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The Ambiguous Nihilism of Cormac McCarthy

By Vereen M. Bell

Cormac McCarthy’s novels are as innocent of theme and of ethical reference as they are of plot. On the other hand, each of them constitutes a densely created world as authentic and persuasive as any that there is in fiction. The worlds are convincing not because the people in them do normal and recognizable things, or represent us metaphorically, or even inhabit identifiable time and space, but because McCarthy compels us to believe in them through the traditional means of invention, command of language, and narrative art. To enter those worlds and move around in them effectively we are required to surrender all Cartesian predispositions and rediscover some primal state of consciousness prior to its becoming identified with thinking only. There is a powerful pressure of meaning in McCarthy’s novels, but the experience of significance does not translate into communicable abstractions of significance. In McCarthy’s world, existence seems both to precede and preclude essence, and it paradoxically derives its importance from this fact alone. The vivid facticity of his novels consumes conventional formulae as a black hole consumes light. He is Walker Percy turned inside out—intuitive, unideological, oblivious to teleological fashions, indifferent if not hostile to the social order, wholly absorbed in the strange heterocosm of his own making. Ethical categories do not rule in this
environment, or even certain: moral considerations seem not to affect outcomes; action and event seem determined wholly by capricious and incomprehensible fates. His stories are lurid and simple; they seem oddly like paradigms without reference and are all the more compelling because of that, since the matter of the paradigm does not lose its particularity in abstraction. The characters—without utilitarian responsibilities to well-made plots and unrelated to our bourgeois better natures—are real precisely to the degree that they resist symbolization.

At the end of Outer Dark (1968) the road that Culla Holme is following brings him abruptly to a swamp, and absurdly ends there:

Before him stretched a spectral waste out of which reared only the naked trees in attitudes of agony and dimly hominoid like figures in a landscape of the damned. A faintly smoking garden of the dead that tended away to the earth's curve. He tried his foot in the mire before him and it rose in a vulvate welt claggy and sucking. He stepped back. A stale wind blew from this desolation and the marsh reeds and black ferns among which he stood clashed softly like things chained. He wondered why a road should come to such a place.  

This is as close to a conventional paradigm as McCarthy usually comes, and it, of course, is a paradigm of a dead-end, paradigmless world (and for its novel also a kind of gothic, self-referential joke). A more sophisticated Cornelius Suttree, in McCarthy's most recent novel, Suttree (1979), dreams in a delirium that his life is being voided into "a cold dimension without time without space and where all was motion." When, past his crisis, he speaks with an attending priest he tells him that what he has learned close to death is that God "is not a thing. Nothing ever stops moving."

This is McCarthy's metaphysic: none, in effect; no first principles, no foundational truth; Heraclitus without logos. At the end of Child of God (1973), Lester Ballard, the logic of whose poignant, homicidal loneliness we have attended step by relentless step, is permitted in death a last socially redeeming value: at the state medical school in Memphis

he was preserved with formalin and wheeled forth to take his place with other deceased persons newly arrived. He was laid out on a

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slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and the brains removed. His muscles were stripped from his bones. His heart was taken out. His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations. At the end of three months when the class was closed Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with others of his kind to a cemetery outside the city and there interred. A minister from the school read a simple service. At about this same time the decomposing bodies of Lester Ballard’s victims are discovered when a team of plowing mules falls through and into the cave-mausoleum where the dead women are found arranged, ”on stone ledges in attitudes of repose” (p. 195). They are hauled out one by one, dripping rheum, and as the sheriff and his deputies drive with the bodies back to town, “in the new fell dark basking nighthawks [rise] from the dust in the road before them with wild wings and eyes red as jewels in the headlights” (p. 197). The hawks are an eidetic rendering of the eerie, inexplicable beauty—and otherness—of McCarthy’s world.

