L'AMÉRIQUE D'EST EN OUEST

The Grapes of Wrath de John Steinbeck,
A Multitude of Sins de Richard Ford

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Université Paul Verlaine-Metz

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THE GRAPES OF WRATH *DE JOHN STEINBECK,*
A MULTITUDE OF SINS *DE RICHARD FORD*

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INTRODUCTION

> We are surrounded by a rich and fertile mystery. May we not probe it, pry into it, employ ourselves about it, a little?
>
> Henry David Thoreau[1]

Objet de fascination, l'espace américain est au cœur de la littérature de ce vaste pays depuis que les premiers colons en ont foulé le sol. Certains se sont faits chroniqueurs et historiens pour rendre compte de leurs découvertes. Leurs récits soulignent certes les dangers inhérents à cette terre inconnue et sauvage, mais ils la présentent aussi comme un pays de Cocagne où les richesses abondent, véritable jardin d'Eden où l'homme n'a qu'à tendre la main pour profiter de tous ses bienfaits. Tous ces écrivains s'attardent sur l'immensité de la contrée qu'ils ont explorée petit à petit, au fur et à mesure qu'ils s'enfonçaient dans la *wilderness*. De ce contact avec la nature est née leur réflexion sur la place de l'homme dans ce pays neuf et dans l'univers ; de cette aventure est né un formidable mythe qui a traversé les siècles.

L'Amérique est restée dans l'imaginaire collectif la terre de tous les possibles. D'Est en Ouest elle étale ses plaines, ses montagnes, ses prairies et ses déserts, à perte de vue – paysages où la notion de limite semble n'avoir plus cours, de telle sorte que l'œil humain reste déconcerté, perdu devant tant de grandeur. Source d'effroi mêlé de respect et de révérence, ce que l'anglais traduit par le terme *awe*, l'espace américain fait naître un

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1 *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau II*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis Allen (New York: Dover, 1962) 471-472.

sentiment de liberté chez celui qui le contemple ; il est, littéralement, une expérience sensorielle, intellectuelle, spirituelle, voire métaphysique. Les paysages de l'Amérique sont, pour reprendre la comparaison de Washington Irving, qui voit dans l'Océan Atlantique une page blanche séparant le Vieux Monde du Nouveau, autant de pages vierges qui invitent au voyage et à l'écriture. Peu importe que l'étendue soit de terre ou d'eau ; seule compte l'absence de tout façonnement humain, qui prépare l'esprit à recevoir la nouveauté et à en prendre la pleine mesure[2].

Dès sa découverte par les premiers Européens, l'espace américain se pose en énigme à déchiffrer. Au fil des expéditions visant à découvrir de nouvelles terres, de nouveaux fleuves, de nouveaux passages (on pense notamment aux explorations de Lewis et Clark), il se révèle dans toute sa complexité et sa variété. Pour le domestiquer et se l'approprier, non seulement sur le terrain, mais aussi sur le papier, on arpente, on mesure, on dénombre, on délimite ; bref, on dessine l'Amérique. Mais ce n'est pas là uniquement l'œuvre des géographes ; les écrivains s'efforcent eux aussi de cartographier leur pays. On trouve chez eux, comme l'a montré Pierre-Yves Petillon, le désir de donner un corps à l'Amérique, de véritablement la définir par le Verbe[3]. Les pionniers ont pour noms Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving ou encore James Fenimore Cooper. Ils posent chacun à leur façon les jalons d'une littérature spécifiquement américaine, mais c'est surtout Cooper qui va ouvrir la voie à une mythologie du Nouveau Monde ancrée dans le rapport à l'espace, à travers son héros Natty Bumppo / Leatherstocking. L'élan vers l'Ouest du milieu du 19e siècle s'accompagne de la construction de routes et de lignes de chemin de fer qui sillonnent l'Amérique et relient la côte Est à l'Océan Pacifique et à ce qui deviendra le 31e état de l'Union en 1850.

La route est l'élément incontournable dans la conquête de l'horizontalité de l'espace. Elle est synonyme d'aventure, de rapidité, de progrès ; elle *est*

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2 Au début de « The Voyage », Irving écrit : « To the American visiting Europe, the long voyage he has to make is an excellent preparative. The temporary absence of worldly scenes and employments produces a state of mind peculiarly fitted to receive new and vivid impressions. The vast space of waters that separates the hemispheres is like a blank page in existence ». Washington Irving, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*. (1880; New York: Signet, 1981) 16.

