

Knoxville & Appalachia In The Works Of Cormac McCarthy

The publication of the newly crowned Pulitzer prize winner *The Road* in late 2006 marks an imaginative homecoming for Cormac McCarthy. On a literal level McCarthy has returned to the setting of his first four novels, and of course to his childhood home of Knoxville, East Tennessee and Appalachia. However, the acclaimed Border Trilogy and the 2005 novel *No Country For Old Men* are infused with the myths, culture, humor and indeed violence of his native soil, and Knoxville and Appalachia have consistently informed one of the most unique and challenging voices at work today in Southern and American fiction.

The Road has very much bought McCarthy's career full circle. Indeed, more than just signal an imaginative homecoming, the novel even suggests that the region affords an opportunity for regeneration and rebirth – those sacrosanct American myths – in a world where all other physical, cultural and spatial markers have quite simply been destroyed.

In order to illuminate *The Road* and McCarthy's southern body of work, I will provide some brief biographical information, as well as addressing the key themes and issues which we can find in his Southern novels. I would also like to incorporate the work of the southern literary scholar Richard Gray who, in his excellent study *Southern Aberrations*, asks important questions about the issues which inform the construction of Southern literary and cultural identity. Furthermore, I would also like to briefly consider the myth and history of Knoxville and East Tennessee, narrative modes which have done much to inform McCarthy's work.

East Tennessee maintains a highly paradoxical and anachronistic position within the literary and political culture of the south. It is widely acknowledged that Southern

literature has always written against the proscriptive cultural hegemony imposed from without; however, Richard Gray notes that many Southern writers, and we can include Cormac McCarthy in that number, have had to do battle against generic definitions of Southernness itself. Quite simply, the south – long held up as the aberrant and marginal region within the United States – has within it factions which have resisted definitions of what exactly constitutes Southernness, and thereby end up marginalized and aberrant themselves, at odds with the culture that surrounds it.

It is important to note at this point the tradition which the region resists, and which, therefore, McCarthy *writes against* to a certain degree. His work has a unique and vibrant sensibility, but it isn't necessarily that shared by other Southern authors. This is not to say that McCarthy's work is entirely free of some of the commanding themes of southern literature – far from it in fact – but these themes are characteristically subverted. For example, East Tennessee did not historically rely on the plantation system and its attendant culture, thereby problematizing the plantation and patriarchal myth within McCarthy's work. We also call to mind Faulkner's famous maxim of how Southern literature is constantly engaged in dealing with the past in the present, of interrogating a historical legacy of loss and defeat, and whilst this is also present in his work it is dealt with in different ways. Finally, McCarthy's works consistently undermines the Arcadian myth of the south, challenging the Jeffersonian idyll of the south as 'the best place,' and presenting an affront to Lewis Simpson's memorable phrase that the south is 'one of the gardens of the world.'

Indeed John Grammer, in his essay *A Thing Against Which Time Will Not Prevail: Pastoral And History In Cormac McCarthy's South*, claims that McCarthy's southern work is entirely against and outside of such grand Southern literary traditions:

We will search in his novels in vain for the great theme of 'the past in the present,' for the burden of southern history, for...the conflict between tradition and modernity. And we will be hard pressed to wring from them the sort of humanistic content which, for all its Gothicism, finally emerges from Faulkner's; it is hard to imagine McCarthy on some platform in Stockholm assuring us that man will survive and prevail. (28)

I intend to demonstrate that McCarthy's work is infused with these humanistic themes, and this brings us to the paradoxical position that Knoxville and East Tennessee has always held within the Southern imagination. As already noted, Richard Gray is one critic that has always been aware of the dangers of speaking of one generic, hegemonic south and, whilst this point may be somewhat self-evident, it is vitally important to recognize the existence of conflicting versions of literary southernness, as it enriches our understanding of McCarthy's work.

In *The Literature Of Memory*, Gray alludes to the 'precise nature of resources available to the southern writer,' (9) which in McCarthy's case is the history of East Tennessee exceptionalism that separates this corner of the state from the rest of Tennessee, from the rest of the south and, therefore, from the rest of southern literature. Gray develops these ideas in his later work entitled *Southern Aberrations*, where he speaks of 'the people of highland and hinterland, the mountain people who have their own special customs, folkways and traditions,' and who 'help to pluralize our idea of a regional culture and to

see Southern mythmaking as a process, a developing series of discrete stories' (xi-xii) and it is precisely these marginal characters that McCarthy brings to center stage.

This, therefore, is the south that he presents to us, the region that is part of the south yet somehow different, exposed to the broader movements and patterns of Southern history yet remaining stubborn and subversive, retaining a distinct air of difference and exceptionalism. In other words, if we take the South as a whole to be an aberrant region, McCarthy's South is the aberration within it, the most atypical area in a much larger one that has revealed in its anachronistic status.

At this juncture I would like to offer a figure from Knoxville's past who did much to articulate the region's difference and independence from the south, and who therefore represents its exceptional sensibility. Although not born a native Tennessean, it is with William G Brownlow (1805-1877) – dubbed the 'Fighting Parson' by his contemporaries in political and public life in the latter half of the nineteenth century – who offers the most colorful example of East Tennessee exceptionalism. Brownlow spent much of his life in Knoxville, crucially during the civil war years, and he captures the atypical, anachronistic and paradoxical character of this most unique of regions.