Because that world is one where “nothing ever stops moving” it is represented by people who are, as he puts it in one place, “fugitive of all order” or, in another, knowers “of things known raw, unshaped by the constructions of a mind obsessed with form.” Marion Sylder in The Orchard Keeper (1965) is a rakish, resourceful whisky-runner who not only defies the authorities but taunts them while scrupulously obeying the terms of his own human code. His counterpart in the loose narration is Arthur Ownby who lives alone in the mountains with his dog and year after year watches over an abandoned peach orchard, on the one hand, and on the other, the decomposing body of a man Marion Sylder has killed in self-defense and thrown into the old orchard’s insecticide tank. Ownby runs afoul of the law when he carefully fires twelve partially circumcised shotgun shell casings into a mysterious goverment tank which has appeared in his woodlands and which he knows to be the beginning of the end of his solitude. “Ever man loves peace and an old man best of all,” he thinks later, after a shootout and capture, remembering proudly what he has done. The boy who is the only link between these two learns an austere integrity from them. His strange

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4 Orchard Keeper (London: Andre Deutsch, 1966), p. 229. All further references appear parenthetically in the text.
maturing is symbolized at the end when he returns to the courthouse in Sevierville to retrieve the dead sparrowhawk he had turned in for bounty months before and then, ashamed and appalled, gives back the dollar when he learns that the authorities do not preserve the hawks for some worthy purpose but instead burn them.

Lester Ballard, the child of God, is abandoned by his mother after his father has hanged himself in their barn and his farm has been taken by the courts. He lives at first in an abandoned cabin which he shares unwillingly with wild animals (including once a pack of baying foxhounds); eventually, when his house burns, he lives in caves which become a grisly necropolis, a makeshift human society populated by young women Ballard has murdered—mostly with their boyfriends in lovers lanes—and made love to. He is not motivated by anything that we can speak of; he lives beyond the pale both socially and psychoanalytically. Since his inner life is closed away from us he seems like a dreadful unconscious, externalized into unreflective and unironic action. When he does come to, so to speak, it is after seeing the face of a boy on a school-bus who he realizes reminds him of himself as a boy, and so he returns to the hospital from which he has escaped, saying only, "I'm supposed to be here" (p. 192).

Cornelius Suttree in Suttree has chosen his own exile from his own wealthy family and from his wife and child to live in Knoxville along the river in his houseboat among derelicts, thieves, drunks (like himself), whores, and bootleggers. Living beneath the bridges and viaducts of the city, they form a renegade anti-community, a Jaycee's nightmare, which Suttree takes to embody the truth, or at any rate, not falsehood. The slum district surrounding this community is called McAnally Flats, and as Suttree is recovering from an illness and eventually decides to leave, the area is being torn down to make way for the new Knoxville expressway (the time is the middle 1950's). Suttree thinks of the wreckers, cynically, as "gnostic workmen who would have down this shabby shapesshow that masks the higher world of form" (p. 464)—thus allying the novel with psychoanalytic notions of the modern city as a flight from nature. Suttree is carefully constructed to express its anti-metaphysical vision. Where all of life is motion, rich episodes follow upon one another with chaotic improvidence, the time-spans between them—their temporal relationships unmarked. The largest units—of time that we are conscious of are the seasons, and this is mainly because the extreme seasons challenge the ingenuity and survival of McAnally's down-and-out residents. The river is the novel's metaphoric ground of being, a new rendering of Williams's "filthy Passaic."
The main characters of McCarthy's four novels, because of their rural isolation and poverty, or because they have chosen isolation and poverty, live a daily hermeneutic adventure, their simple objectives leading them through mystifying disclosures of meaning with which they become continuous. They exist in isolated pockets of experience, intersect with each other briefly, become involved in, or remain auditors of, baroque, wonderful stories of human ingenuity and headlongness or of grotesque cruelty. By this strategy human life is revealed through anecdote and incident rather than through thematic patterns, in particulars rather than through types. Rinhry Holm in *Outer Dark* is a prototype of the character who knows things raw, "unshaped by the constructions of a mind obsessed with form." We do not know where she and her brother, Culla, live when the novel opens; we know virtually nothing about her parents, and neither does she. The two of them inhabit an austere, rural void. When Culla, leaving her for a brief period, tells her not to take strangers in, she replies, "They ain't a soul in this world but what is a stranger to me" (p. 29). When she sets out in search of her newborn child, which Culla, its father, has left to die in the woods, she doesn't know whether she is headed toward town or away from it because she's never been there. When she is asked by a suspicious farmer whether she hasn't run off from somewhere she says, "No . . . I ain't even got nowhere to run off from" (p. 101). She says to a doctor later, "I don't live nowhere no more . . . I never did much. I just go around huntin' my chap" (p. 156). Hunting her "chap" entails hunting a malicious tinker who has in fact found and taken the abandoned baby. But she has never seen the tinker and he has never seen her, and she does not even know, until a storekeeper tells her, that there is "more than one kind." She has no reason to choose one road over another since the tinker could be anywhere. Her quest proceeds in a vacuum, intermittently filled by the sympathetic rural people who help her out but seem somehow, though they have homes and families, no less wandering in space than she. She is shrewd and strong and humorus, but she is virtually without thoughts, driven on and sustained by the simple meaning that she makes. She remains unaware of the appalling facts which transpire in the novel's parallel narrative. In that opposing narrative an evil surrealism prevails, the dark inversion of Rinhry's simpleminded, maternalistic grace. Farmers and towns-people are gratuitously murdered, found hung from trees; corpses are dug up from their fresh graves and robbed of their clothes. All of this is phlegmatically perpetrated by three lawless, sadistic night-riders. The last of victims are the tinker and Rinhry and Culla's child, whose throat the bearded leader slits, before Culla's eyes, as dispassionately as if he were lighting a pipe.
In the beginning of *Outer Dark* Culla has had a strange dream of a prophet who promises cures to all the diseased, lame, and blinded assembly of "human ruin" who attend him, once the sun has gone into and through an eclipse. But in the dream the sun goes into eclipse and does not return, and the crowd waits restlessly in the cold darkness for the promise to be fulfilled. Finally the crowd grows mutinous and turns not upon the prophet but the dreamer, who himself has asked to be cured, and the dreamer is unable to hide, even in the darkness. The dream is a parable of the promise of life—that we may be cured—and the perverse issue of that promise in misery and deprivation. The dreamer is set upon as if he were God, whose broken covenant is grotesquely inverted by those who, rejected, reject him and in doing so make their own darkness. Rinthy represents a fragile human beauty—a promise of sorts—which is merely parallel to the ugliness and inhumanity which prevail elsewhere; this harsh contrast underscores the novel's pervasive concern with the mystifying discontinuities of experience.

