place for souls so poor as is this flesh. This mawky wormbent tabernacle (130).

What Suttree sees in this photograph and others in Martha's album isn't just death, but a form of representation that leaves its subjects' bodies vulnerable to manipulation. Its appearance of life is a poorly executed trick. Its subject is altered, misrepresented, and worse, "frozenjawed" – mute and totally at the mercy of whoever has done this to it. Suttree's attempt to create a more suitable and secure keeping place for himself through narrative is revealed here to be a part of the story. For Suttree (at least initially), a story seems like better way to preserve himself and his memories of friends and places. If images are mute, dependent on (and vulnerable to) others' acts of ventriloquism, a story may speak and allow him a measure of control over his body's message when he's gone. If images are flat and aspectant, a story might tell a truth that's whole. If images,

particularly photos, are physical artifacts made to preserve a part of his (dead, material) body, a story might be better able to preserve his soul. And where images are easily manipulated to serve purposes he may not intend or be conscripted into larger systems, a story might preserve his individuality. Finally, though photographs decay, a story, especially if it's done very well, might not. What he will find, though, is that his approach to narrative as a way to maintain possession of himself and his subjects shares all of these problems – it misrepresents and misuses its mute and vulnerable subjects, it changes and decays, and it can't hold a soul stable.

While Luce sees redemption in Suttree's act of narrative imagination, she doesn't pay enough attention to the struggles and ambivalence embedded within the storyline. She is right when she says that the story is a way for Suttree to "transform and transcend his past," but she doesn't notice that his ability to use it this way is a direct result of a change in his expectations of narrative. Far from being redemptive, narrative as Suttree originally conceives it requires the same kind of "compulsive imaging of his own death" (224) that Luce identifies as trapping him in Knoxville. Originally, he sees the book as an object in which he can invest his soul and secure his identity after death, a thing that he can make last and live as a substitute. The problem with this conception of narrative is that it forces him to view himself and others as if they are already dead—not as people, but as bodies to be kept and animated through narrative. This fetish that he makes out of his autobiographical project is what transfixes him and keeps him from leaving Knoxville, and what allows him to finally escape is a revised understanding of the purpose and limits of narrative. I argue that by the end of the novel Suttree's conception of narrative isn't as a thing—a book to serve as a monument or substitute—but as a process—storytelling as a function of imagination and memory that happens as you live your life in relation to other people. In this novel about a novice writer's attempts at autobiography which Luce calls a "visionary re-

inscription" of his experiences, it only seems natural that part of the story would be Suttree's revisions to his understanding of his purpose and identity as a writer.

There is a complex relationship between words, images, and bodies in this book that is worth examining. First, I intend to take a close look at the specific characteristics of photos that bother Suttree and the effects these characteristics have on the photographed subjects. I will do this with an eye to how Suttree's critique of photography reveals his initial expectations of narrative by contrast, but also how it can be applied analogically to his activities as an apprentice author. My reading of the album scene differs from Luce's here. Luce associates the "freeze frame" of the photographs with Suttree's paralyzing fear of death, and draws on a common opposition between image and word to propose that narrative's power of speech and motion frees him from this paralysis. But I see in Suttree's critique of the photos an indictment of his own narrative treatment of himself and his subjects. As I mentioned above, Suttree's reaction to the photographs implies a desire for a form of representation that can succeed where they fail, but for him their failure is about impermanence and vulnerability. What he wants from narrative, by contrast, is stasis and control, not freedom or motion. A complicated relationship between image and word then arises when Suttree begins supplementing the photos' deficiencies by speaking to, for, and about the photographs' mute and vulnerable subjects. Within the album scene, these efforts at ekphrasis seem intended to better situate or stabilize the photographic referents, since he sees photos as a medium too insubstantial and too easily manipulated to "keep" them properly. But the way in which the narrator represents Suttree's efforts encourages us to view them as something very similar to the posing and propping evident in the album's postmortem photographs, as a way for him to take advantage of these subjects' vulnerability for his own purposes, treating people as bodies to be manipulated. I will then show how the struggle between

image and word provides a figure for a series of complicated social exchanges throughout the novel between Suttree and his living subjects, as he attempts to hold them stable and speak for them. Suttree's critique of the photos' deficiencies places us in a position to be able to notice certain unflattering aspects of his initial narrative approach to his subjects and to piece together an idea of what, in McCarthy's world, is the use of narrative.

CHAPTER II

PHOTOS AS A KEEPING PLACE

Art historian Nigel Llewellyn explains that concerns over the body's fate after death resulted in an elaborate material culture in post-Reformation England meant to stabilize the deceased's place in society as the body decayed. People of the period imagined the human body as multiple, composed of a natural body, which was physically present but subject to decay, and a social body, an identity within society which might be preserved. While the person is alive this identity is projected through the natural body, but after death the two "tend to drift apart" (53), so its preservation through monuments, heraldry, and artifacts of various sorts was considered very important. The decaying natural body had to be dealt with – less as a contaminant to hygiene as it is today, but primarily because its corruption and dissolution was a competing message hazardous to the social body: "It was regarded as a source of danger, not so much to public health – as was to become the main concern in the 19th century – but rather to the health of the public body whose dignity and immaculate memory could so easily be damaged" (47). A "good death" involved setting up a monument to ensure that the signification you intend, your social body, would remain after you are no longer in control of your natural body's message: "just as Joseph of Arimathea made his tomb in his own lifetime, so should the Christian man prepare for death with spiritual exercises and by setting up a monument" (13). This was contrasted against a range of "bad deaths" which involved not only a soul unprepared for judgment but also a natural body left exposed, uncommemorated, and vulnerable to unintended interpretation. For example,

a series of watercolors by Thomas Rowlandson called *Dreadful Deaths* includes "Death in a Riding Accident," which shows a body being dragged by a horse to some unknown location where it would lie exposed to the elements, and "Death on a Desert Island" in which birds pick the corpse of a shipwrecked man who begins to signify something he never intended: "The skeleton, stripped of its flesh but not yet of all its ragged costume, suffers the final indignity of losing its brains to the beaks of a flock of scavenging birds – an allegory of Reason subjected to Nature" (35). Another prime example of a bad death was that of the criminal whose body becomes a public message about the power of the state and the nature and consequences of his crime as it is put on display or turned over to medical students for dissection (40).

Llewellyn suggests that we might better understand these natural and social aspects of the body at death by looking at "how meaning is credited to language" (49): "We can adopt the terms of the Structuralists and, by analogy with Saussure's thoughts on language, analyse the human body at death as 'a sign with two aspects, the shifting relations between which determine its meaning'" (51). Llewellyn asks us to imagine the natural body after death as a signifier, used in funerary rituals and artifacts along with a "whole world of other signifiers, such as costume and heraldry," and the social body as its signified, and to observe how the relationship between the two grows arbitrary:

> With death, the signified is released from the comparative restraint of the signifying natural body, a process illustrated by figural sculpture on monuments: soldiers become Roman heroes, male politicians become statesmen, wives and mothers become paragons of virtue, according to models created deep within patriarchy. (Llewellyn 51)

While alive, we have some control over what our bodies signify. But after death the two aspects of our bodies take entirely different trajectories; one decays and disappears while the other is set

adrift beyond our control. To illustrate the anxiety that this process could provoke, Llewellyn gives the example of Jeremy Bentham who tried to keep himself together by having his skeleton and head preserved, reassembled, and padded with straw under his clothes, then displayed in a wooden cabinet as an "auto-icon"; his monumental effigy, his social body, was made out of his preserved natural body: "Bentham thought 'every man [*sic*] may be his own statue' but, despite the fame of his own image, the idea never caught on"(53).

It seems to me that a similar kind of anxiety about the vulnerability of a person's body and identity after death registers in many of McCarthy's early works. Stories about elusive and/or misappropriated identities of individuals are coincident with instances of grave robbing and dissection, maimings and desecrations of all kinds. In *The Gardener's Son,* for instance, James McEvoy's voice is silenced and his body goes missing (his father is afraid it will be desecrated like his name and hides it) while a more convenient tale about his identity is written into the record by the powerful Gregg family. Particularly interesting is the scene of McEvoy's execution. The crowd witnesses a trick wherein McEvoy is made to disappear beneath the "trap door" of the scaffold (84) only to be re-presented in the form of court transcripts, official photograph, and death certificate that support the Gregg family's version of their town's history. Beneath the scaffold, the executioners simultaneously manipulate his body and the official record. Statements like "You don't have to fill that in. It's down here. Violent or accidental death" are interspersed with "Give us some more slack. Get his foot there" (85-6). The overwhelming impression is one of substitution; an artifice is being created out of the raw material of Robert McEvoy in this scene framed by a man who sits in the hallway furtively whittling a small wooden statue. In *Child of God* Lester Ballard murders a series of women in order to use their bodies to construct a domestic fantasy while the townspeople's and readers' dissection of his motives and identity are

figured through his physical dissection at the end of the novel. In *The Orchard Keeper*, Kenneth Rattner's unburied body decays in a cistern while his son tries to locate him through narrative. It seems reasonable to wonder whether the death-obsessed main character in *Suttree* (a novel replete with bodies) might be concerned about the fate of his own body's image, story, and use once he is no longer in control of them. Suttree's efforts to construct his own memorial, while not as extreme as Bentham's, seem to stem from a similar desire to maintain control of the message that circulates about his identity after death, to "take [his] *own* part" (413). It is this uneasiness, not only about death but about lack of control over what the body will signify after death, that the novel's photo album scene seems to me to highlight. The album shows Suttree not only that things die but that they can't be preserved, at least not without being disfigured, and that no artifact can be self-sufficient but all are reliant on memory — on other people with their own intentions and agendas — to be reconstituted. Accordingly, Suttree's disgust in that scene is due as much to photography's failure as a medium for his purposes – as a "keeping place for souls," a way to maintain the stability of his body's referent – and also about what that failure implies about the possibility of representation in general (particularly narrative).

As Susan Sontag explains in *On Photography*, photographs can present one of two things: a physical body, or whatever the viewer wants to imagine that body represents: "The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: 'There is the surface. Now think – or rather feel, intuit – what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way.' Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy" (23). Or maybe worse, "for an end to probing below the surface, for a redemption and celebration of the body of the world" (24). Similarly, the bodies pictured in Martha's album are reduced either to scientific material, physical "artifacts" of Suttree's family

lineage to be classified according to type, or to something like one of Mother She's talismans to be used for conjuring stories, dreams and memories, true or otherwise. The album scene shows Suttree as much afraid of this vulnerability and dependence of his body and identity after death as he is of death itself – its objectification and absence. Since these are the only options which the photographs in the album allow, we watch him begin to experiment with narrative as an alternative way of memorializing or situating the (improperly secured) bodies/identities that they present to him.

The album's role as genealogical record, for example, presents Suttree with a vision of himself as an artifact to be sorted and classified by some indifferent relative who has collected him. When Roland Barthes is asked whether he is preparing a family photo album, he responds "No: neither album nor family," explaining that to him family is his mother and his brother, no cousins ("that unit so necessary to the constitution of the family group") and none of the extended family people include in an album in order to provide an official background for themselves and the few people they actually care about: "I had determined on a principle for myself: never to reduce myself-as-subject, confronting certain photographs, to the disincarnated, disaffected *socius* which science is concerned with" (74). He gives "family" two competing definitions: social institution versus group of people who love one another. He seems to see the first as a danger to the second, rejecting the family as institution so that he can protect the individuality of the people he loves: "How opposed I am to that scientific way of treating the family as if it were uniquely a fabric of constraints and rites . . . As if our experts cannot conceive that there are families 'whose members love one another'" (74). Suttree can't even identify the subjects of many of the photographs in Martha's album without her help, even those closest to him—his mother, himself as a child. And to get more information than a name or

manner of relation from a photo requires the presence of someone who knew the subject well and whose memory of him is strong enough and fond enough to keep a photograph around. In other words, someone who loved him. Barthes talks about this sort of dependence in *Camera Lucida*, where he calls the photograph a "certain but fugitive testimony":

> What is it that will be done away with, along with this photograph which yellows, fades, and will someday be thrown out, if not by me –too superstitious for that –at least when I die? Not only "life" (this was alive, this posed live in front of the lens), but also, sometimes – how to put it? – Love. In front of the only photograph in which I find my father and mother together, this couple who I know loved each other, I realize: it is love-as-treasure which is going to disappear forever; for once I am gone, no one will any longer be able to testify to this: nothing will remain but an indifferent Nature. (94)

Having abandoned his family and buried his only son, Suttree is in a similar situation. He doesn't have anyone to recall him in this way, and his presence in the album will soon be as nothing more than an "indifferent nature," a body, a visible record of his physical features lacking any life or interiority. The photos in the album scene become not only emblems of death but of his isolation and looming ignominy, the "slander of oblivion." The most he can hope for at this point is the basic recognition that someone named EC receives when aunt Martha supplies his initials ("Here's E C.") and Suttree gathers from the picture that "He looks good in a hat." In fact, throughout this scene the most common information imparted about the individuals pictured is their name and age at death. Suttree's thoughts parody the photos' terseness:

> Here's Carol Beth.
>
> How old was she when she died?
>
> Nineteen. Lord that was a sad time.

This is a dog. He is dead too.

This is the house where the dead lived. It is gone, lost and gone.

What was the dog's name? (128)

He can tell from the picture that this was a human, that the human is gone, and he can learn the label attached to the particular human and how he or she fits into the family group (*socius*), but it can't tell him any more about the interior life of the person than the dog. The generality of the information reduces individuals to a background, a "house," against which viewers can situate themselves (especially if you were to interpret house in the older sense of "household," or "lineage.") In this capacity the photos don't differ much from a mug shot or driver's license, and from what Suttree can tell from their expressions, the sitters' experiences before the camera may have been similar to what we've all gone through getting posed and flashed at the DMV or on picture day at school: "masks of incertitude before the cold glass eye of the camera or recoiling before this celluloid immortality" (129), maybe a little unsure about offering up their identities for permanent record. McCarthy highlights the indifference of the medium as a whole (the camera as opposed to the photographer) by personifying its "cold glass eye."