He frequently exhorted East Tennessee's Unionist sympathies in his many public speeches, and he was constantly outspoken in his newspaper articles for the *Knoxville Whig Journal*, which denounced the Confederacy and all that it stood for; indeed, in such articles we can see that Brownlow shares many similarities with the crazed street corner prophets from *Suttree*. The Fighting Parson was imprisoned on a number of occasions for his sentiments, and in his refusal to yield to a larger, and what he saw as a corrupting force, we see the frontier heroism that many of McCarthy's characters exhibit. During

one especially turbulent episode he articulated his courageously defiant and individualistic approach as follows, which also reads like a mandate for many of McCarthy's characters; 'Stimulated by a consciousness of innocent uprightness, I will submit to imprisonment for life, or die at the end of a rope, before I will make any humiliating concession to any power on earth.' (Brownlow 13)

Elsewhere he claims that the Unionists of East Tennessee 'are astounded with the quick succession of outrages that have come upon them, and they stand horror-stricken, like men expecting ruin and annihilation.' (Brownlow 16) The worst accusation one can often make of Brownlow here is that he is outrageously outspoken and bombastic, whereas at other times he was overtly rude, offensive and belligerent. However, the 'Fighting Parson' identifies the unique character of the region, and therefore he allows us to recognize its problematic relationship with the rest of the south.

This leads us to an important question, and one of the central themes that his novels are concerned with. McCarthy's work is informed with the historical and cultural tropes of the region, but what saves it from becoming nothing but local color, that most restrictive of genre terms? Such a debate is by no means a new thing in the history of southern letters, and it is a struggle which Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and Richard Ford (amongst many others) have had to battle against. Far from being a limiting aesthetic, McCarthy's interest in the clash of myth versus standardization and homogenization, of organic folk cultures and characters clashing with airtight bureaucracies and systems of social control, of the search for transcendental space in our cultural and economic moment, a search predicated on the mythic and heroic templates afforded by his section

of the south, elevate his writing beyond the regional, and therefore makes his voice one of the most challenging yet rewarding that American fiction has to offer.

Now that I have established some essential historic and thematic parameters, I'd like to briefly present a biographical sketch of McCarthy and his work. Prior to the publication of *The Road*, his work can be split into two groups according to geographic setting, although they are not mutually exclusive from a thematic viewpoint. His first four Southern novels – 1965's *The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark* from 1968, 1973's *Child Of God* and *Suttree*, published in 1979, and the western, south western and border works – 1985' *Blood Meridian*, the three novels of the acclaimed Border Trilogy *All The Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, *Cities Of The Plain*, which were published between 1992-98. *No Country For Old Men* was published in 2005, and his body of work also includes two plays, *The Stonemason* and *The Sunset Limited*, which was published just prior to *The Road* in 2006, although it is technically described as a novel in dramatic form. McCarthy has also published a screenplay, *The Gardener's Son*, which premiered on PBS in 1977, and was later published by Ecco press.

McCarthy is famously reclusive and, prior to the soon to be screened Oprah Winfrey interview, he has only ever been interviewed twice, by Richard Woodward for *The New York Times*, and another in the July 2005 edition of *Vanity Fair*. Biographical information is therefore somewhat scarce for such a major literary figure.

However, we do know that Cormac McCarthy was born in Rhode Island on July 20, 1933 to Charles and Gladys McCarthy. Originally named Charles (after his father), he renamed himself Cormac after the Irish King. In 1937, when he was four, the family moved to

Knoxville, and his father became a lawyer for the Tennessee Valley Authority, eventually rising to the position of chief counsel.

McCarthy was raised Roman Catholic, and he attended Catholic High School in Knoxville, then had two stints at the University of Tennessee, from 1951-52, and from 57-59. His academic career was punctured by a four year spell in the US air force, which he joined in 1955; he spent two of them stationed in Alaska, where he hosted a radio show. During his second stint at UT McCarthy published two short stories, *A Drowning Incident* and *A Wake For Susan* in the student literary magazine, *The Phoenix*, calling himself C. J. McCarthy, Jr. While at the university, he won the Ingram-Merrill Award for creative writing in 1959 and 1960.

McCarthy left the university again, this time for good. He went to Chicago, where he worked, apparently as an auto mechanic, while writing his first novel. He later married Lee Holleman, who had been a student at the University of Tennessee, and the couple settled in Sevier County, Tennessee. They had one son, Cullen. Some time later, their marriage ended. (Lee McCarthy is the author of several books of poetry, including *Desire's Door*.)

Before his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, was published (McCarthy's editor at Random House was Faulkner's long-time editor, Albert Erskine), McCarthy had received a traveling fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. This would not be the only prestigious award that would he would receive, and others include a Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Writing and a Macarthur Fellowship, the so-called genius grant, in 1981.

In 1965, using this money, he left America on the liner *Sylvania*, intending to visit the home of his Irish ancestors. While on the trip, he met Anne DeLisle, a young English singer/dancer working on the ship; they were married in England in 1966, and he and Anne toured southern England and Europe. They settled on the island of Ibiza, which was a kind of artist's colony at the time. Here, McCarthy completed revisions of *Outer Dark*.

In 1967, the McCarthy's returned to America. They moved to Rockford, Tennessee, close to Knoxville. He and his wife would later move into a barn near Louisville, Tennessee, and McCarthy renovated the barn himself. For his new fireplace, McCarthy salvaged bricks from the boyhood home of James Agee. Anne DeLisle and Cormac McCarthy were separated in 1976, and McCarthy moved soon after to El Paso, Texas; they were divorced a few years later. McCarthy would marry again for a third time at some point in the late 1990s, and he currently resides in Santa Fe New Mexico. McCarthy has served as an artist in residence at the world renowned Santa Fe Institute. (cormacmccarthy.com)

In an early critique of *The Orchard Keeper*, David Paul Ragan suggests that the greatest challenge the reader faces with this novel – as with all of McCarthy's work- lies in locating a moral center or source of moral authority. (15) Despite the fact that McCarthy very deliberately plays with the narrative structure in his debut novel, the moral authority can be found in the characters who attempt to uphold mythic and traditional regional values against the encroaching forces of modernization.