3 Voir Pierre-Yves Petillon, *La Grand-route : Espace et écriture en Amérique* (Paris : Seuil, Collection « Fiction & Cie », 1979).

l'espace lui-même. Elle fascine tout autant que le paysage qui se déploie de part et d'autre du ruban qu'elle déroule, au point d'avoir donné naissance à un genre littéraire spécifique, le *road novel*. Elle est, avec l'espace, l'une des composantes primordiales des deux œuvres sur lesquelles portent les études rassemblées ici : *The Grapes of Wrath*, de John Steinbeck, roman publié en 1939, et *A Multitude of Sins*, recueil de nouvelles de Richard Ford paru en 2001. Malgré un ancrage spatio-temporel différent, ces ouvrages de fiction témoignent d'une continuité certaine dans l'approche de la relation que les Américains entretiennent avec les vastes étendues qui composent leur pays. Ils mettent en scène des personnages qui à un moment ou à un autre prennent la route, par nécessité ou par plaisir, et sont confrontés à l'espace américain dans toute son immensité et sa splendeur.

Ainsi, dans *The Grapes of Wrath*, les deux premiers paragraphes qui ouvrent le chapitre 12 montrent comment le destin des personnages est intimement lié au lieu dans lequel ils évoluent :

> Highway 66 is the main migrant road. 66—the long concrete path across the country, waving gently up and down on the map, from Mississippi to Bakersfield—over the red lands and the gray lands, twisting up into the mountains, crossing the Divide and down into the bright and terrible desert, and across the desert to the mountains again, and into the rich California valleys.
>
> 66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership, from the desert's slow northward invasion, from the twisting winds that howl up out of Texas, from the floods that bring no richness to the land and steal what little richness is there. From all of these the people are in flight, and they come into 66 from the tributary side roads, from the wagon tracks and the rutted country roads. 66 is the mother road, the road of flight.[4]

Lieu de rencontre pour ces migrants qui affluent de toutes parts, la Route 66 est le *topos* fédérateur par excellence. Elle est la planche de salut, le refuge de ces hommes et ces femmes chassés de leurs terres. Elle leur permet de se faire une place dans un territoire changeant et inconnu, semé d'obstacles, les rassemble et les unit dans un même élan vers l'avenir. Ils peuvent ainsi tourner la page, avancer sans regarder en arrière, opérer un mouvement continu vers des jours meilleurs une fois qu'ils ont atteint la route qui leur offre une ligne de fuite. En effet, comme le dit Gilles Deleuze, « La grande erreur, la seule erreur, serait de croire qu'une ligne de fuite

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4 John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939; New York: The Viking Critical Library, Penguin Books, 1997) 119.

consiste à fuir la vie ; la fuite dans l'imaginaire, ou dans l'art. Mais fuir au contraire, c'est produire du réel, créer de la vie, trouver une arme »[5].

Le mouvement, justement, constitue avec le changement l'axe autour duquel Marie-Claude Perrin-Chenour construit son propos ; elle examine les notions de progrès, de progression et de régression tout en « suivant le fil rouge de l'Indien ». Françoise Clary, elle, aborde la question de l'émotion liée à l'écriture : après un rappel de l'histoire géographique qui sous-tend le roman, elle s'intéresse aux voix du texte avant d'orienter son analyse vers « le voir et le ressentir » et « l'implication de l'affectivité dans l'écriture ». Centré plus directement sur la question de la voix, l'article de Kathie Birat permet de mieux comprendre les mécanismes de l'oralité à travers une étude précise des différents modes d'expression employés par Steinbeck. Enfin, la contribution de Gérald Préher analyse dans le détail l'ouverture du chapitre 17, dans laquelle il voit un exemple révélateur de « la manière de faire des mondes »[6] qui anime les migrants.