The use Suttree and Martha are making of these photos is for Susan Sontag one of photography's most important functions within the context of the family album, namely to create a "portrait chronicle" of family history, a "token presence" of its lost members, and a "portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness." Especially as the modern nuclear family has replaced the extended family, photography has taken on the task of preserving unity among family members dispersed across long distances (8-9). Sontag compares this function of photos within a family album to forms of identification that happen in more official contexts:

> Through being photographed, something becomes part of a system of information, fitted into schemes of classification and storage which range from the crudely chronological order of snapshot sequences pasted in family albums to the dogged accumulations and meticulous filing needed for photography's uses in weather forecasting, astronomy, microbiology, geology, police work, medical training and diagnosis, military reconnaissance, and art history. (156)

In other words, without love, a family album becomes just another ledger for tracking data over time. Martha's album logs the permutations of genetic material resulting in each individual family member's body and disposition, and the labels she uses classify them according to type:

> This here's Uncle Will. You might not remember him. He was like me, he couldn't turn his head to do no good. She turned her head stiffly to show.
>
> Yes.
>
> He was a blacksmith. They all had trades.

This prompts Suttree to mock internally, "He was a drunk, he a grifter" (130). It seems that Martha's explanation about her stiff neck reminds Suttree of his grandfather's saying "Blood will tell." We learn in an earlier conversation between Suttree and John that his father thinks he and his mother are carriers of the same gene for poor character that can be found circulating in the tainted blood of "rummy" uncle John. He explains to John that, "If you weren't a drunk he might see me with different eyes. As 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," clarifying a few lines later, "I'm saying that my father is contemptuous of me because I'm related to you"(19). The way in which Martha reads familial traits and aptitudes in the images here reminds Suttree of his family's belief in genetic predisposition. Though by associating drunks and grifters with

blacksmiths and tradesmen, Suttree leaves open the possibility that behaviors are learned; maybe he's been apprenticed to his drunk uncle by his father's faith in blood. Suttree's earlier musings about types prompted by the photo of uncle Milo the sailor seem to be an apology for his bad blood or maybe a challenge: “What family has no mariner in its tree? No fool, no felon. No fisherman” (128). In any case, he can always turn the argument back on his father as he does when he considers a hereditary hardness and cynicism (a distinct but related kind of “indifferent nature”) to be evident in a photo of himself as a baby in the ancestor’s arms: “Cold eyes bored at him out of the cowled coverlet. The congenitally disaffected” (128). The album shows Suttree an image of his body and identity held in a familial system of classification that he can’t escape.

Sontag's phrase “token presence” would be a good way to characterize some of Suttree's misgivings about the family album in this scene. It seems that the instrumentality of his face in the genealogical record makes him aware of the instrumentality of his body, that each individual exists to reproduce himself in a slightly different form and his life and death are incidental to the transmission of his genetic material. “For,” as Barthes puts it, “death is the harsh victory of the race, if the particular dies for the satisfaction of the universal” (72). Suttree notices the “redundancy” of the features in the album and after flipping through them for a while comes to the realization that he is a physical “artifact of prior races” (129). He sees his individuality being swallowed up in the family group by the token presence of his face among all of these other similar faces and recognizes, like Barthes does when he confuses a photograph of his grandmother and uncle for photograph of his mother and himself, that “The Photograph gives a little truth, on condition that it parcels out the body. But this truth is not that of the individual, who remains irreducible; it is the truth of lineage” (103). When Suttree comes upon the photo of himself in the arms of his father (or possibly his grandfather – McCarthy doesn’t distinguish), he

appears to himself as an “offering,” a thing this man has succeeded in producing for his family, “proposing *it* stiffly before him” (128, my emphasis). He's not embraced or loved as an individual but *proposed*, part of the plan for survival of the group. He is estranged at the same time that he's included, which might be another way to read the phrase “congenitally disaffected.” Here Suttree perceives the photo album to fail as a keeping place for souls in the sense that it doesn’t present an individual soul but a visual record of a body among related bodies.

Regardless of what type of information they afford, the fragile images in the album strike Suttree as a poor keeping place for anything. His attention in this scene is often turned to evidence of how prone they are to deterioration and to the manipulations of other people, which is especially disturbing to Suttree because he sees them as proxies for the bodies of those represented. Suttree becomes aware of this problem as he watches Martha handle the inhabitants of her album:

> The old woman's slow hands sorted a loose packet of brown faded photographs, glasses riding down the bridge of her nose as she nods in recognition. She must set them back again with her finger, shuffling these imaged bits of cardboard, paper, tin. They have a burnt look to them, as if dried in a flue. Dark and haggard eyes peer out. In the photographs the children appear sinister, like the fruit of forbidden liaisons. (127)

Here the flawed materiality of the photos is transferred to the subjects represented. The photographs look old and burnt so the eyes in the photographs appear haggard and dark and sinister. The same transfer occurs later as Suttree perceives that the “old musty album with its foxed and crumbling paper seemed to breathe a reek of the vault, turning up one by one these dead faces with their wan and loveless gaze out toward the spinning world . . . . Old distaff kin

coughed up out of the vortex, thin and cracked and macled and a bit redundant" (129). The "thin, cracked" kin have taken on the qualities of the decaying paper, and Suttree seems disgusted that the medium not only fails to represent them properly (they have the "dead faces," and "wan and loveless gaze" that often accompany a bad photo) but even contributes to their decay. The photograph of his mother fails to capture her because it doesn't look like her, doesn't represent her well, but in another sense it *does* capture her, trapping her in a medium that is just as subject to decay as her body was. As Barthes explains, "like a living organism, [a photo] is born on the level of the sprouting silver grains, it flourishes a moment, then ages. . . Attacked by light, by humidity, it fades, weakens, vanishes; there's nothing left to do but throw it away" (Barthes 93).

The album scene also highlights the importance of memory in filling the gaps in information the photos offer. But Martha's memory is in a state of decay as well. When Suttree asks Martha to identify Elizabeth for him, she says "Lord, . . . Let me get my glasses, I caint make it out" and bends over the photograph. It's worth noting that Suttree and Martha repeatedly lean closer, seize, scrutinize, bend to see the photos, underlining the difficulty involved in grasping the stingy information contained in old photographs. The information they want isn't always apparent in a photo (evident, for example, when Suttree recognizes the photo of Martha as a girl from the expression on her face), and the episode highlights their difficulty in scaring it up: "how long has uncle Carter been dead? She looked high on the far wall of the kitchen as if perhaps it were written there" (127). What Martha wants is not located on the wall or in the album but in her deteriorating mind. Memories and our ability to recall them are just as susceptible to decay as photos and their subjects, each dependent on the very fallible powers of the other. Photos' dependence on fragile memory becomes a reminder of their failure to hold a subject stable.

Suttree perceives another way in which the photographs decay, related to the way the world leaves the photos' reality behind. When he encounters a photo of someone he's known intimately, his mother, he's unable to recognize "the girl" because her face has changed. The photo can't keep up with the way that reality changes; its accuracy constantly decays because it can only provide a trace of something that's already gone. When he sees John, Suttree wonders to himself "was there anything left of that face in the face he knew" (127). The phrase "anything left of" makes it seem that the photo's failure to keep up with time has rendered John's image (and face) corrupt, whether or not it's still in good shape. Similarly, Suttree's impression of "faces simply staggered into gaga by the sheer velocity of time" recalls images warped or distorted by slow shutter speed, another way of showing that photos' inability to keep up with change corrupts the faces they capture. By the time the shutter clicks, the person has already passed, changed. The context surrounding the very first mention of a photograph in *Suttree* might imply that this is an important attribute of photos for this novel. The passage shows photographic distortion that happens when a figure is wrenched out of time, and its details draw attention to successive transformations among like items in a series that would normally escape our notice:

> Glancing up at these cathedraled vaultings with their fossil woodknots and pseudomorphic nailheads in gray concrete, drifting, the bridge's slant shadow leaning the width of the river with that headlong illusion postulate an old cupracers frozen on photoplates, their wheels elliptic with speed. These shadows form over the skiff, accommodate his prone figure and pass on. (7)

Pseudomorph can indicate "a mineral having the outward appearance of another mineral that it has replaced by chemical action" (dictionary.com), something that has turned into something *else* even though it looks just the same on the surface. Each nailhead Suttree drifts past, despite

looking superficially like its precursor, is substantially different. Similarly Suttree's form, which remains motionless and apparently unchanged in his boat, is being inhabited by a series of distinct shadows that conform to his shape for a time and are then replaced by others. In the following paragraph, Suttree watches the reflection of his face on the surface of the river as periodic disturbances in its continuity reveal the changes happening underneath: "A welt curled sluggishly on the river's surface as if something unseen had stirred in the deeps and small bubbles of gas erupted in oily spectra" (7). The precise definition of "spectra" proves useful here: "a broad range of varied but related ideas or objects, the individual features of which tend to overlap so as to form a continuous series or sequence" (dictionary.com), something that looks like one thing though it is really a gradual succession of distinct but very closely related things. McCarthy's vocabulary highlights the naked eye's inability to distinguish small changes among like items in a series, especially over time, contrasted with the image of the cupracer which shows photography isolating, if imperfectly (we read the distortion as motion), one moment of the subject's total gesture. The chapter's first image, of isolated circles of light momentarily trapping small objects as they slide downriver ("wheels of light, coronets fanwise in which lay trapped each twig, each grain of sediment"), mimics photos' tendency to frame and isolate details, to take things apart by showing parts, and sets us up to notice that our first glimpse of Suttree is fragmented: "a hand trails over the gunwale . . . the toe of one sneaker" (7). Photographs disturb our natural tendency to see a motion, or a person for that matter, as a unified whole. The effect is similar to what Suttree notices when he sees the photograph illustrating news of Hoghead's death in the paper: "In the old school photo he appeared childlike and puckish, a composition of spots in black and white and gray. How very like the man." (403). Seeing a photo of a previous Hoghead than the one he knew, Suttree's impression of his whole

friend has decomposed. Assisted by the camera, by obsolete images of himself and people he's known, of relatives “cast up in an eyeblink between becoming and done” (128), Suttree becomes uncomfortably aware of his past self as someone totally distinct from him. McCarthy allows us to feel this estrangement in the “cold eyes” and “disaffect[ion]” (128) that Suttree sees in the photo of himself as a child, as well as his flat reaction:

> That's you, she said, after a silence.
>
> This is me, he said.

Suttree’s subsequent impression that he is an “artifact of prior races” (128) might be interpreted to refer to prior incarnations of himself as much as his proper ancestors. The “I am, I am” that precedes it might indicate a way in which the aspectant nature of the photographs makes Suttree feel himself disintegrate (“Suttree’s spine convulsed in a long cold shunting of vertebrae”).

Barthes contrasts the fractured self-image photography presents to him with forms of representation he finds better able to communicate the “essence of [his] individuality” (11): “If only I could ‘come out’ on paper as a classical canvas . . . . If I could be ‘painted’ (by Titian) or drawn (by Clouet)! . . . . What I want, in short,”he explains, “is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) ‘self,’” but it never works that way, “[f]or the photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity” (11-12). Suttree’s reflection on seeing a baby photo of Elizabeth juxtaposed against a photo on her deathbed associates this kind of fracture with the photos’ quick deterioration: “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” (130). The passage recalls similar comments by French film critic Andre Bazin contrasting “traditional

family portraits," which try to capture something eternal about the subject that remains constant as the body changes, with photographs, which simply slice off one moment, a temporary aspect, and try to hold it in suspension:

> Those gray or sepia shadows, phantomlike and almost undecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny; not, however, by the prestige of art but by the power of an impassive mechanical process: for photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption. (Bazin 242)

For Suttree, though, photographs don't rescue anything from "proper corruption" because a life halted inevitably begins to decay. His unease over the photographs' fractured identities seems to me to imply a desire for a form of representation that can capture something lasting or true about the subject or can produce an image that, as Barthes puts it, will "coincide with [his] profound self" (12) even as his body changes. Here, too, the problem seems to be photos' failure as a keeping place for souls – they only present something that is already dead. Suttree's impression of what they catch is a sequence of spent and lifeless forms – "Turning up one by one these dead faces with their wan and loveless gaze" (129) – like fish he's pulled out of the river – "the hooks riding up one by one into the oarlock with their leached and tattered gobbets of flesh" (7).

Suttree's apparent horror at the decay of pieces of paper in this scene might also be due to an old sense that a photograph, more than just a likeness, shares something of its subject's substance. The crumbling photo of a body may be for him a crumbling body. As Sontag explains, a photo differs from other pictures in the same way that a sculpture of a foot would differ from a cast footprint or a carved bust from a death mask. Because of its mechanical

process, she explains, a photograph participates in the physical existence of its subject in a way that no other artistic representation can, resulting in a "trace, something directly stenciled off the real" (154). Roland Barthes, on the other hand, makes the mechanics sound more like some kind of magic:

> Photography is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here . . . like the delayed rays of a star. A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed. (80)

The process gives photographs something of the quality of relics, which McCarthy acknowledges by associating them with things we might be more likely to recognize as such – "Bits of ribbon, hairlocks fell slowly down over the photos" (129) – and by drawing our attention to their status as objects in their own right – "imaged bits of cardboard, paper, tin" (127). In this capacity, their value has less to do with how they represent, and more to do with what they themselves are, an enduring perception that something essential is being "'extracted,' 'mounted,' 'expressed' (like the juice of a lemon) by the action of light" (Barthes 81). Susan Sontag is sure that, given a choice, we would prefer a photo of Shakespeare, even if it were totally decrepit and illegible and captured him very poorly, to a "glorious" portrait by Holbein the Younger because it would be like "having a nail from the True Cross" (154). Andre Bazin explains that this preference we have for a photograph's status as relic is due to a "deep need" to substitute for an object "something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer" which "is the object itself . . . freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it": "No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it

shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, that being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model"(241). But for Suttree, a redundant, alternate body that decays nearly as quickly would leave much to be desired as a memorial. As Barthes explains, a photo's physical identity with an *object* might inspire us to credit it with greater reality, but the effect should be different on viewing a photograph of a *person*: "Seeing a bottle, an iris stalk, a chicken, a palace photographed involves only reality. But a body, a face, and what is more, frequently, the body and face of a beloved person?" (107). He distinguishes between reality and the narrow physical identity that most photos are able to achieve: "[M]y effigy will perpetuate (for the limited time paper lasts) my identity, not my value" (110). He contrasts this with what he seeks from photos but is able to find only rarely— something more than material equivalence, something of a person's "air": "a soul, ageless but not timeless . . . the person I used to see, consubstantial with her face, each day of her long life" (110). Suttree finds only the former in Martha's album, and his faith in photos' power to capture an individual soul seems limited, but he is still disturbed in this scene by the way the photo album makes the subjects' bodies available to be managed and manipulated.