When they had done in the kitchen she followed the woman down the passageway at the rear of the house, the woman holding the lamp before them and so out into the cool night air and across the boardfloored dogtrot, the door falling to behind them and the woman opening the next one and entering, her close behind, a whippoorwill calling from nearby for just as long as they passed through the open and hushing instantly with the door's closing.

(pp. 61-62)

She opened the door and the night air came upon them again sweetly through the warm reek of the room, the whippoorwill calling more distant, the door closing and the woman's steps fading across the dogtrot and the bird once again more faintly, or perhaps another bird, beyond the warped and waney boards and thin yellow flame that kept her from the night. (p. 62)

The whippoorwill had stopped and she bore with her now in frenzied colliding orbits about the lamp chimney a horde of moths and night insects. (p. 63)

She put the lamp on the shelf and sat on the bed. It was a shuck tick and collapsed slowly beneath her with a dry brittle sound and a breath of stale dust. She turned down the lamp and removed her dress and hung it over the brass bedpost. Then she unrolled the shift and put it on and crawled into the bed. . . . When they were all turned in they lay in the hot silence and listened to one another
breathing. She turned carefully on her rattling pallet. She listened for a bird or for a cricket. Something she might know in all that dark. (pp. 64-65).

Rinthy is not threatened here. She, in fact, has been taken in by responsive, if laconic, strangers. Nevertheless, the five pages that it takes to get Rinthy from washing up to bed are dense with alternating signals of strangeness, uncertainty, and reassurance. The command of the nuances of speech and narrative rhythm, of sounds and of visible objects, and even of silence, is unaltering. The un-lurid, almost pastoral occasion is a subtle microcosm, and the whole of the novel is the sum of such occasions. Each episode, the novel as a whole, and the texture of the prose itself express repeatedly a sense of the interwoven beauty and terror of life which is the unassuming beginning and end of McCarthy's vision. What meaning there is remains inseparable from the sensation of experience.