Ostensibly, the novel, which is set in the inter-war years, has a conventional structure, in that it has four parts which are then divided into a series of mini sections. The novel also has as its focus three main characters who are cast in a heroic and mythic light – Arthur Ownby, Marion Sylder and the young John Wesley Rattner. However, many readers are

frustrated by the fact that, although conventionally mimetic and realistic in places, McCarthy refuses to let us see the in-depth psychological reasoning or motivations of his characters. Instead the landscape, seasons and animals – especially a panther in this novel – parallel the psychological conditions of his characters, and they often foreshadow important parts in the narrative development. This narrative feature would become even more pronounced as McCarthy's canon and aesthetic developed.

The Orchard Keeper is structured around a series of opposing categories – the familiar theme of the past versus the present, myth against materialism, the organic versus the inorganic and so on – and three main characters do battle against these dialectical forces. Arthur Ownby, or Uncle Ather as he is also referred to in the novel, is the stoically isolationist mountain man, who longs for a life of rustic simplicity, a figure who is sadly miscast in the rapidly developing world he finds himself situated in. He covers the landscape of the novel on foot, for ever followed by his loyal if ill-looking dogs, and he is cast in an almost Gnostic fashion. His timepiece and true home is the natural world, and he makes his living by bartering and trading ginseng at the local store. In one key episode from the novel he articulates his wish to live in the mountains of East Tennessee and do nothing but raise bees, an organic, romantic and transcendental dream that, tragically, will never be realized.

Yet Ownby also provides a model of heroism for the young John Wesley Rattner. He defies what is construed as the law, and he triumphs in a scene where the sheriff and a number of his deputies attempt to arrest him on the charge of destruction to government property; this actually occurs when Ownby shoots three crosses in a government water tank that has been placed in the orchard, naturally without his consent. In their final

exchange whilst he is interred in the asylum, Ownby instructs John Wesley that ‘there are things you have to do on account of the fact nobody else wants to attend to them,’ (229) and this call to individually stoic and defiant resistance can be identified in virtually all of McCarthy’s chief protagonists.

He also plays a central role in the most comic scene in the novel, where a social welfare officer interviews him in order to clarify his department’s records. Not only does the officer represent a colder and more bureaucratic order, but his attempt to extract information from Ownby is doomed to failure; indeed, Ownby initially misreads the situation, and he believes that the welfare officer is soliciting for donations. Furthermore, he is unable to document his correct age, as he has calculated it according to a Gnostic system of seasonal change, and he is without a civically approved birth certificate.

Ownby’s narrative within the novel can be read as one of marginalization and displacement. Indeed, this fictional account of dispossession closely parallels the experience of local communities who were also relocated by the TVA during this period. Michael Macdonald’s and John Muldowny’s *TVA And The Dispossessed; The Resettlement Of Population In The Norris Dam Area* is a study in such displacements, and it contains a series of interviews with characters who bear a close resemblance to Ownby, especially in their cultural and economic experiences. One such interviewee was Curtis Steiner, a small-holding tenant farmer who was displaced due to the Norris dam project. His ambivalence towards modernistic and technological encroachment – or the ‘pushbutton’ culture as he refers to it – perfectly correlates with Ownby’s, even though McCarthy’s character went one step further in his attempt to resist and deny such encroachment; ‘With all this pushbutton stuff, well, it becomes a part of you. You can’t

cook a meal without it, you cant take a bath without it, you cant get a drink of water without it, and you cant do nothing without it. There you are, you're hooked.' (8)

Marion Sylder can be read as a contemporized version of Ownby. He returns to Red Branch, the fictional community depicted in the novel, after an absence of some years, mainly spent bootlegging in various locales. However, his absence does not mean that he is ostracized from the deeply held values the he finds in Red Branch, and his becomes something of a heroic quest, attempting to uphold these values against the onslaught of new forms of order. Sylder is arguably the most morally challenging character from the novel, for whilst he is certainly not evil, his acts are certainly extra-legal – his bootlegging for example, and his own notions of justice and punishment, especially when administering a nighttime beating to a hypocritical but defenseless county humane officer. In other words, he embodies the timeless mysticism of Ownby, but he also knows how to drive and navigate the mountain roads on his whiskey runs; indeed, Robert Mitchum's character in the 1958 movie *Thunder Road* essentially is a cinematic configuration of Sylder. In a memorable phrase from the opening of the novel, we learn that Sylder is a man 'beyond the dominion of laws either civil or spiritual,' (16) although this does not mean he is a completely lawless figure. Sylder and Ownby actually serve as surrogate fathers to the young John Wesley, caring and educating him in a manner his biological father could never have hoped to achieve.

We then have the two Rattner males, one old and one young, one central to the development of the narrative, and one peripheral. At this juncture I'd like to point out the authorial slight of hand which McCarthy pulls off in the novel, and it is something which the reader is aware of, if not the central characters. The first section of the novel

concludes with a grimly violent act – another hallmark of McCarthy’s fiction – where Marion Sylder kills Kenneth Rattner, a suspicious character who has manipulated localized social conventions in order to secure a ride from Sylder from Atlanta to Knoxville, where the two met. A confrontation ensues, Sylder triumphs, and he eventually drops Rattner in a spray pit in the orchard, where Ownby, the orchard keeper of the novel’s title, discovers the corpse and maintains an archaic and ceremonial death-watch over it; as his biological father is dead, the two become surrogate father figures to the young John Wesley. Although Kenneth Rattner could never be read in a heroic light, especially given his willingness to manipulate local conventions, especially when you consider that the loyalty in upholding them represents something of a badge of honor in this community, he nevertheless can be read within the tradition of the southern trickster or confidence man, a figure who perpetually spins a series of elaborate tall tales.