À l'Amérique rurale des années trente que dépeint Steinbeck correspond l'Amérique urbaine contemporaine de Richard Ford ; à la cohésion des migrants que le premier met en scène répond le solipsisme des avocats et des agents immobiliers qui peuplent les nouvelles du second ; les grands espaces que traversent les migrants de Steinbeck deviennent chez Ford des jungles citadines compactes qui dévorent jusqu'aux termes renvoyant à un phénomène naturel – comme par exemple le « canyon of buildings » mentionné dans « Quality Time »[7]. Même des sites comme le Grand Canyon se voient pollués par ce qu'on pourrait appeler la civilisation de la ville. La *wilderness* est toujours là mais sous une forme en mutation. Animés par une sorte de désir de retour au prélapsaire, les personnages aspirent à un espace hors les murs et à prendre la route. Cela correspond à l'image qui se dégage de la façon de vivre de l'auteur. Dans un essai publié dans *Harper's Magazine* en 1992 il raconte qu'il a déménagé plus de vingt fois en vingt ans et a vécu dans des lieux aussi divers que le Montana, le

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5 Gilles Deleuze, in Gilles Deleuze et Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (Paris : Flammarion, Collection « Champs ») 60.

6 Nous empruntons l'expression au titre du livre de Nelson Goodman, *Manières de faire des mondes*, traduit par Marie-Dominique Popelard (1978 ; Paris : Gallimard, Collection « Folio essais », 2006).

7 Richard Ford, *A Multitude of Sins. Stories* (2001; New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2003) 26.

Mississippi, la Nouvelle Orléans, New York, le Maine, et bien d'autres encore. Puis il explique que cette sorte de nomadisme est ancrée dans son enfance :

> My most enduring memories of childhood are mental snapshots not of my hometown streets or its summery lawns but of roads leading *out* of town. Highway 51 to New Orleans. Highway 49 to the Delta and the Coast. Highway 80 to Vicksburg and darkest Alabama[8].

Ford plante le décor des nouvelles rassemblées dans *A Multitude of Sins* à divers endroits du continent nord-américain. Les villes sont la plupart du temps nommées : l'action de « Quality Time » se passe à Chicago, « Calling » et « Puppy » à la Nouvelle-Orléans, « Reunion » à New York, « Crèche » dans le Michigan, « Under the Radar » dans le Connecticut, « Dominion » fait une incursion au Canada, à Montréal, « Charity » se déroule dans le Maine et « Abyss » dans l'Arizona. Seule « Privacy », qui ouvre le recueil, a pour cadre une grande ville anonyme du Nord-Est des États-Unis. Si aucune logique apparente ne semble régir l'ordre géographique des nouvelles, il n'en reste pas moins qu'une ligne directe émerge entre la première et la dernière : Ford fait voyager son lecteur du Nord-Est à l'Ouest, du confinement urbain aux grands espaces désertiques. On suit ses personnages dans leur quête de quelque chose qu'ils sont incapables de nommer. Dans chaque nouvelle ils apparaissent à un moment donné au volant de leur voiture, en transit d'un espace clos vers un autre espace clos. Il n'y a que dans « Abyss » que la route prend sa dimension mythique ; la *novella* a même parfois des allures de *road novel*[9]. Au bout de la route s'ouvre le gouffre, spectaculaire. C'est avec cette notion que s'ouvre la partie consacrée aux études sur les nouvelles de Richard Ford.

L'article de Frédéric Dumas explore en effet tous les sens et les implications du spectaculaire tel qu'il apparaît dans le recueil : le terme ne renvoie pas seulement à ce qui est grandiose mais aussi à l'idée de spectacle. Pour Valérie Croisille, « Abyss » est une nouvelle singulière à plusieurs titres, notamment parce qu'elle mélange différents tons et genres ; elle se propose d'élucider les signes dont le récit est émaillé et de lire entre les lignes, ou plus exactement de suivre l'injonction de Frances, « read the fine print ».

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8 Richard Ford, « An Urge for Going. Why I don't live where I used to live », *Harper's Magazine* 284.1701 (February 1992): 62.

9 Voir Brigitte Zaugg, « The Grand Canyon's the Limit: Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* and Richard Ford's "Abyss" », in *America in Motion*, ed. Michal Peprník (Olomouc: Palacký University, 2009).