Andre Bazin begins "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" with the claim, "If the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation" (237). He goes on to describe the "mummy complex" at the heart of their history, beginning with the preserved human bodies which he calls the "first Egyptian statues" (238) and the small clay versions that evolved from them as an insurance policy in case these were looted or otherwise destroyed. He finds in them the first function of any representation of the human body, "namely, the preservation of life by a representation of life" (238), explaining their purpose by analogy with little clay bears found in prehistoric caves that

acted as “a magic identity-substitute for the living animal,” to ensure its capture during the hunt. Western painting, enabled by the “original sin” (240) of Albertian perspective, would continue after this to be plagued by a psychic desire to capture and preserve the appearance of reality as a way to “have the last word in the argument with death by means of the form that endures” (238). Only science, the advent of photography, would free it from this idolatrous desire and enable it to “recover its aesthetic economy” (243) by taking over the function of the Egyptians’ clay proxy. As Bazin explains it, “Only a photographic lens can give us the kind of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation” (241).

Bazin’s claim is that photography has enabled us to “sublimate our concern with [time] to the level of rational thinking” (238). Yet he betrays another kind of irrational faith – in the “power” of photographic image “to lay bare the realities.” Like many others before and after him, Bazin regards the camera as uniquely capable of recording truth because of its ability to reveal details that the naked eye can’t perceive and because of its supposed mechanical independence from human subjectivity. For him, the camera’s truth is the truth of science, of nature, objective truth more real than human perception. “Only the impassive lens,” he explains, “stripping the object of all . . . those piled up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love” (242). This is a commonplace that remains obstinate though it's been repeatedly challenged by critics of visual culture like W.J.T. Mitchell who would remind us that there are many other ways of seeing, and that all of them, including photography, present us not with “any sort of naked reality”(or “stripped . . . virginal purity,” to use Bazin’s phrase) but “a world already clothed in our systems of representation,” especially if we remember that looking

is a habit learned socially and "a product of experience and acculturation— including the experience of making pictures" (*Iconology* 38). Mitchell's story of the invention of artificial perspective associates it not with primitive forms of idolatry as Bazin's does, but instead with an emerging kind, a "spell of scientism" (37) which would enable it to subjugate all other ways of seeing:

> The effect of this invention was nothing less than to convince an entire civilization that it possessed an infallible method of representation, a system for the automatic and mechanical production of truths about the material and the mental worlds. The best index to the hegemony of artificial perspective is the way it denies its own artificiality and lays claims to being a "natural" representation of "the way things look," "the way we see," or . . . "the way things really are." (*Iconology* 37)

That we were able to create a device to record these types of images only further convinced us of their fidelity to nature: "What is natural is, evidently, what we can build a machine to do for us"(37). The camera's pretense of objectivity doesn't seem lost on Suttree, whose reference to its singular "cold glass *eye*" reminds us that humans have an ability to register depth that it doesn't. We could contrast this with several references to parallax that show up in Suttree's visions when his normal senses have failed him – after he's hit with the floor buffer (187), once during his hunger-induced mountain visions (287), and once when he's hallucinating in the hospital (453) – which suggest human vision's superiority precisely *because* it can move beyond objects in the environment – a different kind of depth perception. For example, Suttree calls the "old spectral revenants armed with rusted tools of war" that he sees "colliding parallactically upon each other" in the forest "A vision in lightning and smoke more palpable than wortled bone or plate or pauldron shelled with rot" (287). The phrase reminds me of John Wesley Rattner's assertion that

the physical artifact in front of him is “less real than the smell of woodsmoke or the taste of an old man's wine” (245), sensory memories that exist only in his mind as Suttree's vision of warriors does. To say that the optical accuracy of the photo makes it a real or true representation of the person it depicts is sort of laughable, like Suttree's joke to Martha about the audibly accurate naming of the “peeinest” dog Jose Iturbi (128). Suttree’s perception of the photos would call into question not only Bazin’s claim for photographs’ ability to rescue things from their “proper corruption,” but also his claim for photographs’ unique relationship to reality as well as his claim that photographs enable us to interact with images in a way that's not idolatrous – an adjective that just indicates mistaking what is ‘graven’ (by human hand or mechanical action) for what is real.

Bazin’s tale of civilization being rescued from superstition by the power of technology which we can explain and don't need to worship has been a typical way for westerners to distinguish our own dependence on images from the primitive kind. As Mitchell explains,

> Most ingenious of all, the Western idolatry of the natural sign disguises its own nature under the cover of ritual iconoclasm, a claim that *our* images, unlike “theirs,” are constituted by a critical principle of skepticism and self-correction, a demystified rationalism that does not worship its own projected images but subjects them to correction, verification, and empirical testing against the “facts” about “what we see,” “how things appear,” or “what they naturally are.” (*Iconology* 91)

Our faith in these images’ special relationship to reality is bolstered by a rhetoric of scientific accuracy to assure us that it’s rational and then contrasted against a “proper scenario for idolatry . . . a bunch of naked savages bowing and scraping before an obscene stone monolith” (91) to underscore its normalcy. What Bazin has done with the history of Western art is also often done

with the history of photography. We tend to assign superstition to its early days when people unused to scientific innovation were startled by the magical appearance of copies of themselves, but Cathy Davidson points out the difficulty we still have a ripping up a photograph of a loved one and our uneasiness if we forget to photograph an important event, as if that cancels it out. Her research into the rhetoric surrounding photography in its early days and its "construction of the modern self" has her convinced that issues with self-representation persist in a similar vein and that, "on some level, photography continues to arouse anxieties about the stability of the photographic referent or the identity of the photographed self that perplexed many of its first commentators" (677).

Suttree's album scene seems to challenge the normalcy and rationality of our behavior with photographs as well. It's interesting to think of the way that the photos are manipulated there in light of what Davidson calls the "talismanic power of certain photographs" (677). Martha brings them out, shuffles and arranges them, squints and bends over them, reads them for Suttree, collects them and puts them away again. There is an element of compulsion about the way she does this, as if the objects she's manipulating manipulate back a little: "She *must* set them back again with her finger" (126, my emphasis). Similarly, the stifled animation in the description of these photos transfixes the reader a little – they're not supposed to "peer out." They're like the blinking portraits on the walls at Hogwarts in the Harry Potter movies. A less friendly analogy might be the forced gaze of the photographed corpse that Suttree encounters when he visits Mother She, from which he is unable to avert his eyes (279). Martha and the photos wrestle very gently for control. They move. They're not supposed to be able to move, so she has to attend them. They don't seem to appreciate the way they're being handled, and something about the process seems wrong or dangerous to Suttree. They seem trapped

somewhere they would prefer not to be and their “dark and haggard eyes peer out.”They look “sinister, like the fruit of forbidden liaisons.” The language makes a common and innocent practice seem like some kind of bad magic, a repressed or naturalized version of Mother She’s conjuring over her little sack of claws and teeth. Mitchell’s assessment of our commonplace use of images like these has him wondering whether our behavior with them is as normal as we think:

> Suppose we begin to think of our ordinary, rational behavior with images as just a bit strange, as permeated with odd, cultish practices and ideological determinations? I don't think (and I certainly don't recommend) that this shift in attention would lead us to burn all our photo albums and back issues of *Playboy*. But it might put us in a position to take a critical view of imagery, to see it in its cultural and historical relations, not just as a part of nature, but as a part of us. (*Iconology* 91)

Suttree’s perceptions in this scene seem to evidence a similar “shift in attention” as he notices that our fetishistic behavior with photos, despite the falseness of photographs’ claim to truly capture a living soul, still places the bodies of the photographed subjects under the control of whoever is handling them. Susan Sontag believes that “[o]ur irrepressible feeling that the photographic process is something magical” (155) is a valid reaction to the way in which photos enable “surrogate possession” of the subject. Like Bazin, she traces photography back to “image-making at its origins, when it was a practical, magical activity, a means of appropriating or gaining power over something” (155). Rather than rationalizing this power through a rhetoric of scientific accuracy, though, she shows how it reestablishes a secular/ consumerist version of images’ “primitive status” (155) by allowing the owner of the image to manipulate a version of reality considered credible.

The relative ease with which a photograph can be managed and manipulated is one of its most attractive qualities, and we take advantage in myriad ways: “Photographs . . . get reduced, blown up, cropped, retouched, doctored, tricked out. . . get bought and sold . . . are stuck in albums, framed and set on tables, tacked on walls, projected as slides. Newspapers and magazines feature them; cops alphabetize them; museums exhibit them; publishers compile them”(Sontag 4). Once an image is taken, its subject doesn't have much control over the way it's used. The photographs in Martha’s album testify to their helplessness by their dazed and uncertain expressions as they get shuffled around and their stories get told, however briefly. Suttree's mother, for example, looking “out at the void with one cast eye and a slack uncertain smile,” seems uneasy about placing herself at the mercy of the photographer and whatever unknown person will occupy that “void” in her vision where Suttree and Martha now stand. Photos’ subjects are not only mute, but blind to how they will be used. Barthes does a nice job capturing how it feels to be in this situation, not completely trusting the skill or intentions of the person behind the camera, knowing that once the picture is developed it is out of our hands and literally in someone else's, and trying to maintain some measure of authority over our bodies and what they will signify (sometimes failing comically):

> I experience it with the anguish of an uncertain filiation: an image – my image – will be generated: will I be born from an antipathetic individual or from a “good sort”? If only I could “come out” on paper as on a classical canvas, endowed with a noble expression – thoughtful, intelligent, etc.! In short, if I could be “painted” (by Titian) or drawn (by Clouet)! But since what I want to have captured is a delicate moral texture and not a mimicry, and since photography is anything but subtle except in the hands of the very greatest portraitists, I don't know how to work upon my skin from within. I decide to “let

> drift” over my lips and in my eyes a faint smile which I mean to be “indefinable,” in which I might suggest, along with the qualities of my nature, my amused consciousness of the whole photographic ritual. (11)

Realizing he can't control what his face represents before the camera, he decides finally that his best strategy is to try to evade capture and remain indistinct. He identifies the source of his anxiety in terms similar to Sontag's justification of ‘primitive’ fears: “in a society for which being [is] based on having,” he explains, “this disturbance is ultimately one of ownership” (13). The owner of this relic will be able to control what his body signifies in ways that he couldn't, for purposes he can’t predict: “I foresee that I shall have to wake from this bad dream even more uncomfortably; for what society makes of my photograph, what it reads there, I do not know” (14). He anticipates being forced into postures he would resist if he could: “They turn me, ferociously, into an object, they put me at their mercy, at their disposal . . . ready for the subtlest deceptions” (14).

If Barthes’ fears fill the same void in vision that Suttree's mother encounters uneasily, we see the void again in a strange image Suttree comes across at Mother She's. An unnamed “someone” is manipulating a dead body into a posture of life and the body being manipulated seems to want to avoid looking at what it can't see anyway: Suttree who regards it.

> Someone in the photograph behind the grandmother was holding her head up and her eyes were glazed and sightless. Suttree could not stop looking at this cracked and lacquered scene from times so fabled. The hands at the neck of the creature seemed to be forcing her to look at something she had rather not see and was it Suttree himself these sixty-odd years hence? (279)

In a postmortem photograph like this, a headrest probably would have been used to brace the body into a position that looked lifelike. It was the same piece of equipment invented to help subjects hold themselves rigid by disallowing movement when long exposure times were required to capture an image. Barthes describes it as an extension of the camera's mechanical capability for objectifying people, “a kind of prosthesis available to the lens which supported and maintained the body in its passage to immobility” (13). It's interesting that in the above passage, the brace used to hold a living subject immobile for capture by the camera has been replaced by human hands, a person manipulating a dead body into a posture of life. It substitutes for impassive objectification something maybe worse – an interested reanimation. Someone is going to take that dead mechanical copy and make it into something significant for him. What results will be a “creature” of that person’s own device. It's the same “uncertain filiation” that Barthes describes, but in more horrifying terms as Suttree imagines the poor woman being forced to see herself made vulnerable to whatever his purpose might be. What Suttree chooses to project onto her is his vision of himself in her very position.

If for Suttree photographs are a form of representation that present the body of the photographed subject mute, vulnerable, and blind to the purposes of whoever now possesses them, his attention to the several postmortem photographs in the novel shows this problem in a particularly literal way. Three of the photos in Martha's album portray people who are either dying or dead, totally at the mercy of photographers and family members trying to capture a last image of them. The photograph of Elizabeth is the first of any photo described in the album scene and serves as an interesting introduction to the medium. Both Suttree and the reader encounter it initially as a postmortem photograph: “An ancient woman spreadeagled in a bed, dried hands at her sides, a cured looking face. She is bald save for sheaves of hair on either side

her head and they lie opposed and extended upon the pillow like pale horns" (126). It's only after this description that we find out the picture was taken "just afore she died." Whether Elizabeth is alive or dead makes no difference to the vulnerability of her position in this case, but it does have an effect on Suttree and on the reader who realize that a photograph doesn't distinguish a live body from a dead one. The photo presents visible details that are deceptive (closed eyes, dry skin, pale face, patchy hair, prone posture) and neglects signs of life apparent to someone present with her. The fact that we mistook a live body for a dead one makes us suspicious of what subsequent photos will present. The description of the second postmortem photograph, of his grandfather propped up on his deathbed, shows an opposite form of deception. It alternately places the focus on the intentions of the person trying to animate him as he supplies the corpse with details we might perceive as dubiously lifelike and the undesirable results:

> Some curious person from the past with a penchant for deathbed studies has remembered to us this old man upreared among his stained coverlets, stale smell of death, wild arms and acrimony, addressing as he did kin long parted in a fevered apostrophe of invective. . . . In the picture this old grandfather sat up in his yellowed bedding like a storybook rat, spectacles and nightcap and eyes blind behind the glass. (129)

The shift in perspective and tone and the narrator's direct address to "us" here reminds us that we don't actually see *any* image, but are reading about a postmortem photograph that "some curious person from the past . . . has *remembered* to us." Typical of ekphrasis, the narrator makes the mute and static image do what a photo of a corpse normally couldn't – smell stale and talk and flail its arms around. The effect of these additions is confusing because it's not clear whether this "curious" person's goal is to animate the photo or its referent – to make the corpse present ("stained coverlets, stale smell of death") or to make the corpse seem alive ("wild arms . . .

fevered apostrophe of invective"). It's also not quite clear grammatically whether the "wild arms and acrimony" and "fevered apostrophe of ineffective" belong to the corpse or to the writer animating him ("he" could refer to either) which is probably appropriate as in either case any words, motion, or intention attributed to the image or to the corpse can only be the narrator's. These uncertainties stress the redundancy of the postmortem photograph's deadness, and help direct our attention to where the source of the action really is: the unknown narrator's "curious" manipulations. They also tie the narrative to this type of photographic representation; they link this mysterious narrator's activities to "the hands at the neck of the creature" propping up Mother She's grandmother.