John Wesley is the protégé of Ownby and Sylder, the young man who is most at home in the natural world, and who is ill-suited to the confines of the domestic, and the contemporary for that matter. Ownby and Sylder tutor him in the old ways, they instill him with tales of yesteryear, and they instruct him in the code of the mountains. Like Ownby, he prefers the rhythms of the natural world, and he finds his greatest joy in buying and laying traps, whilst he also returns the money he collected from a state sponsored hawk bounty, an act which is as defiant as Ownby and Sylder’s, whilst it also reclaims an ecological balance, correcting the man made encroachment and commodification of the landscape. John Wesley’s progression is very much that from innocence to experience, and some critics have claimed that he actually constructs and

pieces together the narrative as he returns to Red Branch at the close of the novel to visit his mother's grave.

The Orchard Keeper thus sets out the chief concerns that McCarthy would develop in the rest of his work, and the most complex amongst these is that he is celebrating this exceptional character yet, at the same time, he is also recording its disappearance; as one critic has noted, the novel is both elegy and eulogy to a vanishing way of life. (Prather 39) Indeed, one can read all of McCarthy's texts as a record of failed human enterprises and civilizational aspirations; the question which we then are forced to ask ourselves is amongst such ruin and dissipation, what can survive? The orchard itself is ruined and decaying, and the setting is far removed from the pastoral, Edenic quality that one may expect. Indeed, an early description of the setting hints at dissolution, not redemption, and it undermines the Southern pastoral myth. Note how, in the following passage, the landscape is hellish and apocalyptic above all else:

In late summer the mountain bakes under a sky of pitiless blue. The red dust of the orchard road is like power from a brick kiln. You cant hold a scoop of it in your hand. Hot winds come up the slope from the valley like a rancid breath, redolent of milkweed, hoglots, rotting vegetation. The red clay banks along the road are crested with withered honeysuckle, peavines dried and sheathed in the dust. By late July corn patches stand parched and sere, stalks askew in defeat. All green pale and dry. Clay cracks and splits in endless microcataclysm. (10-1).

Much of the narrative action is set within a relatively small physical space, which is very near to McCarthy's childhood home on Martin Mill pike. However, its thematic concerns and imaginative scope resonate far beyond this, and although Ownby and Sylder remain institutionally sectioned off and displaced at the novels close – the former in an asylum,

the latter in prison – John Wesley ultimately leaves Red Branch, and he succeeds in taking the mythic heroism, imbued in him by his two surrogate fathers, on to new frontiers, even if all else has become myth, legend and dust, as the famous closing line of the novel informs us.

Themes from McCarthy's debut novel can be identified in all of his work, irrespective of region. Perhaps one of the most striking inter-textual connections we can make between *The Orchard Keeper* and *Suttree* in particular concerns the manner in which McCarthy depicts the city of Knoxville itself. The parallels between the two novels are not surprising, as we know that McCarthy was working on *Suttree* for many years, even whilst composing his debut effort. The following passage, which describes a bustling if somewhat gothic downtown scene, very much has a *Suttree*-esque flavor about it, as the narrative describes John Wesley's arrival in Knoxville:

He was still standing on the sidewalk and now he saw the city, steamed and weaving in heat, and rising above the new facings of glass and tile the bare outlandish buildings, towering columns of brick adorned with fantastic motley; arches, lintels, fluted and arabesque, flowered columns and crowstepped gables, baywindows over corbels carved in shapes of feet, heads of nameless animals, Pompeian figures...here and there, gargoyled and crocketed, wreathed dates commemorating the perpetration of the structure. (81).

Themes of homelessness, rootlessness, redemption and retribution dominate in *Outer Dark*, the novel which followed *The Orchard Keeper*. Although McCarthy is far less specific concerning region, time and location in his second novel, the narrative is clearly aligned to the historical narratives indigenous to East Tennessee, specifically Knoxville's history as a lawless frontier outpost.

The novel can also be read within more conventional frameworks, as McCarthy employs and re-inscribes Southern gothic and grotesque with his second novel; indeed, much of the ambiguity one encounters upon a first reading of the novel is resolved if one reads it as a mythic or gothic fable where ‘normal’ temporal and psychological concerns are suspended, and McCarthy’s re-inscription of gothic techniques shares much with the work of Flannery O’Connor and Eudora Welty.

Ruth Weston provides an invaluable commentary on how the Gothic functions in her study *Gothic Traditions And Narrative Techniques In The Fiction Of Eudora Welty*, and her reading can be easily applied to McCarthy’s second novel. According to Weston, such fictional spaces are marked out by feelings of claustrophobia, fear, dread, isolation and a succession of enclosed spaces, all of which are prevalent in the novel. In place of traditional castles and dungeons, we have forests, swamps, and ‘spectral wastes,’ which lends the narrative a certain disorder in which chronology, identity, sex and location are all blurred and disfigured,

In many respects, *Outer Dark* is McCarthy’s most difficult work, essentially due to its disquieting gothic landscapes and its dense and challenging allegorical style. The narrative action revolves around the somewhat ironically named brother and sister Culla and Rinthy Holme, an itinerant traveling tinker, and a hideously evil trio of characters who maraud through the landscape, murdering, abusing and cannibalizing anything or anyone they come across, along with a series of peripheral characters who read like a catalog for the physically, sexually and morally grotesque. At the start of the novel Rinthy, a forlorn earth mother sadly cast in a decaying and terrifying pastoral realm, gives birth to an incestuously conceived child; Culla then decides to abandon the child in

the nearby woods, whilst he lies and tells Rinthy that the child died. Aware of her brother's dishonesty, Rinthy demands to see the place where the child is buried, where she of course discovers that Culla lied, thereby putting both of them on the road in a darkly epic quest, Rinthy to find her child, and Culla to find Rinthy. In the meantime the tinker discovers the child and takes it with him, whilst the murderous trio hover ominously throughout, edging ever closer to the gruesome denouement.