Brian Duffy centre lui aussi son analyse sur « Abyss », mais pour y étudier la question de l'adultère et du rapport entre sexe et moralité ; la nouvelle est pour lui celle dans laquelle Ford énonce le plus clairement le fait que tout acte est suivi de conséquences. Marie-Agnès Gay, elle, démontre l'impossibilité de la « reunion » entre deux rivaux dans la nouvelle du même nom, en passant le texte au crible de l'analyse syntaxique et lexicale. Enfin, Gérald Préher et Brigitte Zaugg s'attachent à mettre en lumière l'isolation et le décalage dont souffrent les personnages dans leur rapport au monde et surtout dans les relations qu'ils entretiennent avec leur partenaire : ils perçoivent une image de la réalité qui n'est pas la réalité elle-même, parlent une langue artificielle, comme doublée, et se retrouvent enfermés dans un univers parallèle dont ils ne peuvent s'échapper. Comme l'un des personnages d'une nouvelle publiée dans *Women with Men*, chacun de ceux qui apparaissent au fil des pages de *A Multitude of Sins* pourrait se dire « entirely out of the world, cast off without a starting or stopping point »[10]. Prendre la route, c'est se perdre sans véritablement savoir si l'on sera un jour en terrain connu. Thomas Wolfe faisait dire à ses personnages « you can't go home again » ; il semble que chez Steinbeck comme chez Ford, l'ultime but soit de trouver cet impossible foyer.

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10 Richard Ford, « Jealous », *Women with Men* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997) 144.

Kathie BIRAT

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"JUS' TALKIN'": ORALITY AND NARRATIVE IN *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

In creating the world of the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck was drawing on multiple traditions of storytelling. After having treated the problem of the Dust Bowl and the subsequent migration of the Okies in journalistic form, he attempted in *The Grapes of Wrath* to give narrative shape to a social, economic and human crisis involving more than 300,000 people between 1935 and 1939. The much discussed structure of the novel, alternating narrative sections focusing on the Joad family and intercalary chapters giving a broader view of the issues involved and the scope of the national crisis, can be viewed as one way of reconciling the ideological underpinnings of the novel with the need to follow a human, and therefore individual trajectory in order to make the novel credible as fiction. However, a vision of the novel that limits itself to a consideration of its documentary and fictional aspects does not fully account for the way in which Steinbeck uses his characters to tell a story which is much larger than their individual destinies. The relation between story and history has traditionally fascinated American writers, who often deal in their fiction with the complex interconnection between individual narratives and the collective destiny of America as a nation. Faulkner, Melville, Hawthorne, Dos Passos, Fitzgerald and Twain are only a few of the major American writers who have been concerned with this theme. Like Faulkner and Twain in particular, Steinbeck saw that orality could be used to capture the great American narrative in miniature form, allowing him to create multiple connections between the speech of his characters and the myths that shaped the American nation. In order to do so he created multiple voices, none of which reflects a total personality, but all of which are echoes of real American realities, rooted in the forms of speech that express the diversity of that reality.

I would like to look more closely at the way in which Steinbeck uses orality in order to organize his artistic vision of the world he is describing. In using the term "orality," I am not referring only to the imitation of oral forms of speech, but to the representation of a world in which oral communication is the expression of a way of life, of a worldview. I consider this use of orality not simply as an aspect of local color but as the crystallization of that world in forms of speech that give it verbal and linguistic shape, making it possible for simple dialogues to take the form of miniature narratives in which the larger, collective narrative is mirrored and echoed. It is in this way that Steinbeck allows orality to carry a large part of the narrative weight of the story. Seen in this light, orality can be considered as speech that "speaks" on several levels, performing a metanarrative function in addition to an expressive one.