Postmortem photographs make us aware of the photographer's presence and intention in a way that normal photographs don't because the only action happening in them is the photographer's manipulation. It was common for photographers to stage these photos in such a way that the corpse might appear alive. This was usually accomplished by making the corpse appear merely to be asleep, especially in the case of children, who often were posed in their cribs. But bodies also were often propped up or worked into positions meant to seem alert, eyes were sometimes opened, makeup might be applied to the corpse or retouching done to the image afterward to add color. The photo of Suttree's grandfather seems to fall somewhere within this category which Jay Ruby, in his book *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America*, labels the "alive, yet dead" pose (72). A photo like this might be the product of no small effort on the part of the photographer. Josiah Southworth, of the prominent early photography firm Southworth and Hawes, describes his techniques for preparing a body for this type of photo. His description seems intended to help other photographers overcome their natural reluctance to the unpleasant work of posing a corpse, and probably also to its trespass:

> [T]his is a matter that is not easy to manage; but if you work carefully over the various difficulties you will learn very soon how to take pictures of dead bodies, arranging them just as you please. When you have done that the way is clear, and your task easy. The way I did it was just to have them dressed and laid on the sofa. Just lay them down as if they were in a sleep. That was my first effort. It was with a little boy, a dozen years old. It took a great while to get them to let me do it, still they did let me do it. I will say on this point, because it is a very important one, that you may do just as you please so far as the handling and bending of corpses is concerned. You can bend them till the joints are pliable, and make them assume a natural and easy position . . . Handle them just as well as if they were well persons. Arrange them in this position, or bend them into this position. Then place your camera and take your pictures just as they would look in life, as if standing up before you. (Ruby 54)

Southworth's repeated insistence on the pliability of a corpse and reassurances that it's okay to handle it as any other prop would be handled gives a sense of the elaborate staging required to achieve lifelike results. His claim that you can bend them into position "just as well as if they were well persons" also hints at the susceptibility of any subject (living or dead) to his intentions. Another photographer describes the complex operation involved in opening the subject's eyes:

> Place your camera in front of the body at the foot of the lounge, get your plate ready, and then comes the most important part of the operation (opening the eyes), this you can effect handily by using the handle of a teaspoon; put the upper lids down, they will stay; turn the eyeball around to its proper place, and you have the face nearly as natural as life. Proper retouching will remove the blank expression and the stare of the eyes. If the background should not suit you . . . make one that will. (Ruby 58)

It's not clear whether Suttree's grandfather's eyes have been opened, but his perception that they are “blind behind the glass” (unseeing but also reflective like the “glazed and sightless” open eyes of the corpse in Mother She's photograph) would seem to emphasize that in any case the eyes in this photo reflect the photographer’s own efforts rather than any kind of interiority of the subject (obviously). But this is an observation that might be generalized to photographs of living subjects in the album as well. For example, if the propping and staging of his grandfather makes him seem “like a storybook rat,” Suttree perceives the same cartoonish effect in the staging of Roy's baby picture: “Sailorsuited poppet a fiend's *caricature of old childhoods*, a *gross cartoon*” (127, my emphasis). Roland Barthes, discussing photography's tendency to make subjects seem inert and opaque, describes the “contortions to produce effects that are ‘lifelike’” that photographers employ to counteract this effect: “wretched notions: they make me pose in front of my paintbrushes, they take me outdoors . . .” (14). Suttree notices similar regrettable attempts at animation happening in photographs where living subjects are consciously posed and embellished by the photographer or placed in artificially constructed scenes. Props and costumes like Roy's little sailor suit, for example, were commonly employed in old photographs of children. Walter Benjamin’s account of them in “A Short History of Photography” emphasizes their elaborate clichéd fantasy in a way similar to Suttree's observations: “Foolishly draped or embellished figures . . . we ourselves: as salon Tyroleans, yodeling, hats swinging against painted firs, or as sailors, one leg straight and the other bent, as is appropriate, leaning against an upholstered post” (206). For Benjamin, these attempts to lend life or artistic flair to the photos mostly just overwhelm the vulnerable presence of their small, passive subjects. He describes a photograph of Kafka as a child:

> There in a narrow, almost humiliating child's suit, overburdened with braid, stands the boy, about six years old, in a sort of winter garden landscape. Palm fronds stand frozen in the background. And as if it were important to make these upholstered tropics even more sticky and sultry, the model holds a huge hat with broad brim like those Spaniards wear in his left hand. He would surely vanish into this arrangement were not the boundlessly sad eyes trying so hard to master this predetermined landscape. (206)

Benjamin explains that the props filling these "predetermined landscapes" evolved out of headrests and knee braces and were originally intended to help steady the subject during long exposure times. They were based on details found in famous paintings – columns, drapes, palm trees – "and therefore had to be artistic" (206). Suttree's sense of their static redundancy, then, derives not only from their likelihood to show up repeatedly "unchanged" in the backgrounds of the photos he's viewing, but also from their status as artistic clichés, and from their purpose of helping to affix a moving, independent subject into a predetermined position: "The landscapes, old backdrops, redundant too, recurring unchanged as if they inhabited another medium than the dry pilgrims shored up on them" (129). Barthes might be alluding to this history, too, when he refers to the headrest as "the pedestal of the statuary I would become, the corset of my imaginary essence" (13).

There is one other aspect of this second postmortem photograph that is striking to me: the removed interest implied as the narrator asks "us" to contemplate the intentions of "some curious person from the past with a penchant for deathbed studies" is typical of the way people tend to encounter an actual postmortem photograph. After some initial shock we are fascinated by the past and absorbed in speculation about it—who would want this? The phrase "deathbed studies" designates the image itself as the result of an aesthetic practice that has been made at a remove,

"a study" to be critiqued or pondered. Ruby explains this as an effect of time, distance, and commodification on images that were once full of emotional import for people who looked at them:

> As people buy, sell, and collect the family photographs of other people, the images lose their original purpose and meaning and become objects of aesthetic contemplation or curiosities. This transformation causes some people to become alienated from their morbid reaction to death photographs and instead become fascinated with the artful way *other* people in *other* times produced these pictures (52).

The reason these images are even in circulation is that they now have a market value as antiques and have been aestheticized to the point that we can take pleasure in looking at them. Postmortem photography is still a common practice but we never see evidence of it because contemporary images are usually thrown away rather than sold to collectors. Nostalgia hasn't yet conquered their distaste to people other than family. As Susan Sontag explains, "time eventually positions most photographs, even the most amateurish, at the level of art" (21); "[M]ost photographs do not keep their emotional charge. . . . The particular qualities and intentions of photographs tend to be swallowed up in the generalized pathos of time past. Aesthetic distance seems built into every experience of looking at photographs" (21). The narrator reminds us that our interest in this image is also as a "curiosity" we've come across in a book picked up at the store or library, fascinating because of the artful way another person in another time produced it, "some curious person in the past with a penchant." Suttree's reaction to Mother She's postmortem photo registers a similar fascination with "times so fabled" (279). But we are not the intended audience for the photo and our dispassionate speculation, or "aesthetic consumerism" as Sontag

would call it (24), was not its intended use. The narrator reminds us that the image has fallen into our hands.

If, as Sontag says, photos are “inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy” (23), it's because of their muteness, opacity, and mystery – the distance they can put between us and the subject. The image of Suttree's grandfather leads directly into another demonstration of that kind of aesthetic distance as Suttree turns his attention to a series of antique photographs — “And pictures. The old picnics, family groups, the women bonneted and with flowers, the men booted and pistoled”— and begins to supply details absent from the clichéd photographic image of “the patriot in his Sam Browne belt and puttees” (129). Dianne Luce perceives that at this point Suttree begins working to achieve “a writer's immediacy” with the distant image: “Like Harry dying of gangrene in Hemingway's ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro,’ Suttree is ‘writing’ here: ‘we could not believe he was inside. Cold and dry it was, our shoes cried in the snow all the way home . . .’” (221). She observes that the two instances in the album scene where Suttree begins supplying a story in response to photos are both prompted by a vacuum of information as he encounters individuals he knew very little: his uncle Milo, a sailor who had been absent for thirteen years and was then lost at sea, and this World War I soldier who would have died before Suttree was old enough to know him. Suttree is exercising his skills “only in response to photographs of people who are essentially strangers to him, acknowledged impersonally as kin” (220), conveniently empty of signification.

I don't think it's a coincidence that what Suttree writes into the soldier’s story is a proper funeral, or that the bodies of neither Milo nor the soldier have been properly secured/interred, Milo’s lost at sea, the soldier’s in transport indistinguishable among many similar coffins with their lading bills scattering their identities to the wind: “The patriot in his Sam Browne belt and

puttees, one of the all but nameless who arrived home in wooden boxes on wintry railway platforms. Tender him down alongside the smoking trucks. Lading bills fluttering in the bitter wind. Here. And here. We could not believe he was inside" (129). Suttree's efforts at narrative here could be interpreted as his attempt to fix a name and position for him, "tender him down" so to speak. The lading bills, like photographs poor identifiers that leave the dead "all but nameless," and like photographs insubstantial and exchangeable paper slips borne away on a breeze, show Suttree's imagined burial ceremony to be an effort to give his ancestor's body someplace more substantial to rest than in the little photograph. But Suttree's efforts are also an aesthetic exercise; he seizes on their lost bodies and identities as raw material for practice. He chooses individuals he knows only as types (the sailor, the patriot – like the characters chosen by the studio photographers of children so annoying to Walter Benjamin), he invests their empty identities with his own concerns and shapes them into, as Luce notes, "prefigurings of himself and of his fate"(129). Luce shows how Suttree's little knowledge of Milo's death at sea allows him to "revisit his imagined participation in the tumbling death of the suicide" and notes that Suttree's rendering of the story, "with its evocation of the southern hemisphere, recalls the narrator's observation in the prologue of the '*gray vines coiled leftward in this northern hemisphere, what winds them shapes the dogwhelk's shell,'* a pairing of passages that . . . reinforces the notion of the mirrored deaths of the suicide in the north and Milo in the south" (221). This symmetrical conception of Milo's death is pretty. So is the way that he imagines Milo's body "[a]s he rocks in his rusty pannier to the sea's floor in a drifting stain of guano" – an (impersonal) artful study of a death at sea and a nice display of his skill. On one level, we see the younger character Suttree's discomfort about the vulnerability of these unclaimed bodies which remind him of his own possible future, and in his narrative we sense a service to lost Milo and

the lost soldier as well as a critique of the poverty of the photographic image which reduces them to mute objects. On another level, we see the narrator/ older character Suttree's critique of his authorial investment as he shows them vulnerable to the manipulations of his narrative. The photos are proven to be “inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy” and Suttree’s efforts to situate them only further demonstrate the vulnerability of those bodies and confirm his fears.

Suttree's reaction to the third and last postmortem photograph is very different. The image of a “fat dead baby, garishly painted, bright fuchsia cheeks” makes Suttree finally close the album in disgust, commanding himself “never ask whose.” His own child's recent death eliminates any aesthetic distance from this picture. He doesn't want to imagine this little body in any kind of creative scenario as he did with Milo or the soldier. He finds the photographer's embellishments revolting. The photo presents him with a body that resembles his own child’s, in a most vulnerable state, being made instrumental to a lie.

The gravestones that prompt the main characters’ “hallucinated recollections” in “Wake for Susan” and *The Orchard Keeper* are a different kind of artifact than what Suttree encounters in the album scene. Monuments, as Llewellyn explained, replace the decaying natural body with something less threatening to the stability of the social body. If monuments are terse, they at least properly inter the bodies they represent; Wes and John Wesley lay their hands on stones and tell stories to make them speak, not on bodies. The ways in which these photos leave their subjects’ bodies vulnerable to decay, misinterpretation and misuse is disturbing to Suttree, and so his hallucinated recollections become efforts to fix a stable location for them. We can see this pattern repeated throughout the novel as Suttree tries to use narrative to create a stable “keeping place” for himself and the vanishing reality of McAnally flats. But the older narrator's critique of

Suttree's narrative manipulations of these photographs can also be sensed throughout the novel. He represents his efforts to control or stabilize his subjects not only as a doomed enterprise, but as a predatory and fetishistic form of “surrogate possession” that robs others of the respect and autonomy they deserve.

CHAPTER III

AN EKPHRASTIC VIEW OF NARRATIVE

Dianne Luce notes the “freeze frame” effect of the photographs in *Suttree*’s album scene and understands them as a figure for Suttree's paralyzing fear of death and the “seeping” of time (225). For Luce, narrative is his way of moving past these fears by becoming “the bard of his own existence” (207) – the power of speech allows this apprentice writer finding a voice to free himself, move beyond Knoxville, and determine his own fate (207). Her interpretation plays on a common understanding of images as the mute and static “impoverished stepsister of language” (*Iconology* 66) whose only real power is a sinister ability to dazzle and fixate the viewer, a sort of Medusa to Suttree’s Perseus. She sees Suttree's storytelling as the purgative and heroic solution to the problems the photographs pose for him. Her storyline is oversimplified, though, because she doesn't address how Suttree's complicated and evolving relationship with narrative is figured by a more complicated treatment of his words’ relationship to the pictures. The stranger from *Cities of the Plain* who gives Luce the phrase “bard of his own existence,” for instance, seems to be trying to *qualify* Billy Parham's expectations about the control a storyteller has over the world he thinks he's creating. When Billy tells him “You dreamt him. You can make him do whatever you like” (282), the stranger responds, “You think men have power to call forth what they will? Evoke a world, awake or sleeping? Make it breathe and then set out upon it figures which a glass gives back or which the sun acknowledges? Quicken those figures with one's own joy and one's despair?” (282). The references to “figures which a glass gives back” or figures

that are “quickened” indicate to me that the stranger is pitting two conceptions of narrative against one another – one in which narrative stays within its traditional temporal sphere and within the limits of representation, and one in which it oversteps both of these bounds into the proper sphere of images and into idolatry. “Bard of his own existence,” implies a narrative based on oral tradition that has a natural, temporal, lifecycle; it changes as it’s passed down from person to person and probably also changes with the teller over his own lifetime, as opposed to this other conception of narrative that can conquer space and time, create figures out of words and make them last and live.

