

Demythologizing the South: Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree* in an Intertextual Perspective

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The article is structured around a premise of intertextuality, which is suggested not only by McCarthy's own more or less overt allusions to Faulkner's writing but also by the very name of his protagonist Suttree, which is evocative of the name of perhaps the best known Faulkner villain Thomas Sutpen. This supposition in turn leads to an argument that in his 1979 novel McCarthy does indeed reverse the life story of Thomas Sutpen by making Suttree descend down the very path that Sutpen ascended a century and a half before him, i.e., from the ranks of Southern aristocracy to the scum of the earth, and in defiance of the same ideology that Sutpen went to great lengths to embrace. Thus, an intertextual and comparative approach to McCarthy's novel not only in the context of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* but also his *Light in August* (cf. Joe Christmas) and *The Sound and the Fury* (cf. Quentin) as well as Ellen Glasgow's short story "Jordan's End" demonstrates that what Cormac McCarthy actually does in *Suttree* is to demythologize the South, complete with its aristocratic pretensions ("doing pretty"), dubious morality (incest) and fear of miscegenation (obsession with time and the double). Moreover, in doing so, he defamiliarizes it by reducing it to its Other (poor whites and African Americans), whose authenticity, liveliness and charity defy the affectation, lifelessness and decadence of the aristocratic South.

Keywords: Cormac McCarthy, William Faulkner, the South, intertextuality, demythologization, defamiliarization

Introduction

The present paper is an attempt at intertextualizing Cormac McCarthy's fourth and longest novel *Suttree* (1979), with a view to bringing out what appears to be its main, although well camouflaged, theme, i.e., deglorification of the South. The book has been variously perceived: as hardly autobiographical at all (Arnold & Luce, 1993, p. 8), "autobiographical in an obliquely symbolic way" (Davenport, qtd. in Arnold & Luce, 1993, p. 8), or as McCarthy's "most autobiographical work" (Cooper, 2013, p. 48), considering the author's notoriety for a reclusive lifestyle and contempt for pecuniary gains as well as his protagonist's renouncement of his aristocratic Southern roots for a life of dejection in the McAnally slums of Knoxville, Tennessee. With its picaresque episodic structure, apparent plotlessness and inconclusiveness (Bryant, 1997, p. 221), *Suttree* raises more questions than it answers, including one about its general direction and place within the American literary tradition, as stressed by Marek Paryż in his review of the recent Polish translation of the book (<http://www.cormacmccarthy.pl/recenzje/marek-paryz-recenzja-suttree.html>). However, the present paper argues that it is precisely *Suttree*'s intertextual consideration against the backdrop of some Southern fiction that

reveals the book's full purpose and intent. For, unless you rely on intertextuality for your understanding of McCarthy here, "You can walk, [...]. But you caint see where you goin," as Mother She tells Suttree at the commencement of her hypnotic session (McCarthy, 2010, p. 509). Indeed, the extent to which *Suttree* relies on intertextuality in general calls for further exploration thus remaining beyond the scope of this study.

The Suttree family album and Aunt Martha's gilded reminiscences about the glorious past of the South introduce Suttree's aristocratic uncles as either victims of the Civil War or of their own Southern temperaments. On the other hand, Suttree's visit to a lunatic asylum to see his other aunt, Alice, reveals a streak of madness in the family, affecting both its sides, the sword and the distaff, for Suttree looks familiar to the nurses of the institution, who remember him for visiting his elders on previous occasions. In fact, it is with dread that the protagonist himself recognizes another member of the family there, possibly his apparently dead grandfather: "Their eyes met across the dayroom and Suttree's face drained to see the old man there and he almost said his name but he did not and he was soon out of the door" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 522), as if in a simultaneous recognition and renouncement of the common blood.