Quite understandably, many critics were horrified upon reading the novel, and some proclaimed that it quite clearly signaled the fact that McCarthy was writing against Southern literary traditions, and that his aesthetic is bereft of an interest or belief in myth, community and even humanity itself. Indeed in *A Requiem For The Renaissance; The State Of Fiction In The Modern South* Walter Sullivan went as far to claim that 'McCarthy is the artist not merely bereft of community and myth; he has declared war against these ancient repositories of order and truth.' (72)

However, in *Pastoral And Politics In The Old South*, John Grammer talks of how a group of early European settling Virginians – including John Taylor and Nathaniel Beverly – did much to forge the imaginative history of the south by giving southern writers 'a powerful body of historical myth to respond to.' (15) Albeit retrospectively, it could be argued that McCarthy is doing exactly the same things for *his* literary version of the south with *Outer Dark*, and it is world modeled on a frontier existence which is harsh, bloody, gruesomely violent and decidedly anti-pastoral.

Specifically, the satanic trio who pillage their way through the landscape can be read within such mythic terms; indeed, as identified in his debut novel, McCarthy refuses to afford us with the psychological insight into their motivations and reasoning, and they

can be read as expressions of philosophies and theories as opposed to fully formed, traditional literary characters (as we shall see, this has some inter-textual ramifications for McCarthy's later work, especially *Blood Meridian*). They also subvert the myth of the holy trinity which is of course prevalent within much Christian and Roman Catholic theology. Furthermore, their marginalization is also revealed in the fact that they are kept at a distance from the other characters in the narrative, as they are relegated to a series of italicized passages, only joining the narrative proper approximately a third of the way through the novel. When they do enter the text proper they are inexorably drawn to Culla, and they are often depicted together in chillingly rendered scenes, such as the following:

In the upslant of light his beard shone and his mouth was red, and his eyes were shadowed lunettes with nothing there at all...Holme looked at the man. The fire had died some and he could see him better, sitting beyond it and the scene compressed into a kind of deathlessness so that the black woods beyond them hung across his eyes oppressively and the man seemed to be seated in the fire itself, cradling the flames to his body as if there was something there beyond all warming. (171-9)

The devilish trio leave a trail of destruction throughout, and their leader chillingly pronounces that 'they's darksome ways afoot in this world,' whereas elsewhere they revel in murdering a character who prior to meeting his grizzly end pronounced his belief in the purpose of everything; ironically, he mistakes his killers for traveling preachers, and in a way they are, except theirs is a dark and blood stained creed. Our final sight of the trio is one of the most visceral and disturbing in all of McCarthy's work, which in and of itself is quite an accomplishment. This arises when Culla stumbles upon them – as he seems bound to do, after committing his original sin – just as they are about to eat his and Rinthy's child, after they have subjected the infant to brutal and extended torture.

Perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly, the novel does have some clear historical precedents. It is of interest here if we turn to William J. MacArthur's essay *Knoxville's History: An Interpretation*, which recounts the tale of the Harpe brothers who, following several days of thieving, pillaging and generally destructive behavior in 1797, murdered one E. Johnson, stole his hogs, cut his body open, filled it with stones and dumped it in the Tennessee river, an act which parallels those of the murderous trio from *Outer Dark*. (23)

Aside from these gruesome acts, the novel does explore some complex spiritual and philosophical issues, especially related to concepts of justice, retribution and the right to judge and punish. The leader of the triune poses the most significant and challenging questions, most notably to Culla, and conducts an absurd line of moral and philosophical inquiry. Largely due to this, the fact that he appears to be a beautifully rendered version of evil, we find the imaginative template for the judge in *Blood Meridian*, McCarthy's finest demented theologian.

Outer Dark can therefore be read as a darkly gothic parable about the nature of good, evil and the possibilities for redemption and salvation. Although philosophically and morally challenging, the novel is never purely sensational and, much like the Virginians identified by Grammer, McCarthy outlines and establishes his own powerful body of historic myth in this novel.

Child Of God, set mainly in Sevierville, is stylistically simpler than *Outer Dark*, even if the themes explored are just as challenging. The novel certainly has a more realistic or mimetic quality about it, even if, once again, it explores a mode of being that we would not like to acknowledge. Whereas McCarthy's second novel uses dense prose and is infused with complex allusions, *Child Of God* is written in a stripped down, economical

style which foreshadows some scenes from *Suttree*, but which also clearly parallels the style of what we could call late McCarthy, exemplified by works such as *Cities Of The Plain*, *No Country For Old Men* and *The Road*.

The novel can be read as a study in dispossession and marginalization. Lester Ballard, the central character, is dispossessed in the opening scene, and this process is accentuated throughout the narrative, as he is rejected by a series of normative institutions and practices – the church, the domestic, the world of work and production, and so forth – which eventually pushes him into necrophilia and serial murder. He ultimately becomes a macabre underground man, living in a cave, surrounded by his dead victims, in a nightmarish replication of the world above that simply refused to accept or accommodate him.