It's the mass and the stable location of the “figures” from the second conception of narrative Suttree seems to be aspiring to when he says that he “would stand a *stone* in the very void *where* all would read [his] name,” a memorial object that could “take [his] own part against the slander of oblivion” so that, both visible and speaking, he wouldn't disappear (414, my emphasis). We might contrast these statements to his impression of the body as a “mawky wormbent tabernacle” (130) toward the end of the album scene. He observes from Martha's album that the body (and the images he associates with it – flat, aspectant, static, mute, blind, corporal and deteriorating) isn't a sufficient “keeping place for souls” (130) on its own. His efforts to supplement the album's ill-treatment of its subjects by telling stories to memorialize or situate them better implies that he thinks he might have an answer to these problems. We can see him setting up an opposition between body, object and image on one hand and soul, subject and narrative on the other, and at the same time trying to bridge that gap by using narrative to speak to, for, and about the mute and static images, lending them voice, agency and life.

But I would point out that the album scene also seems to mock the “vanity” (414) of that project. The photos in the album are dead upon arrival and Suttree doesn’t seem to be having

much success reviving them. His ekphrastic description of a postmortem photograph, for example, only parodies the desire to make the images present before us moving and speaking. It gives us a version of the photo that can stink, stain and flail its arms around in a pantomime of speech not to us but to an audience that's already gone: “Some curious person in the past with a penchant for deathbed studies has remembered to us this old man upreared among his stained coverlets, stale smell of death, wild arms and acrimony, addressing as he did kin long parted in a fevered apostrophe of invective” (129). It's difficult here to tell which “curious person” the narrator is referring to, to distinguish objects from actions or disentangle body, photo, photographer, character, narrator, and narrative. Which one has “remembered to us this old man,” which is responsible for his position “upreared” or the smell or the motion, who does the “addressing” and who the “apostrophe” on behalf of whom, and which animate or inanimate object either is directed at are all very confusing. The difficulty distinguishing between the ekphrastic description of the photograph and the photographic representation of the corpse implies an analogy between the two activities, and suddenly all of the qualities of photographs that Suttree has been critiquing might be applied to narrative. Neither the narrator nor the photographer have managed to bring this figure to life, keep its soul, or allow it to communicate any clear message; they’ve only presented us with something rotten and incoherent. If we understand ekphrasis as a figure for Suttree's desire to give a voice to the mute and static object he envisions himself becoming in death, to keep body and soul together communicative and coherent, this is not an indication that the project is going to turn out well. Like the suicide Suttree contemplates at the beginning of the novel which shows him a reflection of himself as “some gross water *homunculus* taken in trolling that the light of God’s day had stricken dead instanter” (9, my emphasis), the image’s obstinate and redundant deadness refutes the possibility

of creating the kind of quickened “figures which a glass gives back or which the sun acknowledges” and hints that Suttree’s attempt to reproduce himself for posterity will fail.

The scene also gives us the sense that ‘lending’ voice or agency can be transgressive. The postmortem photographs in the album scene are disturbing because the photographer seems to have overstepped a boundary involving taste or deference or maybe superstition. The experiments manipulating passive bodies to create a lifelike representation seem improper and disrespectful, regardless of good intentions. It's the same transgression that we sense in Suttree's memory of a little girl who picked a dead infant up out of its casket and began carrying it down the hallway singing it a lullaby, horrifying the onlookers:

> [T]he woman saw them pass in the hall and called softly upon God before she ran from the room and someone cried out: You bring that thing here. And they ran down the hall and the little girl fell with it and it rolled on the floor and the man came out and took it away and the little girl was crying and she said that it was just lying in there by itself (429).

Seeing it “just lying in there by itself” prone and lonely, the little girl does what she’s learned to do with her dolls – she animates it. She’s following her natural instinct to overcome what separates us from others. She isn’t aware yet, as the adults are, of the difference between a doll and this baby, of ways in which respect of it demands a more careful approach, or of the bad connotations of playing with someone.

The description of the postmortem photograph alerts us to an analogous complicated relationship between Suttree and the subjects he speaks for. The way that W.J.T. Mitchell talks about ekphrasis might provide an interesting lens through which to examine these relationships. He claims the basic motivation behind ekphrasis to be “the overcoming of otherness” (*Picture*

Theory 156) and explains the history of discourse on it in terms of an ambivalence shown in three stages – indifference, hope, and fear – that is "grounded in our ambivalence about other people, regarded as subjects and objects in the field of verbal and visual representation" (163). His categories of hope and fear seem to roughly correspond with changes we can detect in Suttree's expectations of narrative. Mitchell's first stage, ekphrastic indifference, refers to a commonsense attitude that image and word naturally exist in separate spheres for separate purposes and that any attempt on the part of either to step out of its "proper and appropriate mode" will fail (152). I'm reminded here of Suttree's father's advice that there is a proper place for him to enjoy speech and agency and that there is nothing for him in that other place marked out for those other people: "the world is run by those willing to take the 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, and business, and government. There is nothing occurring in the streets. Nothing but a dumbshow composed of the helpless and the impotent" (14). Ekphrasatic hope, by contrast, occurs when "the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we discover a "sense" in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do" (152). What language is attempting to do in this stage depends on the definition of ekphrasis that you're working with, varying from the basic "verbal representation of visual representation" (152), making a work of art appear in words, to "a more general application that includes any 'set description intended to bring person, place, picture, etc. before the mind's eye,'" or to more ambitious attempts to further entangle speech and vision by "giving voice to a mute art object" or to "shaping . . . language into formal patterns that 'still' the movement of linguistic temporality into a spatial, formal array. Not just vision, but stasis, shape, closure, and silent presence ('still' in the other sense)" (*Picture Theory* 154). Each of these definitions of ekphrasis is phrased in

terms of a desire it aims to fulfill, and we see each of these desires reflected in Suttree's efforts at narrative at different points in the novel to the degree that we might be able to characterize his initial expectations of narrative in terms of "ekphrastic hope." His critique of the photographs in the album scene, for instance, generally takes the form of "a rhetorical description of the work of art" meant to make the photographs present for the reader but also to characterize the images as an inferior form of representation.

Sometimes, though, he begins to use narrative to reach through the images and position the photographed subjects' bodies differently than the photos have done, or to speak to them or for them, transforming the stasis and muteness of the photographs *and* their subjects. Here the album scene reflects a desire Suttree exhibits throughout the novel to counter his father's indifference by overcoming the barriers between mute objects and eloquent agents. We can begin to see how Mitchell's category of "ekphrastic hope" and its associated desire to overcome what separates us from others can be applied to Suttree's narrative treatment of living subjects. Dianne Luce notes, for example, "the deaf-mutes' patient nods of encouragement and appreciative laughter when Suttree succeeds in breaking through the barriers that wall them away from one another," and considers this to show the relationship between writer and reader, author and subject "as communion as much as communication" (*Reading the World* 209). She points to passages in which Suttree as an apprentice writer learns vocal mannerisms and stories of the people around him so that he'll be able to provide a "'history' of the inarticulate"(208) as William Chaffee does in *The Gardener's Son*. In defiance of his father's comment that the streets are a "dumbshow of the helpless and impotent," many scenes in the novel show Suttree learning from less formally articulate men how to speak, and give the reader a sense of mutual respect and interaction between Suttree and his prospective subjects. As Luce explains it, "the story-

swapping between Suttree and less-educated men brings them together in a bonding ritual and represents Suttree's efforts to master vernaculars and subcultures other than the one in which he was raised" (209). There are many places, as in the interactions above, where this communal relationship between apprentice-author Suttree and his subjects seems to exist. But there are just as many places in the novel where the same sorts of interaction are represented less as bonding or communion and more as subjection, objectification or theft, with the subject resisting and frustrating his efforts by fighting back or by playing dead. These scenes highlight the manipulative nature of Suttree's interactions with voiceless or vulnerable subjects and point to motivations beyond altruism that Luce fails to identify, indicting rather than celebrating his narrative project. Evidence that Luce uses to illustrate how Suttree's writerly intent is to break down the barriers marginalizing the residents of McAnally, for example, might also be used to show how he oversteps a boundary they might rather keep intact:

> Indeed *study* is the verb of choice in many of these passages, suggesting that Suttree is self-apprenticed as a student of life or writer in the making. Suttree watches acutely the "elder child of sorrow" – the "smokehound" and "drinker of shaving lotion" – who, locked within himself, never speaks to his fellow prisoners. The old man catches Suttree studying him and "fell to talking to himself with a kind of secretive viciousness" (50). (*Reading the World* 208).

The episode she's referring to begins with a description of Suttree's "gothic loneliness" in prison (*Suttree* 50). He seems to see this other prisoner's seclusion as a possibility for his own future, and so his empathy feels genuine. He reaches out with a generous gesture, offering the man a package of cigarettes he's been handed, which seems to indicate that his effort to get the man speaking is altruistic. To return to Mitchell's discussion of the motives underlying ekphrastic

hope, it is a common assumption "that arguments, addresses, ideas, and narratives are in some sense *proper* to verbal communication, that language must bring these things as a gift to visual representation" (*Picture Theory* 160) but this isn't always true; images have their own rhetoric just as the "dumb" and "helpless" inhabitants of McAnally do. What happens, then, when the objects of Suttree's attention have their own manner of speaking and don't want his gift? The old prisoner, for instance, seems to have lots to say. He just doesn't want to say it to Suttree or in a manner that he can understand, and his self-protective reaction exposes Suttree's interest as an intrusion. He seems to be aware, as well, that the cigarettes are going to require some form of reciprocity. If Suttree's interest in him is writerly, he's studying this figure in order to make a better, more real or vivid, fiction. Though placing words in a mute art object's mouth is often discussed in terms of "lending" or "giving" voice, it's also a way of appropriating the image or object's concreteness to give body to a writer's own abstraction. As Mitchell explains, we also assume "that the visual arts are inherently spatial, static, corporeal, and shapely; that they bring these things as a gift to language" (*Picture Theory* 160). Though he may not realize it in this (attempted) exchange, part of Suttree's purpose in studying the residents of McAnally is to give detail and body to his own autobiographical project and to "[q]uicken those figures with [his] own joy and [his] despair" (*Cities of the Plain* 282). In this sense, Suttree's projection of his loneliness onto the other prisoner and consequent effort to make him speak are something like the little girl's transgression animating the baby "just lying in there all by itself." To quote Billy Parham on the issue, "I don't recall a time that I ever dreamt about other people but what I wasnt around somewheres. My notion is that you pretty much dream about yourself" (*Cities* 274).

Accordingly, characters in this novel are often described in ways that make them seem like mute and passive images or objects – as dolls, marionettes, effigies, or artifacts, or flattened

into static photographic or clichéd images which Suttree then interprets or animates in whatever way he sees fit. Like Martha's manipulations of the photographs, this play with proxies often seems fetishistic, predatory, and a little bit dangerous. In each instance, the subjects represented begin to resist Suttree's will to "keep" them either by remaining obstinately dead and deteriorating or by coming alive and breaking apart from his still and controlled spatial arrangements, fighting or speaking back (often in ways that seem incoherent to him). Paradoxically, once his subjects begin to move and speak of their own accord, his reactions usually involve a form of contempt similar to his father's and fear of "insurrection" (434) followed by some form of quick retreat, as if he never expected that they might not want to do exactly as he pleased.

These reactions seem consistent with Mitchell's third phase, ekphrastic fear, which occurs when the desire to make the object present or to make it speak or move, now (in some sense) realized, begins to feel like a bad idea, a can of worms that maybe should never have been opened. Instead of what is possible, the question becomes what is proper for images or proper for words and how those boundaries should be legislated. Rules must now apply for the protection of each party. Mitchell explains it as "the moment in aesthetics when the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than (as in the first, "indifferent" phase of the crisis) a natural fact that can be relied on" (*Picture Theory* 154). Which party is in danger, though, which is overstepping and which is threatening, would depend on whether the interactions are seen from the perspective of Suttree the character/apprentice writer or Suttree the older narrator. Character-Suttree's contempt of subjects who speak and act out of place (and his scared retreats) imply that he thinks image and word can cooperate as long as each knows what "gift" it brings to the exchange, which is consistent with Mitchell's assertion

that ekphrastic fear begins as an awareness of cooperation between these two modes "as a dangerous promiscuity" which must then be regulated "with firm distinctions between the sexes, modes of representation, and the objects proper to each" (155). From character-Suttree's perspective, the images overstep their proper sphere when they move or speak in ways he hasn't intended and then become a threat. We get a sense that he is failing to control the magic he's been playing with, the "dangerous promiscuity" epitomized in the scene in which Mother She's magic to make him see allows her to paralyze and violate him in a horrifying sexual nightmare (426). This is consistent with the kind of iconoclastic rhetoric that often comes into play at this point which, as Mitchell explains, traditionally focuses on the danger that the imaged other poses to the author or the reader: "[T]he utopian figures of the image and its textual rendering as transparent windows onto reality are supplanted by the notion of the image as a deceitful illusion, a magical technique that threatens to fixate the poet and the listener" (*Picture Theory* 156). This is precisely the effect of Mother She's potion on Suttree. He finds himself "divest[ed]"of his powers of speech and vision: "unknowing if his eyes saw or saw not . . . he screamed a dry and soundless scream" (426-27). Consequently,

> All the utopian aspirations of the ekphrasis – that the mute image may be endowed with a voice, or made dynamic and active, or actually come into view, or (conversely) that poetic language might be "stilled," made iconic, or "frozen" into a static, spatial array – all these aspirations begin to look idolatrous and fetishistic. (*Picture Theory* 156)

In his older incarnation as narrator, though, Suttree seems to be revising this viewpoint and showing us the ways in which his attempt to use narrative as a "keeping place for souls" is a predatory form of entrapment or capture that imposes on its subjects. He reverses the typical

rhetoric on idolatry to indicate that his former expectations of narrative have overstepped the proper sphere of representation.