This "infection" of madness in an extended Southern family calls for an intertextual consideration of McCarthy's book against Ellen Glasgow's short story "Jordan's End," with an analogical parade of aunts and uncles—sisters and brothers—in the Jordan family. The parallel is further augmented by the mirror scenes of knitting in both texts. In Glasgow the Jordan aunts are making a piece of pink baby garment in an ominous preparation to the birth of as yet unexpected but already doomed little sister of Allen Jordan's sick son, who suffers from the same genetic disease as do his father and his great uncles. This scene is mirrored in Suttree's visit to the asylum where he sees Aunt Alice and another lady engaged in a similarly ominous act of knitting of, as if, the vicious circle of the family doom, the association which becomes particularly apparent when, upon leaving the place, the protagonist sees the old man mentioned before "holding a huge watch in his hand and following Suttree with his eyes as if he'd time him" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 522). The book's intertextual reading against Glasgow's story may also serve to solve the mystery of the sudden and premature death of Suttree's young son, the more so that McCarthy's novel neither explicitly raises nor answers the question, just as it passes in silence over the reasons for Suttree's abandonment of his wife, the issue to be addressed further in the paper.

Suttree's preoccupation with the idea of a double ever since he discovers that he had a stillborn twin brother, his obsession with time, clocks, shadow, darkness and both his father and grandfather, mirror analogical preoccupations, coupled with the same array of attributes, in Quentin Compson obsessed with family incest and miscegenation in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* (cf. Young, Jr., 1993, p. 95).¹ Those similarities spell analogical reasons behind both the ingrown nature of the Compsons and the Suttrees, the fact confirmed, among others, by the recurrence of the same male names from one generation to another, with the sons and even daughters named after their fathers, uncles and grandfathers (i.e., Suttree's grandfather and uncle both called Jeffrey; Faulkner's Jason bearing his father's and Grandfather's name; and Caddy's daughter Quentin IV named after her uncle).

A constant repetition of the words "shadow/y," "black/ness," "dark/ness," in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Suttree*, as well as the persistent recurrence of the colour of "yellow" in the latter book, shows that Suttree's

¹ A number of other critics have noted thematic and stylistic parallels between the fictions of Cormac McCarthy and William Faulkner: e.g., Guillemin, 2004, pp. 7, 12; Karl, 2001, p. 122; Evenson, 2013, p. 62; Frye, 2009; Grammer, 1993, p. 39).

trauma, like Quentin's, is related to racial identity, thus suggesting the universal Southern fear of the consequences of miscegenation. The dread is articulated most dramatically in Shreve's famous prophecy at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, according to which "in a few thousand years," all northern Americans "will have [...] sprung from the loins of African kings" although "as they spread toward the poles they will bleach out again like the rabbits and the birds do [...]. But it will still be Jim Bond," i.e., Sutpen's mulatto idiot son howling from atop Sutpen's mansion, an incestuous scion of both races (Faulkner, 1964, p. 378). The "wrong" colour of the progeny may or may not show in a particular generation, but it will pop up here and there over the years, and unexpectedly so too, often in different shades of white and black, because "Blood will tell" as Suttree's grandfather used to say (McCarthy, 2010, p. 22), for, as his mother's brother Uncle John believes, "[t]he women are just carriers" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 23), rather than "whores," contrary to the way Suttree's alleged father perceives his wife and Suttree's mother.

Incidentally, but certainly not accidentally, the first person that turns up after Uncle John's visit to Suttree's boathouse and their vehement and revealing family talk, as well as the person whose appearance closes the book, is J-Bone, with whom Suttree converses about "Civil War relics" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 28), when joined by a character called "Nigger," whom they claim to be one of those. Both names, J-Bone and Nig, significantly, appear side by side in the writer's phrasing of their dialogue: "Early times, *Nig*, cried *J-Bone*" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 28; emphasis mine). When pronounced, the latter's name reads [dʒei-boən], which sounds like a corruption of Jim Bond [dʒim bond], analogically to the similarity in pronunciation between Bond Jim [bon(d) dʒim] and Benjy [bendʒi], Faulkner's idiot boy from *The Sound and the Fury* (see Branny, 2008, for further discussion). This homophonic analogy creates rich implications for both Benjy and Suttree, by claiming not only incestuous but also ethnic provenience for both, analogical to Jim Bond's, which is why neither Benjy nor Suttree qualifies for taking over the family heritage, quite apart from the former's idiocy and the latter's relinquishment of the familial heritage of guilt and evil.