The characteristics of oral cultures have been extensively described by anthropologists because of the importance of orality as an expression of collective identity. I am not suggesting that Steinbeck is presenting what could be called a primary oral culture. The Joads are literate and are not by any means presented as "simple folk," a caricature that would have been contrary to Steinbeck's intention. However, they do belong to a universe in which oral communication plays an important role and is invested with significant value. The dilemma with which they are confronted takes a verbal shape to the extent that the situations with which they must deal are based on codes of communication that are very different from those to which they are accustomed. The America that Steinbeck describes is being transformed by the emergence of a consumer society; it is a world of national brands with billboards lining the highways, stitched together by the trucks that roar from coast to coast, carrying merchandise back and forth. The Joads are ill-equipped to deal with this world, for they lack the linguistic skills needed to decode its mysteries and make themselves both understood and respected. The nature of this confrontation between two ways of life, the emerging world of transport and commerce and the inarticulate one of poverty and hunger, can be seen in chapter 15, in the scene involving the Okie family that comes into the hamburger stand looking for a loaf of bread. The waitress Mae, who spends her time flirting with truck drivers, the only people with money to leave tips, pretends not to understand what the man is asking for. When he says, "'Could you see your way to sell us a loaf of bread, ma'am?'," she humiliates him in front of the watching truck drivers by stating the obvious: "'This ain't a grocery store. We got bread to make san'widges'" (*GW* 160).

Although Mae later regrets the vulgarity of her reaction and gives the children candy, the family's inability to cope with situations in which only money really talks is made obvious in this scene, which dramatizes the transition from a world of agricultural self-sufficiency and self-respect to one of commerce, anonymity and national brands. This scene is re-enacted in various ways throughout the novel, as people's capacity to cope is measured by their ability to negotiate with a series of characters who, like Mae, are caught between their humanity and the necessity of making ends meet.

Steinbeck uses scenes like the one described above to make the characteristics of the world he is depicting stand out in sharp outline. However, the contrast between the world of residual orality and the universe of billboards and national brands is not a fixed and static one; the narrative of the Joads follows the shifting frontier between the rural environment from which they have come and the new world with which they are faced, and in which they will need to acquire new linguistic skills without giving up the values rooted in an essentially oral society. What I am concerned with is how Steinbeck uses orality not simply as a marker of collective identity and social class, but also as a way of creating a narrative space in which new possibilities for individual and collective action are negotiated.

Steinbeck's strategy can be illuminated by a consideration of some of the characteristics of oral cultures. In his well-known work *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong defines the nature and functioning of oral cultures and discusses the effects of oral communication on the production of narrative. He proceeds from oral to literate cultures by examining the effects of literacy, writing and printing on the forms of cultural expression. At the beginning of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck discusses the Joads' relation to writing. When Jim Casy asks Tom Joad if his family wrote to him in prison, Tom answers:

> "Well, Pa wasn't no hand to write for pretty, or to write for writin'. He'd sign up his name as nice as anybody, an' lick his pencil. But Pa never did write no letters. He always says what he couldn' tell a fella with his mouth wasn't worth leanin' on no pencil about." (*GW* 28)

Apart from the colorful demonstration of oral expression, Tom's remark deserves close attention for what it reveals about the relation between writing and orality. In this passage, Pa is basically talking about writing in its metonymic function as an extension of himself. He equates writing his name with activities like combing his hair and shining his shoes. He licks his

pencil to improve his penmanship. But more specifically, his remark reveals the involvement of the body in acts of communication. "Tell with his mouth" is not simply redundant, just as the remark about "leaning on a pencil" is not simply an example of the hyperbole often found in oral expression. They demonstrate the way in which the body participates in verbal expression, one aspect of what Ong refers to as the "verbomotor" lifestyle found in oral cultures. However, the real problem underlying this remark in this context is the distance that writing introduces between sender and receiver. Tom's father does not write to him in prison because he cannot imagine the context in which his message will be received; the gap between the farm and the prison is not solely geographical, it is also existential. Ong, in talking about the effects of writing and printing, emphasizes the distance between writer and reader. This distance is not purely physical; it produces its effects on the content and form of verbal expression. When Tom says that his father could not imagine to "write for writin'," he is expressing in a nutshell the essence of the act of writing, which is, as Ong points out, solipsistic, whereas oral communication is agonistic and interactive. Ong says:

> Lack of verifiable context is what makes writing normally so much more agonizing than oral presentation to a real audience. 'The writer's audience is always a fiction.' (53-81)
> The writer must set up a role in which absent and often unknown readers can cast themselves. (100-101)

For Pa Joad, prison is a context which is not only unknown, but in which he cannot imagine his son. Beyond this imaginative distance, there is the very nature of writing, which is essentially self-contained and able to transmit meaning without reference to the contexts of production and reception:

