

***THE MYTHS OF THE OLD SOUTH AND THE NEW SOUTH IN CORMAC
MCCARTHY'S SUTTREE***

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Abstract: Cormac McCarthy's first novels focus on the Tennessee history, myths and the cultural and economic changes brought especially by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Suttree, his fourth and most autobiographical novel, is located in the 1951 Knoxville, in a world caught between "the world that was" – an Old South, with its pastoralism and stories -, and "the world to come" – the New South, with its urbanisation, industrialisation and "Americanisation". This paper aims to highlight through the eponym character of this novel McCarthy's pastoral vision and the confrontation between wilderness and civilisation in the Southern region.

Key words: Old South, New South, Southern pastoralism, wilderness-civilisation, Cormac McCarthy.

The New South and the Tennessee Valley Authority

What does the South mean nowadays? We all have an image of the South through the writings of well-known writings, like William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Anne Porter, Alice Walker, or even Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. However, the world is in a continuous change, and concepts like *tradition* and *modernisation*, *globalisation* and *regionalism*, *multiculturalism* and *ethnic identity* clash in the process of new myths creation.

Cormac McCarthy, "the rightful heir" of William Faulkner and of the Southern gothic tradition, has been known especially for his Western novels – *Blood Meridian* (considered his masterpiece), *The Border Trilogy*, *No Country for Old Men* (known also for its adaptation by the Coen brothers), and his post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road*. Writers and critics acclaimed both his Southern and Western novels. To give one example, Harold Bloom considers McCarthy one of the four greatest American contemporary writer¹, together with Don DeLillo,

¹ "Well, we have four living writers in America who have, in one way or another, touched what I would call the sublime. They are McCarthy, of course, with *Blood Meridian*; Philip Roth, particularly with two extraordinary novels, the very savage *Sabbath's Theater* and *American Pastoral*, which I mentioned before; Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, which is a little long for what it does but nevertheless is the culmination of what Don can do; and,

Thomas Pynchon and Philip Roth. Moreover, the writer's complexity is not represented only by his style which is often compared to the one of William Faulkner's, Flannery O'Connor's or Ernest Hemingway's, in his mixture of minimalism – when it comes to dialogues and the construction of his characters – and maximalism – when we refer to his descriptions and monologues, but also in the variety of his themes and the diversity of approached genres: the Southern gothic, the Western (and the anti-Western), and the post-apocalyptic writings. As Steven Frye remarks, McCarthy's work deals with “a range of aesthetic and social concerns: genre transformation, narrative form, cinematic technique, mythogenesis, gender, masculinity and ethnicity, among others.” (*The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, 2013: 4).

McCarthy's career as a writer starts in the South, with his first four novels: *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1974) and *Suttree* (1979). How is his South different from Faulkner's South? What happened to the myths of the South after the 1950s? What does the Old South mean? What about the New South and the creation of a new myth? There have been many “Souths” - the colonial Eden, the romantic Old South, the antebellum South – with its idyllic community, the romantic Old South, the crusading Lost Cause – opposed to the materialistic (with its economic prosperity and equality among races) New South. After they had lost the Civil War, in the collision of the traditional culture with modern elements, the past, or more exactly the memory of the past South, became myth, a myth which gravitates around *family, community and roots, religion and patriotism*.

However, the modern age brought with it other conflicts: *globalisation vs. regionalism, multiculturalism vs. ethnic identity*, elements which were summarized by John Egerton in the coined phrases “the Americanization of Dixie” or “the Southernisation of America”. On the one hand, Hodding Carter proclaimed “The End of the South” (Time Magazine, 1990), explaining that this region had been reduced to “at most an artefact lovingly preserved in the museums of culture and tourist commerce”, because “the South, a living, ever regenerating mythic land of distinctive personality is so hard to find in the vital centers of the region's daily life.” (qtd. in Duncan, 2010: 144) On the other hand, other voices, like Charles Reagan Willson, proclaimed the survival of a distinctive regional culture in an industrialised, modern world, and that “other parts of the United States, without consciously turning to the South, began to long for some of its values: community, family, roots.” (“The Myth of the Biracial South”, 2010:

of course, the mysterious figure of Mr. Pynchon.” Harlold Bloom in the interview offered to Leonard Pierce, A.V. Club. June 2009.