The novel also has an easier structure than McCarthy's previous two, as it is divided into three parts, and within these three parts McCarthy presents us with two modes of narrative or ways of viewing Lester – via himself as authorial presence, and through the larger community who, in a series of episodic narrative fragments, attempt to frame Lester through their own recollections of him. Thus the novel could be read as a collective one with a polyphonic structure, as the chapters and inter-chapters attempt to frame and rationalize Ballard; indeed, via the ironically named sheriff Fate Turner, McCarthy proposes that narrative and story-telling itself can be a redemptive act, themes that he would pursue in his later works, specifically *The Crossing*. As a central protagonist, Lester Ballard also shares a literary kinship with Jeeter Lester from Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* and, much like Caldwell's novel, *Child Of God* also caused its fair share of critical controversy.

William Christopher Spencer, in his wonderful thesis *The Extremities Of Cormac McCarthy: The Major Character Types*, notes that Lester can very much be read ‘as the frontier hero gone bad.’ (103) The novel opens with the celebratory feel which accompanies a real estate auction, as his family home is the subject of the auction. Thus a more aggressive form of capitalist accumulation is displacing the old, and when Lester attempts to bring a halt to proceedings he is unceremoniously clubbed unconscious. We follow Lester through the remainder of the narrative as he attempts to reclaim or appropriate his birthright, even if this traditional quest narrative descends into madness and perversion – along the way Lester becomes a voyeur, necrophiliac, murderer and the most extreme and deranged pariah. In one of the most memorable scenes from the novel, Lester attempts to reclaim his family homestead from the new owner Greer, although he attempts this bold move of individual justice dressed in the clothes of one of his victims and what is described as ‘a fright wig,’ and McCarthy paints a disturbingly macabre picture of a cross-dressing vigilante roaming through a community in East Tennessee. As we identified with *The Orchard Keeper*, arguably the greatest challenge when reading *Child Of God* is locating a moral center or source of authority. That center can be found in the child of god of the novel’s title, Lester Ballard. Although the acts he commits are horrific, McCarthy refuses to condemn him, and it is left to us as readers to offer some kind of reasoning for Lester. Even Lester himself has something of an epiphany towards the end of the novel, and it comes when he is wondering the mountain roads after escaping from the authorities who were attempting to locate his victims. In another moment of rootlessness and homelessness in McCarthy, Lester himself becomes lost, and whilst walking down a mountain road he sees a child in a church bus peering back at him,

and he has a rare yet lucid moment of moral introspection – he perhaps sees what other Lester there could have been if the notionally bonding agencies of community, family, the law and property had not so ruthlessly dismissed him. He eventually returns to the state mental institution, claiming that he is meant to be there, thus underlining his marginalization and revealing the fact that he is yet another sadly miscast McCarthy character.

Talk of a garish cast of the aberrant, mad, disturbing, endearing and outlandish lead us nicely into the novel that, alongside *Blood Meridian*, is arguably McCarthy's finest accomplishment. Although eventually published in 1979, we know that McCarthy had been working on *Suttree* for a considerable period of time, even whilst he was working on *The Orchard Keeper*. The novel is by far the most complex and aesthetically accomplished within his southern canon, and it incorporates and develops the themes explored in his previous three novels – it displays a deep affection for the traditional communities and those displaced by a more rampant commercialism, it is at times disarmingly allegorical and deeply metaphysical, whilst at other times it is brutally violent yet highly amusing, often within the same passage. *Suttree* is therefore as challenging, paradoxical and anachronistic as the region itself.

Set in the opening years of the 1950s, *Suttree* follows the exploits and philosophical crisis of one Cornelius Suttree, who has shunned his family's wealthy and privileged existence for a life designed to arrive at some organic, transcendental truth. To do this, he lives in a shabby riverboat home and revels in the hedonistic opportunities afforded by Knoxville and the community of McAnally Flats.

Suttree himself can very much be read as an absurd or existential hero, and whilst he eventually triumphs in his metaphysical tussle against the knowledge of his own mortality – in one recollection of his childhood we learn that even at a young age *Suttree* had ‘already begun to sicken at the slow seeping of life,’ (136) - his philosophical unification comes at a cost – both Suttree and McCarthy himself would leave Knoxville and East Tennessee at the conclusion of the novel, on the road again, heading west (like John Wesley Rattner before them) for new terrains and vistas.

The novel constantly switches tone and direction, often within small narrative spaces. Whilst the physical space is familiar the imaginative or unconscious terrain can be as allegorical and grotesque as the textual ‘space’ we identified in *Outer Dark*. Many commentators have noted that Suttree differs from many of McCarthy’s central protagonists in that he is educated, articulate and capable of mature emotional and intellectual reasoning; the fact that he chooses not to utilize such skills is much to the chagrin of his father especially. Suttree is perhaps McCarthy’s most autobiographical novel and character, and the glimpses we are afforded of Suttree’s childhood memories could well be modeled on the nightmarish dreamscapes of the young McCarthy himself:

He himself used to wake in terror to find whole congregations of the uninvited attending his bed, protean figures slouched among the room’s dark corners in all multiplicity of shapes, gibbons and gargoyles, arachnoids of outrageous size, a batshaped creature hung by some cunning in a high corner from whence clicked and winked like bone chimes its incandescent teeth. (149)

The novel opens with a now legendary prologue which evokes the preface in James Agee’s *A Death In The Family*. The preface to *Suttree* fully reveals the aberrant nature of the region, and it sets the anachronistic, hybrid and paradoxical tone that McCarthy will

follow throughout the narrative. Indeed, McCarthy ‘gothicizes’ Knoxville if you will, and the following excerpt beautifully captures this city which is *constructed on no known paradigm*:

Encampment of the damned...The buildings stamped against the night are like a rampart to a further world forsaken, old purposes forgot. Countrymen come for miles with the earth clinging to their shoes and sit all day like mutes in the marketplace. This city constructed on no known paradigm, a mongrel architecture reading back through the works of man in a brief delineation of the aberrant disordered and mad.... We are come to a world within a world. In these alien reaches, these maugre sinks and interstitial wastes that the righteous see from carriage and car another life dreams. Illshapen or black or deranged, fugitive of all order, strangers in everyland. (3,4)

As with his debut novel, *Suttree* explores a complex dichotomy, in that McCarthy is at once celebrating this exceptional quality whilst the text also documents its disappearance. Indeed, by the end of the novel the world presented to us is no longer fugitive of all order, as many of the characters are proscribed roles by a more conformist system – some are absorbed into the normative world of work and employment, others are interred in prisons or asylums, whilst others, such as Ab Jones and Red Callahan, meet brutally violent ends.