To draw the implications of the homophonic analogy between J-Bone and Jim Bond even further, let us compare their results in relation to both Faulkner's Benjy and McCarthy's Suttree. Benjy—Quentin's outwardly white idiot brother—turns into a "*bluegum*" child, as Versh claims in *The Sound and the Fury* (Faulkner, 1956, p. 84), in effect of his grandfather General Compson changing his name—as if in assertion of the boy's heretofore unacknowledged mulattoism—from Maury, the name of his mother's brother, to the biblical Benjamin, who, as Faulkner explicitly states, was sold by his brothers into slavery. This act of dispossession is further augmented by Benjy's loss of his rightful heritage, i.e., the family pasture, taken away from him by his iniquitous brother Jason.

Suttree is, analogically, referred to in the novel by names different from his own: Bud or Buddy to his family, he goes by Sut or Suttree, or, Indian-like, Youngblood, at McAnally. Moreover, the hypnotic trance at Mother She's brings back Suttree's childhood memory of a drooling idiot boy running around the family yard, the respectable household of lawyers and businessmen, who, as his father used to teach him, were the only people that counted on this earth. What's more, Suttree is called "a yellow cocksucker" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 195) by an infuriated hoodlum, whom he refuses to give money, for he indeed has none.

This brings us to another issue which makes for the intertextualization of McCarthy's novel against the backdrop of Faulkner's fiction, i.e., Suttree's presentation as a Christ-like figure, not unlike that of Joe Christmas from *Light in August* (cf. Cooper, 2013, pp. 48-49). Indeed, the action of McCarthy's novel starts in August, and Suttree's relinquishment of his heritage is misconstrued by his family as unfounded eccentricity

and an excuse for abandoning his wife and child, just as Christmas is lynched for the crime he did not commit, i.e., Joe Brown's murder of Joanna Burden (see Branny, 2013, for a more detailed discussion). Suttree's voluntary acceptance of poverty and destitution in renouncement of the sins and perversities of many a generation of Southern aristocracy can be viewed as analogical to Christ's voluntary acceptance of his Passion to save humanity from the eternal death of the soul in effect of sin. Christ's Harrowing of Hell in the rescue of sinners, which preceded his Resurrection, finds its analogy in Suttree's descent into the Hades of the world of evil at McAnally on a mission of love, in a voluntary single-handed rescue operation addressed to Gene Harrogate, whose very name implies where he belongs, i.e., "a fellowship of the doomed," as Suttree calls it, but whom he himself perceives as a surrogate prodigal son (cf. Arnold, 1993, p. 59).

Suttree's acts of kindness do not apply to Harrogate only; they are indeed universal and embrace other inhabitants of the McAnally grounds, "a jovial community of the fallen," each of whom "clings to Suttree [...] as a means of grounding their desperate lives" (Frye, 2009, p. 58). Thus he shares catfish with the hungry goatman of a preacher; helps the Indian Michael to find his lost boat; assists Leonard in burying his overdue father by sinking him in the Knoxville river; calls on Mother She to heal the wounds of Abe Jones after his violent encounter with the police; and, finally, buys poison for Harrogate's bounty-hunted bats even though he realizes that the boy has been cheating on the panic-stricken hospital staff by making them believe that the bats were already dead when he found them.

On the other hand, as indicated in the abstract, Suttree's very name is evocative of the name of perhaps best known Faulkner villain Thomas Sutpen, which indeed gives Suttree the dubious status of a Joe Christmas presented as at once an alleged murderer and a Christ-figure. This analogy, however, leads to an argument that in creating Suttree as a Christ-figure, McCarthy created an anti-Sutpen. Thus McCarthy reverses the story of Thomas Sutpen by making Suttree descend down the very path that Sutpen ascended a century and a half before him, i.e., from the ranks of Southern aristocracy to the downtrodden of this earth, and in defiance of the same ideology that Sutpen went to great lengths of iniquity to embrace. Sutpen's failed American dream, which he tried to accomplish by renouncing the Other in the form of his own progeny, is counterpoised by Suttree's moral victory, in both exposing the truth about the varnished surface of the fossilized history of the South, and in ennobling the destitute and the needy Other by voluntarily joining his ranks.