> Of course, all language and thought are to some extent analytic. […] But written words sharpen analysis, for the individual words are called on to do more. To make yourself clear without gesture, without facial expression, without intonation, without a real hearer, you have to foresee circumspectly all possible meanings a statement may have for any possible reader in any possible situation, and you have to make your language work so as to come clear all by itself, with no existential context. (Ong 103)

Tom's sojourn in prison is presented in the novel not simply as a temporary absence from the family farm. It serves as a synecdoche for a world governed by a spatial and temporal logic that stands in diametrical opposition to the self-contained world of the family farm. In being sent to prison, Tom has become caught up in a network of information and communication that deprives him of the privacy and individuality of his former life. Numerous references are made to the fact that he is on parole, a situation

which, ironically, has nothing to do with the spoken word, but reveals rather the power of the letter of the law. If he breaks parole, he can be tracked down anywhere in the country. Like his brother Al's awareness of license plates as markers of geographical identity in an increasingly motorized world, Tom's realization that his name appears in a national list of prisoners on parole obliges him to accept the fact that his destiny is controlled by forces that are no longer local and visible but distant, anonymous, and for this very reason all the more powerful and threatening.

If prison, like the roadside restaurant, functions as a synecdoche for a world of standardized written communication, the world of orality is rooted in the rural environment of the farm. It is in his exploiting of what Ong refers to as the "situational" dimension of orality that Steinbeck displays his skill at creating what Bakhtin would call an "image" of the language that characterizes the Okies.[1] Bakhtin's discussion of the novel as a polyphonic genre which develops its worldview through the interaction of the languages that characterize different social groups is an important aspect of any attempt to understand Steinbeck's use of orality.[2] Bakhtin emphasizes the fact that in order to enter into dialogic interaction, the languages deployed in a novel must become the vectors of specific worldviews. The authenticity of the speech of a character is less important than its capacity to indicate the character's position in the narrative economy of the novel. Steinbeck makes the speech of the Joads seem authentic by linking it to the rural environment in which they function. Most of the images and metaphors they use are based on animals, like Muley Graves's comment that a farmer could not raise enough crop "to plug up an ant's ass" (*GW* 50). Expressions of this type reflect the farmer's capacity both for observation and humor. They are accompanied by descriptions of the particular types of competence that characterize the activities of the farmers (like slaughtering the pigs and

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1 "If the subject making the novel specifically a novel is defined as a speaking person and his discourse, striving for social significance and a wider general application as one distinctive language in a heteroglot world—then the central problem for a stylistics of the novel may be formulated as the problem of *artistically representing language, the problem of representing the image of a language*." (Bakhtin 336)

2 "The speaking person in the novel is always, to one degree of another, an *ideologue*, and his works are always *ideologemes*. A particular language in a novel is always a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for a social significance." (Bakhtin 333)

preparing the meat, or skinning and cooking the rabbit). These activities create a link between the characters' experience, their worldview and their linguistic practices. The consistency with which this type of expression is used serves as a marker of the family's identity and enhances the credibility of the portrait Steinbeck paints. They also indicate a particular way of dealing with the world that is based on orally transmitted experience as well as on direct observation. When Tom says, "'Dog coyote a-mindin' his own business an' innocent an' sweet, jus' havin' fun an' no harm—well, they's a hen roost clost by'" (*GW* 251), he is expressing what could be called folk wisdom, a form of expression rooted in traditions of oral expression.

More important than the way such expressions refer knowledge back to the world of nature and direct observation is their insistence on traditional ways of storing and communicating information that characterize oral cultures. In their struggle to survive in situations in which they are marked as outsiders—vagrants, bums, Okies, outlanders—the Joads will need to adjust to the codes of communication that define an unfamiliar environment while recognizing those who can be counted on to communicate with them in terms that they understand. The family's encounter with the Wilsons establishes their ability to create a larger community on the basis of shared modes of expression. Although Pa Joad comments, "'I knowed you wasn't Oklahomy folks. You talk queer, kinda'" (*GW* 136), it quickly becomes clear that they share the same values, based on mutual respect and a willingness to help others in situations of adversity. Pa's use of the word "beholden," a somewhat antiquated and formal term ("'We're beholden to you'" [*GW* 140]), to thank the Wilsons and Mr. Wilson's reply ("'There's no beholden in a time of dying'") reflect the verbal rituals that underlie and sustain the social space shared by the two families.