> [I]conoclasm typically proceeds by assuming that the power of the image is felt by somebody *else*; what the iconoclast sees is the emptiness, vanity, and impropriety of the idol. The idol, then, tends to be simply an image overvalued (in our opinion) by an *other*: by pagans and primitives; by children or foolish women; by Papists and ideologues (*they* have an ideology; we have a political philosophy); by capitalists who worship money while we value "real wealth." (*Iconology* 113)

Similarly, we watch apprentice-writer-Suttree find instances of idolatry in others all over Knoxville: in Mother She and Michael with their talismans and fetishes, in himself as a child when he pulls "a small billikin carved from some soft wood and detailed with a child's crayon" out of a chimney in the school "where he'd been taught a sort of christian witchcraft" (304), in Martha's domestic conjuring with photos, at the Church of the Immaculate Conception where he mocks a "tabernacle where the wise high God himself lies sleeping in his golden cup" (253) and associates the priests' imaged sermons with a naïve and illiterate congregation ("visions of hell and stories of levitation and possession and dogmas of Semitic damnation for the tacking up of the Paraclete. After eight years a few of their charges could read and write in primitive fashion and that was all" 254), or in the things that Joyce or his father are willing to sacrifice to money. He seems to be locating forms of idolatry in all of the expected places and contrasting its imagery and vanity with his own rational thought and language. According to Mitchell, this is a common tactic. Others' idols "must be declared 'dumb,' 'mute,' 'empty,' or 'illusory'" so that "Our God, by contrast – reason, science, criticism, the Logos, the spirit of human language and civilized conversation" can be shown to be "invisible, dynamic, and incapable of being reified in

any material, spatial image" (*Iconology* 113). The older narrator Suttree, on the other hand, shows us how the same kinds of idols infiltrate his story. When Suttree finds the billikin he'd carved as a child, for example, the narrator associates it with an emblematic object embedded in the narrative. The priest, described as "the figure," is curiously static and silent, "mounted on the first landing like a piece of statuary. A catatonic shaman who spoke no word at all" (305). His concern seems to be that Suttree's manipulation of his subjects *keeps* them from speaking, rather than a fear about what will happen when the object or image gains a voice. Older Suttree critiques the prior characterization of the priest as a naïve caricature in retrospect, a child's paper puppet similar to the little carving: "*When he looked back* he could see the shape of the priest in the baywindow watching like a paper priest in a pulpit or a prophet sealed in glass" (305, my emphasis). Instead of mocking a god sleeping in a little cup worshiped by naïve illiterate papists, the narrator mocks his own attempt to encapsulate this subject. He seems to be trying to contradict his former iconoclastic rhetoric, which Mitchell describes as "a rhetoric of exclusion and domination, a caricature of the other as one who is involved in irrational, obscene behavior from which (fortunately) we are exempt" (*Iconology* 113), and to implicate himself instead. He also seems to be showing the irrationality of his desire to create a kind of narrative that can tell a complete truth, a self-enclosed story that can keep its subjects safe from others' tampering and incorrupt, his "prophet sealed in glass." The narrator's ekphrastic fear cautions against his own efforts to preserve himself and the residents of McAnally for posterity by making them "iconic" and freezing them into a "static spatial array" (which he can then make move and speak) as predatory and idolatrous. As Mitchell notes, "Among the most interesting and complex versions of this struggle [between image and word] is what might be called the relationship of subversion,

in which language or imagery looks into its own heart and finds lurking there its opposite number" (*Iconology* 43).

In her book *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer: 1840-1940*, Carol Schloss shows how the visible activity of photographers helped several writers to understand the complexities of their own position in relation to their subjects. As she explains it, the perceptual activity of writers gathering materials – their decisions about how to approach their subjects, how to gain access while still respecting boundaries, how to avoid distorting a subject in service to their own agendas, all hidden and implied – were revealed by "the camera's literal, dependent presence before the subject":

> Photographers have served writers as narrators of the actual, embodying creative powers in the most literal ways, unveiling the dynamics of vision, insisting that methods of working, ways of gaining visual access to the world, of relating to subjects, constitute a dimension of art as substantive as – indeed, consubstantive with – the more formal qualities that commonly defined an aesthetic tradition. (17)

Author James Agee was particularly affected by watching photographer Walker Evans at work while he collaborated with him on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* documenting the lives of tenant farmers during the depression. He admired Evans' talent and his respectful treatment of his subjects. Nevertheless, the collaboration caused him to struggle with the potential abuses of his art. Though the pair were engaged in a project meant to give voice to their subjects (similar to Suttree's desire to create a "history of the inarticulate") Agee was aware of the power relations at play: "He thought it no accident that pictures are usually taken by one class of another . . . that 'concerned' photography was usually a dubiously motivated concern for those who could most easily be taken from" (8). Schloss relates an anecdote about the pair trying to photograph a

church in Alabama. While Evans was setting up the tripod so that he could catch the building in the right light, a pair of churchgoers walked by and Agee and Evans were suddenly aware of themselves as trespassers. As Agee explained it, they were "ashamed and insecure in [their] wish to possess their church" (Qtd. in Scloss 8). Agee ran after the couple to ask their permission and frightened them, and afterwards considered his and Evans' behavior to be criminal. Had Agee been gathering material to write about the church on his own, he might never have realized his trespass because the visible apparatus of the camera wouldn't have been there to draw the notice of the churchgoers, to show him his own position among them. The camera helped Agee visualize his own hidden activity:

> Far from being an added dimension to a story, reinforcement or proof of some other mode of representation, [the photographs] provided the light by which Agee understood his own creativity, his own humanity and his lack of it. 'Next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness,' he said, '[the camera is] the central instrument of our time.' It was as if he saw in those several dazzling and uncomfortable weeks of watching Evans a visible tableau of his own position in the world, the hidden and secretive probing of the writer made tangible, its effects on others exposed. (Schloss 15)

I think the photo album scene functions in a way similar to the camera in Agee's anecdote, "unveiling the dynamics of vision" not by showing us the camera/implement but by showing us "its effects on others exposed" in a series of images that flatten, disfigure, misrepresent, and place their subjects at a disadvantage. Similarly, the narrator in *Suttree* never openly acknowledges to the reader that Suttree is his apprentice-author self, nor does he directly address the dangers of his former expectations of narrative. Instead he repeatedly invites us to notice the effect he is having on the people around him. Characters are shown to us as marionettes, artifacts

in a museum, static images, or taxidermy because Suttree approaches and represents them that way – as bodies he can shuffle and arrange in his book in a manner similar to the posed and propped subjects in Martha's album. This way of alerting us to Suttree's status as apprentice author, starting from his effect on others, implies that the ethical encounters between author and subject "constitute a dimension of art as substantive as – indeed, consubstantive with – the more formal qualities that commonly defined an aesthetic tradition" (Schloss 17). This subplot seems to emphasize the problematic and predatory nature of Suttree's (hidden, implied) "unassisted and weaponless consciousness" as he works to gain access and gather materials, often overstepping boundaries and distorting his subjects in service to his own autobiographical agenda. Suttree's ekphrastic manipulation of images in the album scene provides another unflattering analogy for his narrative treatment of his subjects, also rooted in the dynamic between seeing, speaking, moving subject and seen, mute, static object. Throughout the novel, the narrator shows us how his representations repeatedly ignore or suppress his characters' voluntary speech or action, turning them instead into bodies that he can use as mouthpieces for his own concerns. These manipulations remind us that "the most basic pictures of epistemological and ethical encounters (knowledge of objects, acknowledgment of subjects) involve optical/discursive figures of knowledge and power that are embedded in essentialized categories like 'the visual' and 'the verbal'" (*Picture Theory* 162). The examples that follow will examine how the novel represents Suttree's interactions with his subjects as ethical encounters involving these kinds of "optical/discursive figures of knowledge and power."

CHAPTER IV

SUTTREE'S NARRATIVE MANIPULATIONS

The album scene alerts us to a complicated relationship between image and word implicit in Suttree's attempts to give voice to the vulnerable subjects he finds there. Viewing these exchanges between word and image as representative of social relationships puts us in a position to understand what happens when Suttree begins to project his concerns onto living subjects who should be able to speak for themselves. We can begin to see how Suttree's approach to narrative as a way to secure a stable identity for himself and his subjects after death reduces them, as the photos do, to a collection of bodies to be managed and manipulated.

For Suttree, the photo album was disturbing in the way that it denied the individuality of its members and made them instrumental to the survival of a family blood line and record. Its faces became part of a story that "blood told" about biological permutations of the family type, and were flattened into a general family background for the viewer. Several scenes in the novel seem designed to showcase Suttree's similar treatment of his subjects in service to his personal chronicle. The scene in which Suttree goes to see his institutionalized aunt Alice to gather information on his family background, for example, seems set up to remind us of this aspect of the album scene and to tie Suttree's narrative activity to the representations he found there. Suttree enters the building through another book, a ledger, logged in by a nurse according to his manner of relation:

She took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes and pushed the paper back. She opened a ledger and held the pencil above it. Your name, she said.

Suttree. Cornelius Suttree.

You are . . . What?

I beg your pardon?

The nurse looked up at him. What, she said. A nephew?

Yes. Nephew. (431)

The short dialogue is a little reminiscent of Suttree and Martha's identifications of her album's subjects. Suttree's confusion over the nurse's apparently broad question "You are . . . What?" emphasizes the institution's narrow definition of his identity. For her purposes, he is "Cornelius Suttree . . . . Nephew." Suttree's subsequent conversation with Alice reintroduces names of relatives familiar from the album scene as well as a familiar set of competing definitions of family as social institution (Barthes' "disaffected socius") versus group of people who love one another. When Suttree asks Alice whether she knows him her reply is that he is "Grace's son," which makes him smile to himself and repeat, "son of Grace" (432). The phrase sounds both vaguely religious, like a title from a litany where "grace" would imply that the status of son is a gift of love freely given, and genealogical, where the relationship has been determined by careful tracking of bloodlines. Later, we notice that Alice's definition of "father" differs from Suttree's:

I never thought to end my time in such a place as this, she said. If Alan had lived he never would of let no such thing happen. He was always so good to me. I was like his little girl almost. I was just little when daddy died.

What was his name? Your father. I never knew his name. (433)

Alice's story designates Alan as her father because he loved her— he would have seen her unhappiness and done something about it. But Suttree's cold response, failing to recognize her unhappiness and dismissing her story about family in order to record the proper name of her proper father, aligns his purpose as a writer with that of the nurse he encountered when he came in. Later, when Alice evades the subject of Jeffrey's criminal history and the manner of his death, Suttree's desire for accuracy gives his voice the quality of a ledger:

> . . . But they said he was, that he had been in trouble, I don't know. I reckon it was so and I reckon Jeffrey must of took after him. I never knew Jeffrey. I was just a baby when . . . When he died.
>
> He was hanged in Rockcastle County Kentucky on July 18, 1884.
>
> She didn't answer. She said: Alan always said that Robert favored him. But of course Robert never . . . (433)

The only hint that the information Suttree supplies here is part of the dialogue and not omniscient narration is the sentence "She didn't answer." The detail seems to link Suttree's disaffection with his narrative intent. For Suttree this is not a conversation but an interview that needs to result in accurate data for his personal chronology, a point emphasized by his reaction when Alice and her friend want to engage him beyond his line of inquiry: "He felt himself being drawn into modes for which he had neither aptitude nor will. They were both watching him. The tears were gone. Their eyes seemed filled with expectation and he'd nothing to give. He'd come to take" (434).

When Suttree first sees Alice he asks her how she's being treated, but the question is a cover. His interest in her extends only as far as her usefulness as an artifact.

> How have you been, aunt Alice?

> Hollow croak of a voice in the drafty dayroom. He cleared his throat. He turned to see had he attracted attention. (432)

The hollow quality of Suttree's question, appropriate in the cold empty room, turns him again into an extension of the institutional setting. Her response, “Oh, *a body* ought not to complain” (432, my emphasis) is a reminder that in this place she is a body to be kept. Suttree asks whether anyone has visited her, mentioning Martha, and Alice informs him that no one has come but John, using the phrase “He took me out” (432). Martha, who takes great care keeping the photographic records of her siblings, hasn't taken (literally logged) actual Alice out of the place where she’s been filed away. Suttree’s impressions as he approaches the building prepare us to understand how he views her: trees look like “fossils” (431), people look like “some*thing* from the past” (431 my emphasis), he notes the effect of time on Alice's body: “He thought that he might know her in some way but age and madness had outdone all the work of likeness there had ever been and he could not guess” (431-2), the phrase “the work of likeness” making it seem as if her body were a statue the weather had eroded so it could no longer be read. Once he's gotten what information he can from Alice, he leaves, “Casting his eyes over this wreckage” (434), as if the visit had been a dig.

Suttree's impression of himself in the album as an “artifact of prior races” marked him not only as a keeper of genealogical data but also blood. He was disturbed by the album’s (and Martha's) reduction of people to bodies in the sense that human characteristics became biological properties. His interest is in genealogy prompts related musings from Alice as she explains a genetic predisposition to wildness according to who “took after” or “favored” whom, but always based on family lore: “they said he was, that he had been . . . I don't know. I reckon” or “Alan always said” (433). She tells Suttree that she questioned (“always wondered about”) how that

kind of determination worked with the observation that “had he [her father] died none of us would never have been at all and I never could . . . Well, that's a funny thing to think. Maybe we would have just been somebody else” (433). It's hard to know here exactly what blood (in this case Alice) is telling. Her recollections leave us with a sense of traits as a result of traditions passed down by people, not bodies, and of the important role of storytelling in the process. As in *The Orchard Keeper*, where the traditions John Wesley has received from Uncle Ather and Marion Sylder make them fathers more than Kenneth Rattner who shared his blood, memorializing a family history is more complicated than locating the corpse of a forebear. Yet throughout the scene Suttree seems to be missing the stories that matter most because he has gone to pick Alice's brain with a narrow purpose and sterile assumptions. But if Suttree's interest in her extends only as far as her usefulness as an artifact, Alice is not quite as clear on the question of her utility: “They was nine of us you know,” she explains, “Me and Elizabeth outlived all the boys and now she's gone and I'm in the crazy house. Sometimes I don't know what people's lives are for. She looked at Suttree” (433). The content of her next story, loving an old horse even though it was no longer useful to her family, hugging it and crying in the middle of the street even though that seemed like madness to other people, provides a warm contrast to Suttree's unvoiced answer.