One might claim that after all Suttree abandons his wife and son exactly as Sutpen does his first family in Haiti. However, the proposed intertextual reading of McCarthy's novel points to the true reasons behind his act, the reasons which are mirrored in Suttree's own life story, and which most certainly link his renouncement to the doom of the South. If Sutpen abandoned his Haitian wife and his half-breed son Charles Bon, it was for their racial otherness; if Suttree abandoned his aristocratic Southern wife and her son, it was because of the moral otherness of her people, in effect of which his son was not in fact his but his wife's and her family's only, which is precisely why he dies a premature death. The above solution to the riddle of Suttree's abandonment of his family may explain the fury on the day of his alleged son's funeral of not so much his wife, who is described as "madonna berieved" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 181), but her family, and especially her mother, for it was Southern ladies that specialized in "doing pretty," and, as a 19th cent. chronicle has it, pretending that the mulatto children in their households exactly resembling their white children, "dropped from the sky" (qtd. in Sundquist, 1983, p. 109).

From the very beginning McCarthy's book establishes an unmistakable affinity with *The Sound and the Fury*, by starting with an episode with which this Faulkner novel ends in the chronological sense, i.e., "[d]eath

by drowning" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 15), evocative of Quentin's suicide by and obsession with water. Next in *Suttree* comes the mention of the clock and Grandfather, linked together, as they are in Faulkner's novel, when "the ticking of the dead man's watch" brings to Suttree's mind an immediate association with "[t]he old tin clock on Grandfather's table" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 15). Moreover, Quentin's remark about African Americans being the white Southerners' "obverse reflection" finds its equivalent in "mauve halfmoon[s]" on the right and left temples of Suttree and his dead twin brother referred to by McCarthy's protagonist as "[m]irror image. Gauche carbon" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 16), thus indeed claiming the status of Anti-Suttree for Suttree's dead twin. Incidentally, McCarthy's "halfmoon[s]" are evocative of Faulkner's "*the full of the moon*" in Versh's prophecy about Benjy's true racial identity as one of "*them bluegum chillen running round the place*," who "*et [granpa] clean*" (Faulkner, 1956, pp. 84-85). Furthermore, one of Suttree's childhood memories which surface in his hypnotic session at Mother She's features a doll-like figure in a cot—apparently his nameless twin—who is referred to by Aunt Martha as "a thing," curiously enough, as his hypnosis reveals, brought home together with the living brother instead of being passed on into the hands of "people [...] [who] take care of these things" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 20), most certainly to hide the baby's mullatoism, which is why Suttree learns about his existence by accident many years later, significantly enough, from Uncle John, his mother's brother, and only because the latter is drunk. It is also Uncle John who assures him: "I cant imagine anyone being more different from your brother" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 19).

The fact that this is not just a singular instance of miscegenation in the Suttree family is confirmed by a photograph at Aunt Martha and Uncle Clayton's of "a fat dead baby, garishly painted, bright fuchsia cheeks. Never ask whose" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 156), apparently made up for the coffin to camouflage its wrong colour of skin and in perpetuation of family's "colorblindness," which is specifically mentioned by Uncle John upon his calling on Suttree, when he refers to him as "colorblind," to which Suttree retorts: "At least I'm not crazy"—both conditions being the essence of the Southern problem (McCarthy, 2010, p. 23). That neither Suttree nor McCarthy is indeed colorblind becomes apparent from the protagonist's straightforward admission: "I am, I am. An artifact of prior races" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 154), and a persistent recurrence in the novel of the colour "yellow." Not only is Suttree dubbed a "yellow cocksucker" by a complete stranger as previously mentioned, but also Uncle John's "forefinger" is described as "yellow" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 21) and "[a] soft yellow dust bloomed" when Suttree closed the family album at Aunt Martha's (McCarthy, 2010, p. 156), to mention but a few of the countless instances of the sort in the novel.

McCarthy's gnomic comment on the photograph: "Never ask whose," cited above, brings forth the very issue which must have lain at the core of Suttree's renouncement of his family's Southern heritage. While looking over the family albums at Aunt Martha's, Suttree observes: "In the photographs the children appear sinister like the fruit of forbidden liaisons" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 152). And indeed, most of the conversation between Suttree and Uncle John, obliquely refers to the issue of the former's genetic identity, hinting at his having been fathered either by his mother's brother or her own father, the latter envisaged by Suttree as talking to him as a boy with "*incertitude*" during their walk together "by a dark lake" in Suttree's dream, just as "the dead faces" in the "old musty album" wear "masks of *incertitude* before the cold glass eye of the camera" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 154; emphasis mine). The repetition of the word "*incertitude*" might refer exactly to the uncertainty of whose son Suttree in fact is and who fathered the other children in the family with "[t]he landscapes, old backdrops, redundant [...], recurring unchanged" (McCarthy, 2010, p. 154), for no influx of fresh blood, no change of scene or character.