For much of the novel, Knoxville vibrates with a kind of other worldly gothic energy, especially in the Market house scenes. McCarthy achieves a lyrical brilliance in such passages, and in the scene described it is easy to imagine Ownby trading his ginseng, John Wesley purchasing his traps, and Lester Ballard viewing it all sadly, a world that will never be his. *Suttree* himself earns a meager living by fishing the river, and his

economic existence is very much in line with ‘the country commerce’ described in the following passage.

In what is quite a rare authorial gesture, McCarthy offers a fixed time, 1951, in which the following Market square view unfolds. Much American literature of and about this period was mired in conspiracy and paranoia, and it bemoaned the conformist route the burgeoning Military Industrial Complex was taking. And then we have McCarthy’s depiction of Market Square in Knoxville, Tennessee, and it reads as a description more akin to some gothic or medieval kingdom than north America in the nuclear age. I’m sure that this excerpt is familiar to all of you, as it inscribed in the present day Market Square, alongside passages from James Agee and David Madden:

Market Street on Monday morning, Knoxville Tennessee. In this year nineteen fifty-one. Sutt with his parcel of fish going past the rows of derelict trucks piled with produce and flowers, an atmosphere rank with country commerce, a reek of farmgoods in the air tending off into a light surmise of putrefaction and decay. Pariahs adorned the walk and blind singers and organists and psalmists with mouth harps wandered up and down. Past hardware stores and meat markets and little tobacco shops. A strong smell of feed in the hot noon air like working mash. Mute and roosting pedlars watching from their wagonbeds and flower ladies in their bonnets like cowed gnomes, driftwood hands composed in their apron laps and their underlips swollen with snuff. He went among vendors and beggars and wild street preachers haranguing a lost world with a vigor unknown to the sane. Suttree admired them with their hot eyes and dogeared bibles, God’s barkers gone forth into the world like prophets of old...He passed under the shade of the markethouse where brick the color of dried blood rose turreted and cupolaed and crazed into the heat of the day form on form in demented accretion without precedent or counterpart in the annals of architecture. Pigeons bobbed and preened in the high barbicans or shat from the blackened parapets. (66-7)

As the narrative progresses this almost carnivalesque flavor is completely eroded from the city. Following his near fatal bout of typhoid Suttree witnesses the destruction of McAnally Flats, a nightmarish mechanical vision where ‘yellow machines groaned over the landscape,’ and where lay ‘fields of rubble, twisted steel pipes and old conduits reared out of the ground in agonized ganglia among the broken slabs of masonry.’ (464)

Another Market Square scene late on in the novel is one of the most touchingly mournful from the text, and there are quite a number of those in *Suttree*. In this passage the streets are empty and the natural, organic vibrancy has disappeared, replaced by a bleak and lonely setting where all is changed, seemingly for good:

In Market Street the flowers were gone and the bells chimed cold and lonely and the old vendors nodded and agreed that joy seemed gone from these days, none knew where. In their faces signature of the soul’s remoteness. Suttree felt their looming doom, the humming in the wires, no news is good. Old friends in the street that he met, some just from jail, some taken to trades. (381).

Another chief theme of the novel, and indeed in all of McCarthy’s work, is the Oedipal conflict between father and son. Suttree’s father obviously strongly disapproves of his sons beatific existence, and in a letter to him – which is presented to us in the opening of the novel – it is clear that the father clearly represents the sanitized institutional order that Suttree has fled from. In this letter Suttree’s father claims that ‘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, in business, in government. There is nothing occurring on the streets. Nothing but a dumbshow composed of the helpless and the impotent.’ (14-5)

Much like Ownby and Sylder before him, Suttree determinedly and stoically sticks to his guns, boozing and brawling through his years amongst the dispossessed and destitute. In his phantasmagoric mock trial following his near-fatal illness Suttree is memorably accused of squandering ‘several ensuing years in the company of thieves, derelicts, miscreants, pariahs, poltroons, spalpeens, curmudgeons, clotpolls, murderers, gamblers, bawds, whores, trulls, brigands, toppers, tosspots, sots and archsots, lobcocks, smell-smocks, runagates, rakes and other assorted and felonious debauchees’ to which Suttree replies, ‘I was drunk.’ (457)

There is a temptation with *Suttree*, and all of McCarthy’s work for that matter, to focus too intensely on the philosophical and metaphysical, and to overlook the fact that he also writes fine comedic scenes. McCarthy is writing within a strong regional tradition in this instance, and McCarthy’s Suttree certainly has many similarities with George Washington Harris’ *Sut Lovingwood*. Whether he is detailing secretive and forbidden romantic midnight dalliances with watermelons, capturing ground shaking wind problems at downtown diners, or recording the absurd entrepreneurial schemes of Gene ‘the city rat’ Harrogate, which are doomed to fail at the moment of their conception, McCarthy, like the frontier humorists before him, is a highly skilled writer of comedy.