Unlike Alice's friend who cries at the thought of Alice crying over her horse, Suttree won't be “drawn into” her story since he's only there to gather information, record. His instinct is to pull away, and what should have been an exchange is instead represented as a kind of theft: “Their eyes seemed filled with expectation and he'd nothing to give. He'd come to take. He pulled away from them and they leaned toward him with their veined old hands groping at the emptiness” (434). His status as an interloper is evident too in the stealth he employs on entering

the room (“A lone pacer in a strange knitted cap paused and raised a cautionary finger. Suttree nodded, agreeing as he did on the need for care. The old women sat like almstresses on the floor in their hodden cloaks” 431) and his furtive glances when he realizes how false his expressions of concern sound (“He turned to see had he attracted attention” 432). I'm reminded of Gene Harrogate stealing peaches and dimes from street vendors and beggars, using a wad of gum on the end of a stick to maintain his distance while he picks the coins out of a blind beggar’s cigar box (103), and then also of Walker Evans’ observation that “concerned” documentary is often a “dubiously motivated concern for those who could most easily be taken from” (Schloss 8).

The photographs in the album scene, especially the postmortem ones, also alert us to the way the inert bodies of their subjects are vulnerable to manipulation— posed, propped, embellished to become whatever sort of thing will serve the purpose of the person representing them. An interesting passage early in the novel in which Suttree is visited by his uncle John seems designed to link his narrative treatment of living subjects to the kind of disturbing ventriloquism happening in those photos. Suttree is shown, for example, literally arranging his uncle's body into a posture he wants, “composing” a scapegoat his story will need.

> . . . I'm saying that my father is contemptuous of me because I am related to you. Don't you think that's a fair statement?
>
> I don't know why you try and blame me for your troubles. You and your crackpot theories.
>
> Suttree reached across the little space and took his uncle's willowing hands and composed them. I don't blame you, he said. I just want to tell you how some people are. (19)

John has shown up at Suttree's door immediately after he had been thinking about his father's last letter (14-15). If Suttree wanted to fight with someone over his family issues, he wouldn't be the first person to scare up an interlocutor out of his imagination. And as he blames John for his father's low expectations of him, he would be the right scapegoat to materialize. In the context of Suttree's life *story*, too, John becomes indispensable for the light he sheds on Suttree's family problems, important background information for our main character. In both cases, John is instrumental to Suttree's personal chronology as the family drunk, the origin and explanation for his break with his family and his own drinking problems (as Suttree responds to Martha's assertion over the family album that all his ancestors "had trades" with "He was a drunk, he a grifter" 130.) The representation of John in Suttree's story functions in a way similar to the photograph of John in the family album—as a backdrop, a hereditary piece of context, and he's represented throughout the scene as a body that Suttree manipulates in order to play out his own issues.

During much of John's visit, Suttree is terse verging on rude and John is conciliatory. John corrects his word choices to placate him, "Well, we hadn't heard anything. . . . I hadn't heard. I mean I didn't know for sure . . ." He composes his body trying to please him, standing awkwardly in the center of the room until he's told to sit then sitting "carefully" (15) and shifting uncomfortably in his chair (16), trying to choose the correct facial expression: "He was smiling uncertainly. . . . He stopped smiling." He tries out different reactions to Suttree's unorthodox living situation, but never quite nails it, as Suttree first "studie[s] with a cold face the tolerant amusement his uncle affected" (15) then changes the subject after John attempts a complement: "Well good. He was looking about. Not bad. Stove and all." (15). Suttree sees John's amenability as insincere, and seems to resent his efforts to please him even as he actively manipulates him

into the postures he wants. For example, when John struggles to articulate how he feels about his family, Suttree puts words into his mouth, explaining to him that “You just can't stand them nor them you” and John complies: “I guess that's right, the uncle said, . . . *reflecting*” (16 – 7, my emphasis). The visit then starts to become a struggle between John's attempts to represent himself in a certain light that Suttree considers false, and Suttree's own efforts to make John drop the pleasantries and admit that he's a drunk, his life is sad, and his family despises him. This is, of course, Suttree's version of the story. As the visit progresses, the manipulations become more aggressive and Suttree becomes more hostile to his uncle. When Suttree tries to bait him into deriding his father, John almost bites but then assumes a more defensive position as he becomes aware of the way he's being played.

Are you an alcoholic?

No. What are you smiling at? I'm no goddamned alcoholic.

He always called you a rummy. I guess that's not quite as bad.

I don't give a damn what he says. He can . . .

Go ahead.

The uncle looked at him warily. He flipped the tiny stub of his cigarette out the door.

Well, he said. He don't know everything.

Suttree sees John as an actor: “He looked made up for an older part, hair streaked with chalk, his face a clay mask cracked in a footman's smile” and he resents his efforts to play a part that he's chosen for himself: a recovering alcoholic, “pulling out of it” after his surgery and able to turn down a drink (16), someone with a decent life — “Don't call me sorry, said the uncle” (20) — and more importantly a man who knows he’s equal to Suttree's father and chooses not to associate with him for his own reasons, asserting that “He puts his pants on the same way I do

mine," to which Suttree responds " Bullshit, John. You don't even believe that" (19). But while the character Suttree is busy exposing John as an actor, the narrator represents him differently, as a marionette with a wooden smile and creaky movement suspended between two fixed points on younger Suttree's stage, "arrested in the quadrate bar of dusty light davited between the window and its skewed replica on the far wall, a barren countenance cruelly lit" with hands that "moved slightly with the wooden smile he managed"(15). The narrator alerts us to Suttree's ("cruel," "cold") manipulations of John's words, attitude, and body, giving us another unflattering glimpse of Suttree in the act of representing people, of the "the workings in the wings, the ropes and sandbags and houselight toggles" (422).

If Suttree dislikes John's obsequiousness, it is because it's false, "a clay mask cracked in a footman's smile" (14). But the dance John does is controlled almost entirely by Suttree's reactions and prompts. In this sense, Suttree is annoyed by his own inability to manipulate a truthful performance out of John. John's falseness is his own failure to create a lifelike representation because John's movements are Suttree's own. But Suttree gets even more annoyed when John hints at their equivalence. He is short the first time his uncle suggests that they're similar ("You and me have a little in common there, eh boy?" receives a response of "He thinks so." 17) and becomes defiant the second time:

> … You know, he said, you and me are a lot alike.
>
> I don't think so.
>
> In some ways.
>
> No, said Suttree. We are not alike. (18)

I think the suggestion makes him mad for reasons that have to do with the subtext of his authorship as much as the apparent plot. Yes, he gets angry because he doesn't want to be a

drunk like his “rummy” uncle and fulfill his father's low expectations, but his anger is also frustration about what's happening in his narrative. He wants John to be a living creature on the page, an individual, but it's not working out that way. His characters seem dead to him (John is described as having “eyes watery and half closed with their slack pendules of flesh hanging down his cheeks” 15) and seem to reflect his own obsessions more than live their own lives in the narrative. The way he discusses his stillborn twin with John is an indicator that this is the case. He wonders why they couldn't think of a name for the baby, which indicates a concern for his individuality (17). He doesn't like that the child was treated as just an appendage of himself. He doesn't want John to be a born a dead reflection of his own mind. The last image of John could be a reflection of Suttree's own isolation: “He looked back. But that old man seemed so glassed away *in worlds of his own contrivance* that Suttree only raised his hand” (20, my emphasis).

In order to write convincingly about himself, Suttree has to write about his family, his place and the people who populate his life. He has to make them instrumental to his own story, and at several moments in the novel where he seems to struggle with this, descriptions of people and places become static, contrived, and often interchangeable background tableau much like the artificial landscapes Suttree encounters in the album. A group of poker players assembled in the back room of Ab’s house, for instance, “seemed themselves like shades of older times or rude imposters on a stage set . . . old men in gaitered sleeves galvanized from some stained sepia, posting time at cards prevenient of their dimly augured doom” (22). Their anachronistic costumes and the phrase “rude imposters on a stage set” recall the sailor suit that made Roy's baby picture seem to Suttree like a “gross cartoon.” Suttree sees the men through doors “long painted fast in their tracks” (22) fixed and immobile like the album’s backdrops “recurring

unchanged as if they inhabited another medium" (129). Here Suttree's description has failed to make them fully present; "galvanized" from an image, they seem like "shades" lacking immediacy or volition. They are shown "conjured up," to use Mitchell's phrase, as a "fictive *figural* presence" (*Picture Theory* 158, my emphasis), and remind us of the limitations of Suttree's narrative representation. In another weird tableau, Suttree seems to criticize his hackneyed, "gaudy and barbaric," treatment of some of the people of McAnally and the way he has hammered them into a set of details on a "wrought," "jaded" cityscape:

> Passing the creek mouth he raised one hand and waved slowly, the old blacks all flowered and bonneted coming about like a windtilted garden with their canes bobbing and their arms lifting dark and random into the air and their gaudy and barbaric costumes billowing with the movement. Beyond them the shape of the city rising wore a wrought, a jaded look, hammered out dark and smoking against a china sky. (8)

Rather than a description of people, we have one of descriptive problems – clichés, artificiality, and flatness. Here again the costumes, "gaudy and barbaric," recall the album's embellished bodies that strike Suttree as "gross" (127) and "garishly painted" (130). Their "*wind*tilted . . . random" movements – they don't lift their arms, their arms lift – come from a source outside themselves and hint to us that our attention should be directed at whatever is (poorly) animating them (8, my emphasis). Linda Woodson, in her article "Visual Rhetoric and Cognitive Identity in *Suttree*," includes this passage in a rash of similar descriptions she identifies, "heavily emphasizing the visual in gesture and clothing," in which black occupants of the city become "a stereotypical part of the background" (177):

> "Propped and rocking in the shade of porches. Old black ladies in flowered gowns who watched impassively the farther shapes of the firmament as he went by" (81); "A row of

> black fishermen sat along the ties where the tracks crossed the creek, their legs dangling above the oozing sewage" (99); "Old men like effigies with fingers laced and capped upon the heads of canes between their knees" (100). . . . "black families in bright Sunday clothes fishing at the river's brim watched somberly his passage. Dinner pails and baskets adorned the grass and dark infants were displayed on blankets capped at their corners by stones against the wind" (12-13); "a preacher that looked like a storybook blackbird in his suit and gold wire spectacles. . . . Dusky throats tilted and veined like the welted flanks of horses. He has watched them summer nights, a pale pagan sat on the curb without" (21). (177)

Woodson's analysis focuses on the stasis of these images as a way for Suttree to establish artistic distance from memories that threaten to emotionally overpower him. What I notice in these descriptions, though, isn't so much stasis as an absence of *voluntary* motion. Their bodies are "Propped . . . Impassively," "legs dangling," "like effigies," "adorned" and "displayed." As in the passage above where the subjects are described as "windtilted," their movements don't seem to be their own. The preacher, who resembles "a storybook blackbird in his suit and gold wire spectacles" like Suttree's grandfather ("a storybook rat . . . eyes blind behind the glass") seems meant to draw our notice to the person whose motives he reflects, "some curious person in the past with a penchant for deathbed studies" (129) or "the hands at the neck of the creature" (279) that posed and dressed his body. These arrangements of black bodies are also similar enough to one another that they begin to feel strangely familiar to the reader. Suttree's flat treatment of his subjects "recur[s] unchanged" like the backdrops in the album and makes the individuals seem redundant.

Suttree's depiction of his wife and in-laws on the day of his son's funeral begins to reduce them also to an arrangement of bodies, but the episode is interesting for the way the static tableau he creates dissolves as the characters resist his will and break away from their set poses. His first image of them as he approaches their home shows their bodies carefully arranged to signify something timeless about family: "They watched him from the porch, gathered there like a sitting for some old sepia tintype, the mother's hand on a seated patriarch's shoulder" (150). That image is immediately followed by another, of pain, also meant to be universally understood: "She came down the steps slowly, madonna bereaved, so grief-stunned and wooden pieta of perpetual dawn" (150). His wife is then described as "blind," "deep in the floor of her welling eyes dead leaves scudding" (150), reflecting back a general and kind of clichéd elegaic theme for Suttree's story about death, loss and changing seasons rather than communicating anything of her perspective. Just as general are the terms he uses to refer to them throughout the scene; he calls them "the girl," "the old lady," "the mother," "the old man," or else places them in familiar roles that preserve his own version of his experiences: the "Madonna," the "abandoned wife," the "demented harridan," and the "ghastly bitch." Were you to ask what's her name, the wife, about the same episode, you get a feeling the cast of characters might be different. The clichéd images alert us to the function of self-preservation (at the expense of other people) in Suttree's narrative of events and the way that the individuals are being made instrumental to the demands of a consistent story.

The static repose soon gives way to tumult, though. The family breaks away from their fixed positions in the background and into violent action. His mother-in-law comes running from the porch and claws and kicks him, bites his finger and gnaws on his leg, then he grabs her by the throat and kicks her in the head while his father-in-law beats him with his shoe, then his

wife joins in to defend her mother and his father-in-law finally runs him off, all bloody, with a shotgun. As in other scenes, the reaction can be explained according to what we know of Suttree's history with them, but it also seems to show a set of characters fighting against the way Suttree wants to use them and their personal pain as a backdrop for his autobiography—the world resisting his efforts to make it keep his desired shape. Suttree's quick escape from Alice was similar to this one in that it was preceded by his sense of potential "insurrection" (434). As in this scene, the patients seemed about to move out of their fixed positions and he noticed a reversal of vision as Alice and her friend focused more intently on him. Instead of bodies to be observed and interpreted at leisure, "now they were watching him, eyes vacant or keen with suspicion or incipient hatred . . . An air of possible insurrection in the room, wanting just the cue to set these wretches clawing at their keepers" (434). Suttree seems to treat his subjects respectfully until they refuse to be kept. Their rejections of their proper sphere of visibility and stasis inspire a contempt similar to his father's (they become "wretches" and "demented harridans") and then fear and a quick retreat from his attempts to lend them a voice. The importance he places on the boundary between image and word shows us something disturbing in his attitudes toward "the helpless and impotent" of McAnally. Mitchell identifies this kind of reaction as typical of ekphrastic fear with its legislation of "proper and appropriate modes" and its assumptions about the inadequacies of the other: "The contempt springs from the assurance that images are powerless, mute, inferior kinds of signs; the fear stems from the recognition that these signs . . . may be in the process of taking power, appropriating a voice" (*Iconology* 151). Harrogate's fight with one of the beggars he has been trying to defraud begins with a contemptuous "Fuck you" when the man breaks his silence, then fear when he emerges from his fixed position in the background:

He felt his head. It was all knotty. Shit a brick, he said. I didn't want the goddamned thing that bad. A *legless* beggar *mounted on a board* like a piece of ghastly taxidermy *had come awake* to laugh at him. Fuck you, said Harrogate. The beggar *shot forward* on ballbearing wheels and seized Harrogate's leg and bit it.