Risking portentousness, one might characterize McCarthy's nihilism as not simply ambiguous but dialectical. There is Rinthy on the one hand, and the evil Magi on the other, the whippoorwill's song and the silence when it ceases, her dreamed child and the real one. There is Lester Ballard's helpless loneliness and hunger for love and the remains of the victims of it, "covered with adipocere, a pale gray cheesy mold common to corpses in damp places, and scallops of light fungus [growing] along them as they do on logs rotting in the forest" (p. 196; the gothic element in McCarthy refers us to what we contrive to avert our senses from in normal life). During one idle journey along the river, Cornelius Suttree witnesses at one point a peaceful baptism ceremony—"total nursin" one of the participants calls it—and hears talk of being saved; at another point he remembers from his own childhood being instructed in killing, near the same spot, by an old turtle hunter and watching a turtle's skull being blown away "in a cloud of brainpulp and bonemeal": "the wrinkled empty skin hung from the neck like a torn sock" (p. 119). At the end of the novel, as Suttree hitchhikes out of Knoxville, he is approached and offered a dipper of cold water by a boy who is carrying water for a road-construction crew (they are building the new expressway): "Suttree could see the water beading coldly on the tin and running in tiny rivulets and drops that steamed on the road where they fell"; he sees himself for an instant in the blue of the child's eyes (p. 470). Then moments later, after he has been picked up, he looks back and the child is gone. In his place has come an "enormous lank hound... sniffing at the spot where Suttree had stood" and he recalls the hounds of the huntsman of one of his feverish dreams, "slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravenous for souls in this
world" (p. 471). Such juxtapositions are calculated, but they are suggestive rather than schematic. Their disturbing effect is condensed in a story told to Suttree by an old railroad man. Back in the days when he had "used to hobo a right smart" he had been passing through the mountains in Colorado in a slatsided boxcar crouched in a corner against the winter wind. But the car catches fire from a match he has flipped away, and when he is unable to stamp out the flames he leaps from the ascending train into a snowbank; "and what I'm going to tell you you'll think peculiar but it's the god's truth. That was in nineteen and thirty-one and if I live to be a hunnerd year old I don't think I'll ever see anything as pretty as that train on fire going up that mountain and around the bend and them flames lightin up the snow and the trees and the night" (p. 182). This could not seem very peculiar to Suttree, since it is the minimal point of his experience that we dwell inescapably in paradox and should learn to be willing to do so, since things could be a lot worse.

The clear, good water that recurs in the novels is a simple representation of what is desired of the world but is a provisional image only, not a symbol of redemption. When Gene Harrogate, Suttree's hilarious young neighbor, is rescued by Suttree after days of being trapped under debris and sewage in a vast cave under the city, his lunatic plan to blast his way through the foundation of a bank disastrously thwarted, he says first of all, "I hate for anybody to see me like this" and then, "I'd give ten dollars for a glass of icewater. . . . cash money"—thus comically uttering a serious refrain, the story of anyone's life in McCarthy's world (p. 277). One of the mysteriously affecting moments in Outer Dark comes when Rinthy and the farm family that has taken her in stop along the hot road to town to drink from a spring. "That's fine water, the man said. Fine a water as they is in this country. She took the cup from him and dipped it into the dark pool, raised it clear and drank. It was sweet and very cold." Such images and episodes rhyme with each other meaningfully. They also ground and reinforce episodes of greater apparent import. One such is Suttree's wholesomely erotic interlude with the young daughter in a family of mussel-shell gatherers which ends when she is killed beneath a landslide of slate. The small moments are subtly foregrounded and achieve significance because they form a whole with the otherwise dominating spirit in the novels of violence and perversity. The vague dialectic is one point; its irresolution is the other.

In this context something grander Yeats wrote comes to mind: "The human soul would not be conscious were it not suspended between contraries, the greater the contrast the more intense the consciousness." In McCarthy's novels intensity of consciousness is not that of any given character. His technique is to represent characters who are strikingly devoid of con-
sciuousness, insofar as we are permitted to see. The intensity of consciousness is the novelist's—or that of the novel itself—and then ours as we are compelled to cross over from our world into his. His daring range of styles is essential to this effect. On the other hand, all of McCarthy's novels are unusual for the high degree of unassimilated raw material they accomodate. His world stands forth vividly. His scrupulous reproduction of detail (reflected in the precision of his language), his casual command of the right names for things—for parts of things, for aspects of various processes, and how things get done—his respect for the taxonomic specifcness of the natural world, are like Joyce's in that they give his work a deep cohesion that mere shape and plot cannot. And this method has its point, too—that the raw materiality of the world is both charismatic and overpowering: the ego is as fragile and as transient, and perhaps as illusory, as any imagined form.