12) What is then the South? As Jan Nordby Gretlund asks “Have the inherited values survived the modernisation of recent decades? Or have they been bulldozed away now that the South is also a victim of interstate highways, chain stores, suburban life, and mass media advertising?” (*The Southern State of Mind*, VIII)

Among the institutions which changed the face of the South, the Tennessee Valley Authority, known as TVA, had a great impact not only for the modernisation and the industrialisation of “the entire Tennessee River Valley, from Knoxville to Paducah, where the Tennessee joins the Ohio River” (Dianne C. Luce, 2009: 18), but also for McCarthy’s Southern novels. The TVA, a governmental corporation created in May 1933, had broad powers to “take notice of any item of valley life that could be included under the term ‘general welfare’ or ‘physical, economic, and social development’ (qtd. in Dianne C. Luce, 2009: 18). Among their objectives were the flood control and the river’s transformation into a navigation channel of still lakes via dams and locks, but

[...] the TVA’s engineering decisions destroyed the farmland of hundreds of families and permanently altered the traditional culture of the region. Its engineers debated between constructing a high-dam or a low-dam system on the river but finally chosen the former because it would maximise production of cheap electricity (Dianne C. Luce, 2009: 21)

The result was “the displacing of thousands of people and their old cemeteries”, because “in order to achieve flood control, they would have to create a permanent flood in the valley itself. In this process, 3000 families – 14 000 individuals – and 5000 graves were displaced.

Although his father was a lawyer for the Tennessee Valley Authority, Cormac McCarthy “spends much time in the rural countryside among the people who form the basis of characters in his early Southern novels” (Steven Frye, *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, 2013: XVII) Moreover, the TVA’s influence in the South is highly present in all of these novels, presenting in them on the one hand the flaws of the South, with its outlaws and lower-class society, and on the other hand the struggle to maintain a pastoral, traditional existence in the forced industrialisation of this region.

Suttree, a novel of urban life

Suttree was McCarthy’s last and most ambitious Southern novel, different from his previous novels through his character, setting and structure, and it has often been compared by critics with James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Eliot’s “Waste Land”, and Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. *Suttree* is a well-educated man, “an intelligent and perceptive artist/philosopher-in-the-making, also an alcoholic and soul-wounded man alienated from

family, church, and twentieth-century American culture” (Dianne C. Luce, 2009: 194), who gives up his fortune and rejects his family in order to live in a houseboat, in a Knoxville which actually existed in the 1940s – 1950s. It is a strongly autobiographical novel and the characters with which Suttree interacts are based more or less on McCarthy’s acquaintances. It is McCarthy’s first urban novel, which depicts the clash between the city life and (eco)pastoral existence, with deep roots in the Southern society, being at the same time a *tour de force* when it comes to literary techniques. As Georg Guillemain writes in “Introduction: The Prototypical *Suttree*”, “in some respects Suttree might count as his most Southern work (due to the tall tales, banter, and local color), while in other respects it seems barely American (due to its use of stream of consciousness and its Old World iconography). (Harold Bloom, *Cormac McCarthy*, 2009: 50)

The novel begins with a portrait of the city and its surroundings, made by an omniscient narrator, that seems to look at everything from above, mingling past and present, civilisation and nature, tradition and modernity, simplicity and materialism. The river becomes a reflection of Suttree’s inner wars, reflecting at the same time his fears and the vortex of Knoxville: “He could hear the river talking softly beneath him, heavy old river with wrinkled face. Beneath the sliding water cannons and carriages, trunnions seized and rusting in the mud, keelboats rooted to the consistency of mucilage.” (*Suttree*, 2010: 8)

McCarthy’s river reminds us of Eliot’s river, the Thames, from “The Waste Land”, in which are present “primary images conveying the poem’s theme of the sterility of life in the modern world” (Robert L. Jarrett, 1997: 47), and in which images like mud, sewage and decay predominate. In McCarthy, the river reflects two distinct worlds, the natural, pastoral one, being a source of existence for Suttree and people like the ones from Wanda’s family, and at the same time it reflects the decayed life of the city, being seen and described as “cloaca maxima”. The images of the river reflect Suttree’s inner universe and conflicts. As Robert L. Jarrett puts it, the river “operates as primary representation of Suttree’s psyche, in which the two forces of life and death coexist in unresolved conflict.” (Robert L. Jarrett., 1997: 48)