At the novel’s end Suttree leaves Knoxville, presumably to head west, spiritually and philosophically unified, prepared to embrace flux and mobility, not stasis and inertia, in a new setting. The new roads being laid over McAnally at the conclusion of the novel suggest that a new order is taking hold on the city, and that its exceptional character is now nothing more than myth, legend and dust, the fate that seems to befall all of McCarthy’s characters and landscapes.

Motifs and metaphors of journeying and wandering proliferate in McCarthy's work, and it should therefore come as no surprise that they dominate in *The Road*, his most recent novel. The novel is classically American in many respects, as it is a road narrative, an epic journey, a quest to forge ahead in a hostile and unknowable terrain. However, the landscape traversed here is not some pastoral sanctuary, it is not 'one of the gardens of the world,' but it is a bleak and lifeless post-apocalyptic landscape.

In the novel we follow an unnamed father and his son as they journey through this hellish wasteland; indeed, this is where we encounter another paradox in McCarthy's work, as although the landscape is ashen and apocalyptic the prose is clean, crisp and lucid, and the economy of McCarthy's style renders the novel's most important scenes all the more poignant.

As the narrative voice informs us in the early stages of the novel, this is quite simply a world in which 'Everything [is] uncoupled from its shoring.' (11) Phone books, maps, states and even nations have no signifying purpose in the fictional world designed for us here, and road signs advertising Rock City remain after the attraction itself has long since perished. However, perhaps one redeeming and gently ironic element of the world presented to us in *The Road* is that the child doesn't know what coca-cola is. Indeed, much like in all of his work, this is a 'world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities.' (88)

However, one of the most symbolic themes of the book is that the south – as physical space and imaginative entity – acts as a redemptive agency when all else seems to have vanished. The motivation behind this may be that the father believes that the climate will be marginally better or that some kind of life may have prevailed in the south, but it is

also heavily influenced by a pastorally sublime memory from the father's childhood. Recalling a day spent fishing with his uncle, presumably close to his home city of Knoxville, the father remembers that this was 'the perfect day from his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon.' (13) Furthermore, the scene where they find and bathe in the waterfall – located in North Carolina – is perhaps the closest thing we get to a romantic and sublime moment in the whole novel, underlined when they find morels growing in a nearby forest.

The father heads south in search of a new place, a new chance, and the south becomes the new physical and imaginative frontier, the place which inspires stories and shapes dreams and hopes, when all else seems to be lost. The child even develops his own fantasies about 'how things would be in the south,' (54), where he even imagines other children. The belief in narrative as an energizing and life-affirming force is significant, especially one centered around a long-cherished dream of the south.

A number of subtle inter-textual parallels between *The Road* and McCarthy's earlier southern novels can also be drawn. The father and son journey through ruined and decaying orchards, which evokes *The Orchard Keeper*, whereas elsewhere they are described as resembling the 'walking dead in a horror film' (55) which calls to mind the cinematic images *Child Of God* and *No Country For Old Men*. The fact that the narrative suggest that 'the frailty of everything [was] revealed at last' (28) also hints at the unsure ground that McCarthy sees all human constructs as operating on.

When Knoxville is described it is done so using the carnivalesque imagery employed in *Suttree*, and we see how 'the long concrete sweeps of the interstate exchanges' were 'like

the ruins of a vast funhouse.’ (24) The city is populated with ‘the mummied dead everywhere,’ also appearing as ‘shriveled and drawn like latterday bogfolk.’ (24) On two separate occasions the father and son also walk through ruined plantation houses –symbolizing one lost cause amongst many others here – replete with their ‘tall and stately white Doric columns,’ (105) pretensions to order and stability from another era. The country is also described as feeling ‘like a dawn before battle,’ (129) which is how Knoxville is also described in the preface to *Suttree*. Victims of the disaster – whatever that may have been – litter the road in agonized, petrified stances, ‘figures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling,’ (190) which closely parallels the victims of the triune in *Outer Dark*, as does the ‘human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit’ (198) which the child stumbles upon.

Conversely, in a more hopeful and heroic vein, the father embodies the heroic qualities we have identified in much of McCarthy’s characters, from his debut novel through to John Grady Cole and Billy Parham in the Border Trilogy. Despite he fears that ‘he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own,’ (154) the father –in the best traditions of McCarthy’s characters – continues to resist and defy, ultimately upholding his promise to his child (perhaps the last remaining child of God) that ‘this is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don’t give up.’ (137) The father keeps his promise, and the boy carries his light into the south.

The conclusion of the novel does raise some interesting questions. Is the ending of the novel uncharacteristically hopeful, or could the rescuers be another group of cannibals? How has their ‘goodness’ been validated? We learn that they have been watching the boy

and his father, but what was their motivation? Is the ending plausible, within the context of the novel itself, or what we have discussed about McCarthy's work?

In many respects, *The Road* brings us full circle in terms of McCarthy's Southern canon. Although his five southern novels are concerned with some of the commanding themes of southern literature – such as the theme of the past in the present, the struggle to maintain organic folk cultures against the onslaught of modernity and bureaucratic standardization and so on – these novels are also fully in tune with the cultural, social, economic and mythic exceptional narratives of Knoxville and East Tennessee. Indeed, in his work McCarthy has brought a strikingly unique and memorable imaginative order to a city and region constructed on no known paradigm, to borrow from the preface to *Suttree*.

For my final point, I'd like to return to the quote we examined from John Grammer at the opening. Grammer claims that it is hard to imagine McCarthy on some platform in Stockholm assuring us that man will survive and prevail. Whilst his work prior to *The Road* hinted at such uplifting humanistic themes his most recent novel suggests that, if ever summoned, and contrary to Grammer's opinion, it may not be so hard after all to imagine McCarthy articulating such a hopeful and life-affirming message.

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