One of the photographs in the family album features Suttree's grandfather: "[a]n old man [...] holding a baby in his arms. Presenting it stiffly before him like an offering" (McCarthy, 2010, pp. 153-154), very much like biblical patriarchs presented their newborn sons sired in their old age. Moreover, Suttree "remembered the blue pools of his dead eyes. *He and his sisters* filing past the tall old bed. Lifted up to see. *Waxen flesh obscenely* wrinkled. [...] old *grandfather* sat up in his *yellowed* bedding" (McCarthy, 2010, pp. 154-155; emphasis mine). This sparse McCarthian description implies a number of things. Even though he looks dead, Grandfather is very much alive, both physically and metaphorically, which might account for a moment of dread and recognition between Suttree and "an old man in a striped railroader's hat" in the asylum. This is also suggested by the visible colour of his eyes in the above citation, the eyes which would have otherwise been closed by his family the moment he died, were he indeed lying in state here, the adjective "dead" frequently recurring in *Suttree*, particularly in the Southern familial context. Moreover, the colour of grandfather's flesh and his bedding as well as the very choice of the same, unmistakably imply miscegenation, while the adverb *obscenely* used to refer to his *flesh* in the context of a file of grandchildren by his bedside instills in the readers' minds an *incertitude* as to which of them are indeed his and his daughters', and which ones are his sons' and their sisters', especially in the context of a piece of historic evidence in the form of an 1850 respectable Southern senator's last will addressed to his son, where the former voices an analogical incertitude as to the fatherhood of the mulatto children in his household (qtd. in Williamson, 1980, pp. 55-56).

Furthermore, Suttree's curious conversation with his mother's brother about his own genetic identity implies that he is indeed a "[r]eprobate scion of doomed Saxon clans" as he believes himself to be upon a visit to the ruins of the family mansion, the scene which bears distinctly Anglo-Saxon overtones, complete with "the master" and "the hunt," "old heraldic feasts" and the *ubi sunt* motif in "the feast is done" and "nor child nor horse," where, significantly, the rider is replaced with the *child* (McCarthy, 2010, p. 163). Addressing Suttree Uncle John says:

Don't tell them you saw me.
 [...]
 The uncle nodded, watching the floor. *You know*, he said, *you and me are a lot alike*.
 I don't think so.
 In some ways.
 No, said Suttree. *We're not alike*.
 Well, *I mean*...the uncle waved his hand.
 That's *his* thesis. *But I'm not like you*.
 Well, *you know what I mean*.
I do know what you mean. But I'm not like you. I'm not like him. I'm not like Carl. I'm like me. Dont tell me who I'm like.
 Well now look, Buddy, there's no need...
 I think there is a need. I don't want you down here either. I know they dont like you, *he doesnt*. I don't blame you. It's not your fault. I cant do anything. (McCarthy, 2010, p. 21; emphasis mine)

Suttree's vehement denial of any likeness to the family should be understood both figuratively—as an assertion of his self-imposed exile, or, ironically, as a general expression of ingrownness ("I'm like me")—and quite literally—as his disgust with the very idea of incest. Either way it is reminiscent of Quentin's violent and thus false sounding denial of his hatred of the South in response to Shreve's prophecy about miscegenation quoted before: "*I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*" (Faulkner, 1964, p. 378). Just as we tend to

disbelieve Quentin, we are inclined to distrust Suttree, and for identical reasons too. What Suttree's defiant reply does, though, is adding still another *incertitude* to the three already mentioned, that of yet another uncle looming large as his potential father.

Conclusion

To conclude, the most important question concerning the main reasons for Suttree's decision to leave home for good and renounce his family's Southern heritage can hardly be answered without resorting to intertextuality in general, and William Faulkner in particular, for McCarthy's book itself is silent on the subject. But through his use of the Faulknerian technique of asserting presence by absence in apparently presenting the modern epic of destitution and bereavement at McAnally, Knoxville, Tennessee, McCarthy draws the discerning reader's attention to the tragic consequences of the moral degeneration of the aristocratic South, thus both demythologizing and defamiliarizing it.

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