Moreover, as Dianne C. Luce observes,

“On the Tennessee River bank Suttree occupies a liminal world between subsistence and commercialism, wilderness and city, poverty and middle class, communion and isolation, aspiration and materialism. The river and the city are metaphors for Suttree’s spiritual imprisonment, his struggle with despair, his intermittent efforts to find a vision that will free

him from his own kind of drowning in materialism – the materialism of mortal flesh and the materialism of American culture.” (*Reading the World*, 2009: 197)

Modern world and old world dwell inside Suttree’s soul. On the one hand, Suttree rejects the sound and the fury of modern life, and searches in his wanderings a simple existence, rejecting his father’s materialism. On the other hand, paradoxically, Suttree is attracted and allured to the materialistic part of existence through the commerce that he makes with the fish that he catches, his occasional jobs that he accepts for profit, or his relation with Joyce, with whom he lives inside the city, opposed to his relation with Wanda, the woman who he meets on the banks of the river. He silently accepts everything from Joyce – the fact that she is a prostitute, the money that he receives from her, the way she dresses him. For a short period of time, he abandons his houseboat and his way of living, falling into the world that he firstly rejected in his family.

They selected shirts and ties and cufflinks. They studied shoes in a glass case. A sleek attendant hovered.

Wednesday noon he appeared at Comer's in a pair of alligator shoes and wearing a camelhair overcoat. A pair of beltless gabardine slacks with little zippers at the sides and a winecolored shirt with a crafty placket requiring no buttons. (*Suttree*)

However, their relation is constructed only on materialism and as he rejected and abandoned his family, Suttree breaks with Joyce and the world that she represents. In his way back to his houseboat, McCarthy’s character observes the image of Knoxville, of this “city on the hill” created by man:

“Knoxville as Dis, the city of heretics, is a fallen version of the city on the hill, the Puritan hope for a city of God in America, as Canfield points out. When Suttree makes his way down the hill to his houseboat after his break with Joyce, a separation that marks their mutual disgust with the materialism at the heart of their relationship, he notes the ruinous hardscape of the city – ‘all this detritus slid from the city on the hill’ (411); his reference, with its ironic hindsight, is to John Winthrop’s sermon, ‘A Model of Christian Charity’ [...] Suttree’s allusion suggests that the American enterprise has erected on the clean breast of the new world, not Winthrop’s city upon a hill but Dante’s Dis or even Babylon [...] It marks Suttree’s full recognition – inklings of which have troubled him all along – that he has reenacted the heresy of Knoxville and America, the terrestrial city, in his seduction to pleasure and profit with the prostitute Joyce.” (Dianne C. Luce, 2009: 228)

Conclusion

Marcel Arbeit, in his essay, “Lies as the Structural Element in the Fiction of Lewis Nordan”, points out that contemporary Southern writers approach the South through two different perspectives. One is through the myth of the past, which says that

Southern writers are interested more than others in moral problems, family, and community life, that they realise to a greater extent that our world is a place of pain, suffering and sorrow. (*The Southern State of Mind*, 2010: 175)

However, he goes on, contemporary writers have in mind a different approach:

In an age of small narratives and lack of belief in God there is no place for morals. It is the tension between these two myths that haunts the best contemporary Southern writers. (*The Southern State of Mind*, 2010: 175)

This is also the case of Cormac McCarthy’s novels. We will find in them the major themes of the South, with the search of family, of an edenic place, with the myth of a pastoral and an ancient South, myths which are present in his writings only to be debunked. McCarthy searches for a pastoral South - often found in the myth of the antebellum South, bringing to our attention the themes, the myths and the specific characters of this region. But he presents to us another side of the coin through his outlaws that he depicts and the conflict between the old South and the new South, between man and nature, civilisation and wilderness, industrialisation and tradition. As Georg Guillemin affirms, “McCarthy pitches a highly stylized, wholly man-made literary practice against his evolving ecopastoral universe, until a stalemate between humanist discourse and post-humanist idea invests his fiction with a narrative melancholia that is actually very common in pastoral fiction. Out of the dialectic tension between narrative voice and narrative vision, however, evolves a version of pastoral without equal in the American literature of the latter half of the twentieth century.” (Harold Bloom, *Cormac McCarthy*: 2009: 50)

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