Shit! screamed Harrogate. He tried to pull away but the beggar had his teeth locked in the flesh of his calf. They danced and circled, Harrogate holding to the top of the beggar's head. The beggar gave a shake of his head and a tug in a last effort to remove the flesh from Harrogate's leg bone and then turned loose and *receded smoothly to his place against the wall* and took up his pencils again. (103, my emphasis)

Though Harrogate makes a triumphant retreat with the dime and nickel he's managed to steal ("Fuck you, said Harrogate, skipping nimbly on"), he doesn't come away from the episode unscathed. He's marked by the encounter and forced to sit down and examine himself afterwards: "The beggar's ill spaced teeth had printed two little sickle shapes, the flesh blue, small pinlet of blood, Harrogate wet a paper napkin in his water glass and laved it over his queer stigmata" (104). Suttree undergoes a similar self-examination after confronting his in-laws: "He plucked small bits of harrowed flesh from the edges of the wounds and daubed at them with a wet paper towel. The face in the mirror that watched was gray and the eyes sunken" (151-52). We witness his subjects' resistance begin to change how Suttree perceives himself.

As happens in Martha's album, Suttree's manipulation of these objects/bodies causes them to break down. We might recall, for example, Suttree's impression of Alice and the other patients as "wreckage" as he leaves the institution. This breakdown sometimes shows up as chaos and incoherence in his story. Suttree's attention to Joyce is an interesting case as he's always cupping the weight of her parts, etc., but he has trouble understanding her when she

speaks, particularly when she resists him. When she eventually breaks the car, rips up the money, and starts ranting incoherently he's finished with her because dissolution of objects bothers him. His materialism becomes a figure for his objectification of Joyce in life but also in narrative; her incoherent ranting is an indication that his narrative world is refusing to cohere, but he doesn't seem to get the message right away: “She was shouting at him some half drunken imprecations, all he could make out was his name” (411). This selective deafness to his subjects’ attempts to communicate with him seems due to a self-concern he may not be fully aware of. But Suttree's realization of his transgressions comes about gradually like ours does, through others’ reactions to his buried narrative purpose: self-concern causes him to manipulate others in ways he doesn't fully understand, his subjects feel uncomfortable under his control and react against it, he gets angry and fearful and through this response begins to understand his own position better (becoming aware, like Agee, of his “wish to possess” them). In this way, the subplot of Suttree's authorship begins to trace revisions to his understanding of his position in relation to his subjects.

An interesting set of paired scenes shows this process of revision in action. Suttree shows up in a cafe that echoes details of one described at the beginning of the novel, but with instructive differences. Here the narrator replaces the rich detail, invitations, and exchanges written into his former characterization of the scene with starkness, suspicion, and refusal, and gives us a glimpse of an uncomfortable process of awakening for Suttree. In the first scene Suttree seems to himself the master of his surroundings, but in its revision he can make no sense of anything at all and the world is “a rash of incomprehensible events” (291). His approach to the first café highlights his powers of perception as he becomes a narrating dynamo:

> It is overcast with impending rain and the lights of the city wash against the curdled heavens, lie puddled in the wet black streets. The watertruck recedes down Locust with

> its footmen in their tattered oilskins wielding brooms in the flooded gutters and the air is rich with the odor of damp paving. Through the midnight emptiness the few sounds carry with amphoric hollow and the city in its quietude seems to lie under edict. The buildings lean upon the dim and muted corridors where the watchman's heels click away the minutes . . . (27)

The narration goes on like this for a while. As he walks through the streets, the city offers up all its secrets. He can see behind the façades of the buildings into the entryways and then into the inner rooms and watch all of the hidden activity there: "In the lobbies of the slattern hotels the porters and bellmen are napping in the chairs and lounges, dark faces jerking in their sleep down the worn wine plush. In the rooms lie drunken homecome soldiers sprawled in painless crucifixion . . ." and so on (27).The world is his very open and transparent oyster. The second café scene begins like a hangover with Suttree waking up "in full daylight by the side of a road," struggling to his feet with his head "curiously clear," and "peering about at the sudden tawdry garishness in which he found himself" (291), as if he's seeing his earlier narrative approach to the café (which had occurred immediately after a scene at Ab Jones' house involving profuse consumption of a toxic swill called Early Times) without his drunk goggles. Instead of the transparency of the buildings in the earlier scene, we get an incomprehensible "maze of small-town mercenary legend," and "dusty shopwindows," opaque and unromantic (291).

When he enters the first café, the waitress who takes his order is unaware that he's observing her ("She wrote. He watched.") and because of this he's able to get away with a trespass that implicates his writer's consciousness as he searches for interiority in surface detail: "He watched the shape of her underclothes through the thin white uniform" (28). We get the feeling from their exchange that even if she had been aware of his gaze, she might not have

minded, as he seems to have aroused her interest as well. He catches her "watching him from beyond the coffee urn," she offers him more and invites him to "Come back" (28). In the second café scene, in place of a young waitress in a see-through uniform unaware of Suttree's leering, we get a "leery matron" who has "old bird's eyes honed by past injustices to a glint just between suspicion and outrage" (291). She keeps her eye on him distrustfully throughout the scene. And where in the first scene we get an open view of the operations in the back room, where Suttree can watch unobstructed "a young black labor[ing] in a clatter of steaming crockery" (28), here he gets only an isolated glimpse of one body part completing half a motion: "In the cameral shutting of the kitchen door he saw a black hand picking at the seat of a pair of greasy jeans" (291).

In the first café scene we watch Suttree consume the rich sensory detail of his surroundings. "He held the first wedge of it to his nose for a minute, rich odor of toast and butter and melting cheese. He bit off an enormous mouthful, sucked the pickle from the toothpick and closed his eyes, chewing" (28). He internalizes details between sips of coffee ("Ring of gold orange blossoms constricting her puffy finger. He took another sip of coffee") and there is a sense of analogy between eating and perceiving, a kind of "consciousness in its acquisitive mood" (Sontag 4) as Suttree commits people, smells and sounds to memory for his story. The second scene couldn't provide a starker contrast:

> Suttree could hardly lift his fork. He buttered one of the muffins and bit into it. His mouth was filled with a soft dry sawdust. He tried to chew. His jaws worked the mass slowly. He tried to spit it out and could not. He reached in his mouth and fished it forth with his fingers in thick clogs of paste which he raked off on the side of the platter. (292)

Predictably, he has a similar difficulty integrating the details of his surroundings into a coherent whole. Where the earlier Suttree thought he could assimilate his entire environment to himself,

this Suttree watches his brain unspool a series of faded and grotesque images it had stored. “A dull wooden clicking he'd thought some long coiled component of his forlobe together with the fading colored pictures and the receding attendance of horribles segued into a shrunken Indian passing across the glass of the café front” (291). You could call it brain vomit. In any case, it seems to signify his inability to digest his impressions (even those previously stored) as he explains after trying unsuccessfully to read the newspaper: “A rash of incomprehensible events. He could put no part of it together” (291).

When Suttree tries to chew his food, he finds instead that his mouth is full of sawdust. The image connects him to the taxidermy lynx from the previous café scene, “gouts of shredded wood sprout[ing] from the sutures in his leather belly” (27) and also to the “huge and blackened trout” which “hung out on a board above the counter and knew not. Nor the naked leather squirrel with the vitreous eyebulbs” (291). In this scene where Suttree is being watched and known by other people and is unable to make any sense of his surroundings, we get an image of him as an unknowing object, a caught fish, stuffed game. The scene reverses his position and he has trouble taking what he's dished out:

> . . . He caught her watching from the sideboard. He spat in the plate.
>
> Is there something wrong with me? he demanded.
>
> She looked away.
>
> What is this crap?
>
> *Other people eat it,* she said.
>
> He stabbed at the potatoes with his fork. *The imago does not eat,* he told the plate mutteringly. Fuck it. He let the fork fall and looked up at the waitress. (292, my emphasis)

When he asks her to take it away and bring something more palatable she tells them “you'll have to pay for it” and “if you didn't want it you ought not to of ordered it,” in other words, you get what you pay for, or be careful what you wish for. Putting himself in the position of the dumb, “helpless and the impotent” (14) in order to tell their story is a more serious endeavor than he expected. A fair exchange is harder to accomplish than he thought. And where Suttree had begun his journey into narrative by passing through many corridors into Ab Jones’ back room where found it so easy to mimic the postures of his marginalized friends (21), here “He could hear doors closing all back through his head like enormous dominoes toppling in a corridor” (293).

The second café scene and the people and objects that populate it resist his efforts to capture them. Where the previous scene was docile, this one confronts him over “past injustices.” It offers him up an image of himself as an interloper that he doesn't recognize: in the waitress’s suspicious glances, in all its contemptuous refusals of exchange – “He aint paid, said the waitress. Suttree glared at her. Just get on out, the man said. I dont need your money” (293) – and even in the countertop itself where “Some stark and darker bearded visage peered him back from the shiny black formica of the tabletop. Some alien Suttree there among the carven names and rings and smears of other men's meals” (290). His own image (“darker bearded” looking younger than in this scene where Suttree is described as “an old gummy man”) stares him down with hostility, refusing identity with him, belonging to someone else like the “smears of other men's meals.” If these scenes are in fact about his attempts at narrative, autobiographical narrative, he can't even capture himself. This Suttree, “peering him back” like the “dark and haggard eyes” that “peer out” from the photos in Martha's album, won’t be made a part of his life's chronology, but asserts an independent identity that he can't absorb. Suttree is shown

pulling away from himself like this in a dream he relates on his way to the first café, where someone he “took to be” his father stops him, tells him he's been looking for him, and tries to grab him. But the younger Suttree refuses: “I would draw back from him and his bone grip” (27). A corresponding image in the reflective surfaces of the first café similarly seeks him out, described as his “fetch come up from life's other side” (28). All these images of resistance to capture prepare us to understand in retrospect that Suttree's intentions in the café have been predatory (an “elderly pederast” hangs around the bathroom in the first café scene) and that his story is not entirely the transparent medium or altruistic project he thought it was. Even more interestingly, they make for a more accurate autobiography because they give us a sense of Suttree's changing identity as an artist. I would say a more *complete* autobiography except the effect is that he can't seem to capture or make himself cohere – there is no whole self (“imago”) but only an approximate series of independent selves, continually revised, that resist being integrated into a whole.

As he leaves Knoxville, we watch him trade “the little cloaked godlet and his other amulets” for “the simple human heart within him” and its associations not only of vital process but also ethical encounter between people. His comment to the dead ragpicker that “You have no right to represent people this way . . . . A man is all men. You have no right to your wretchedness “ (422) offers, I think, an alternate conception of representation as a thing all people do as they live their lives in relation to one another, an idea opposed to the ragpicker’s hoarding and isolation and Suttree’s narrative version of this. It's an idea that also seems at odds with the special, heroic status Diane Luce would attribute to Suttree's identity as a writer. She claims, for example, that “recognition of Suttree as a narrative artist confirms his transcendence that we sense in the epilogue's imagery. ‘Old Suttree ain't dead’ . . . he has become the ‘bard of

his own existence'" (*Reading the World* 207). She sees his interactions with the "dumb," "helpless and impotent" of McAnally Flats as lending voice, as a service that he is uniquely capable as a writer to perform. But she doesn't notice the ways in which the novel shows him suppressing the voice his subjects already have. Suttree's comment to the ragpicker, by contrast, seems to replace the idea of narrative as a book – the exclusive published property of a gifted writer by which he might make a name – with an idea of narrative as a human faculty tied to speech, memory and imagination and shared by all people. In this sense, Martha's unofficial history about family and John's account of his identity are forms of narrative as valid as any writing Suttree might do, and shouldn't be suppressed. We can see him working toward a new idea of narrative as process more than product, a complex form of social exchange that has to be negotiated with attention to its effects on others, rather than as an object constructed out of words or a version of reality you can possess. As the stranger in *Cities of the Plain* explains to Billy Parham, "All knowledge is borrowing and every fact a debt" (272). This is the sense in which the novel's iconoclastic rhetoric differs from most. Rather than presenting Suttree's imaged, objectified, fetishized characters as evidence of representation's vanity and pretension, it gives us a feeling of its importance as a real interaction between real people who deserve respect and autonomy. To return the matter again to Billy's stranger, "the ground of [a character's] history is not different from yours or mine for it is the predicate life of men that assures us of our own reality and that of all about us" (*Cities of the Plain* 272). Since everything but our most immediate present is represented to us through memory, imagination, or some form of recorded history, narrative and its characters are *very* important. The stories we (constantly) tell ourselves about the world and other people are inseparable from how we treat them.

Suttree gives us, in the end, an understanding of narrative as crucial to our existence/identity, but not in the way that its main character originally thinks. Rather than a means of producing an emblematic object ('a narrative,' a monument), it's a vital process, like eating or seeing, that happens continually and socially, helping us determine our position, understand our physical existence and history, make sense of and build relationships with the people around us, learn from mistakes, and determine a course. Like eating, it leaves a trail that others can sometimes follow like scat, but not for very long in the grand scheme of things. Like molting, this narrative helps him differentiate himself from former selves and move beyond Knoxville:

> Walking down the little street for the last time he felt everything fall away from him. Until there was nothing left of him to shed. It was all gone. No trail, no track. The spoor petered out down there on Front Street where things he'd been lay like paper shadows, a few here, they thin out. After that nothing. A few rumors. Idle word on the wind. Old news years in traveling that you could not put stock in. (468)

This is very different from his initial conception of the novel as a stone, impervious, with his name on it to send into the void, showing us instead how "[t]hose stories which speak to us with the greatest resonance have a way of turning upon the teller and erasing him and his motives from all memory" (*Cities of the Plain* 275).

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