The negotiations between the ego and the contary world are a main issue in Suttree, since for its protagonist the nature of identity is a primary, consuming mystery. It is, however, through his friend Harrogate that the point is most affectingly conducted. Known also as country mouse and city rat and—for good reason—as the moonlight melonmounter, Harrogate is oblivious to such morbid distractions as ontological insecurity. He is a resourceful survivor for whom poverty is an exhilarating game. Yet when he is arrested finally, trying to rob a store, and is sent to the state penitentiary, he is made by McCarthy, in a passage of remarkable originality and insight, to seem virtually to disappear. On the train to Brushy Mountain Prison Harrogate is without thoughts; he merely watches from his window, sees things as they pass: a cornfield and the dark earth between dead stalks; flocks of nameless birds; winter trees against a winter sky; a woman tossing a dishpan of water into the yard and wiping her hands on her apron; a little store at a crossing; a row of lighted henhouses; a lighted midnight cafe. Then, abruptly, as the train moves into the dark rainy country, the windows become tear-stained, black mirrors: "and the city rat could see his pinched face watching him back from the cold glass, out there racing among the wires and the bitter trees, and he closed his eyes." To think of Harrogate dispersed into the world and then to remember him free, contriving his endless, baroque schemes, is to perceive the real and metaphorical horror of prison life, of passivity and inaction, and to consider how it is that schemes and scheming hold the world at bay. This long, saddening account of Harrogate's journey has begun with the observation—his or the narrator's: "It is true that the world is wide" (p. 439). The dreadful reality within the cliché—that we are not the world nor the world us—would not be likely to occur to Harrogate as a thought, but it has entered his mind, and we
experience it his way.

Suttree himself is an educated and reflective character, the anthithesis of freewheeling Harrogate, and he is paralyzingly aware of everything that Harrogate’s industry and simplicity shield him from: the true horror of death; the sure corruption and end of all friends, all love, all singular, cherishable things; the impersonal relentlessness of time; the cruel absence of God from the world. He is obsessed also with the arbitrariness of identity, of how even that minimal coherence erodes when reassuring reflectors or the conventions of social roles or homes and families fail. (He is haunted by doppelgängers, especially that of a twin brother who died at birth.) Living on the river off of his trotlines seems to be saturation therapy for him, a way of confronting head-on and dealing with the chaos and violence that he both identifies with and fears, a choice to endure authentically at the risk of both his selfhood and sanity. Insofar as McCarthy’s vision and technique allow for anything like an epiphany, a small one seems to issue from Suttree’s experience when he irreverently tells the priest who has come to attend his death (Suttree is a genuinely lapsed Catholic, not a fake Burgessite one): “I learned that there is one Suttree and one Suttree only” (p. 461). This means of course that there is only one Suttree lifespan, complete in itself; but it also appears to signify not a realization about identity but a choice—that a Suttree of the many possible in a world of antiform must be made to be. In its minimal way, this is also an affirmation. Not long before his grisly contest with typhoid fever and its accompanying allegorical derangement, Suttree has himself attended the death of the old ragpicker who is the novel’s oracular voice of nihilism’s despair, cursing life and God, and himself as well (he has tried to contract with Suttree to be soaked in coaloil and burnt on the spot when he dies). Looking upon his body Suttree is moved by his own residual existential stamina to think about him for the first time and to reject him. “You have no right to represent people this way, he said. A man is all men. You have no right to your wretchedness’” (p. 422). This intellectual gesture implies a tenuous hold upon purpose and it seems to be a stage in the same subterranean process by which becoming one Suttree becomes a rational goal. It is a product of experience rather than naive faith, since for all the atrocity and deformity, alienation, bone-deep physical pain, and violent death Suttree witnesses and suffers, his various unendejected friends have borne him care and have embodied for him a heartening, hell-raising stoicism. So the as yet inchoate one Suttree is fully conscious of the two symbolic acts at the end, drinking the water and fleeing the hounds. Wrenchingly conflicted as this amazing world of McCarthy’s is, from which logos has been borne away, even an illusory choice, an illusory transcendance gets one through to
the next place in one's life where something bizarre or exhilarating or moving—worth surviving for—obscurly waits. In Cormac McCarthy's novels, adjusting a notion of the self to an understanding of the nature of the world is a baffling and precarious enterprise, since it is the essence of that world, in all the novels, that form and meaning refuse to coincide. Experience, meanwhile, continues to insinuate questions while supplying no answers, leaving the articulate and the inarticulate alike fatefully free.