It would however be a mistake to assume that Steinbeck is proposing a nostalgic vision of a residually oral culture which is attempting to maintain and defend its value-system in the face of an increasingly anonymous world of commerce and mechanization. Although he alludes specifically to an orally-based folk culture in some of the intercalary chapters, the voice that invites the reader to participate in the swapping of stories is just one of the many that can be heard in the novel. The intercalary chapters offer what could be called samplings of American voices. The narrative voice that speaks in these chapters does not attempt to offer facts in a neutral tone. On the contrary, it expresses itself through the numerous forms of rhetoric that

characterize American cultural expression, above all religion, business, and folklore. These passages rely on exaggeration, performing a parody of the American gift for speech-making, while at the same time providing a documentary background to the narrative of the Joads. Chapter 23 deals specifically with storytelling, folklore and orality. In this chapter, the narrative voice explains that the migrant people "climbed up their lives with jokes" (*GW* 325). The narrator both tells a story of an Indian brave and reflects on the role of folklore and storytelling in the migrants' lives:

> And the people listened, and their faces were quiet with listening. The story tellers, gathering attention into their tales, spoke in great rhythms, spoke in great words because the tales were great, and the listeners became great through them. (*GW* 325)

This statement, which presents an idealized picture of the way in which folklore can allow people to overcome the hardships of their lives, is not to be taken at face value. The story of the Indian brave contains a warning about the illusion created by storytelling and its inherent exaggerations. The interdiegetic narrator who tells the story of the Indian brave explains how the illusion created by the Indian was broken when he was shot:

> An' I laid my sights on his belly, 'cause you can't stop a Injun no other place—an'—then. Well, he jest plunked down an' rolled. An' we went up. An' he wasn' big—he'd looked so grand—up there. All tore to pieces an' little. Ever see a cock pheasant, stiff and beautiful, ever' feather drawed an' painted, an' even his eyes drawed in pretty? An' bang! You pick him up—bloody an' twisted, an' you spoiled him—you spoiled somepin better'n you; an' eatin' him don't never make it up to you, 'cause you spoiled somepin in yaself, an' you can't never fix it up. (*GW* 326)

There are several ideas expressed in the story of the killing of the brave. The most important one is that the essence of the Indian's courage cannot be captured by those who kill him; murdering him will not make the soldiers his equals, just as eating the pheasant will not permit the hunter to absorb the bird's beauty. Paradoxically then, it is only by recognizing the power of those who challenge you that you can become their equals, a message with interesting applications in the novel. However, on another level, as a story illustrating the power of storytelling to make people feel bigger, it suggests that there are limits to storytelling as an instrument of survival. The story-teller in this case is also using the story to enhance his own status. He begins by saying, "I was a recruit against Geronimo—" (*GW* 324), Geronimo of course being a legendary figure. At the same time, his language reveals his essential bias against Indians. The word "Injun" immediately evokes a stereotyped vision associated with people who speak like the narrator.

While he expresses admiration for the Indian, he is also seeking his own aggrandizement. This embedded narrative thus provides an interesting picture of the way in which storytelling is used and simultaneously poses the question of its power and its limits.

I have devoted specific attention to this passage because it offers a clue to the ways in which Steinbeck exploits the characteristics of oral storytelling as a way of enhancing the stature of his characters without diminishing their credibility. The fact that the extradiegetic narrator does not possess the omniscience often associated with this type of narrator places considerable narrative weight on the dialogues. The Joads are responsible for narrating their own story to a large extent. At the same time, the larger-than-life quality of certain characters, Ma Joad in particular, stretches the credibility of their discourse. Steinbeck uses the dialogic nature of the novel to explore both the possibilities and the limits offered by orality as a mode of expression.

While Steinbeck did not have a romantic view of orality, he nonetheless used several important characteristics of oral cultures to tell a story that, to some extent, only the Joads themselves could tell. The most obvious characteristic of oral narration to be found in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the episodic structure related to the road novel. In this type of structure, movement in space constitutes the mainspring of the action. In talking about the effects of writing, Ong argues that what he calls the "climactic, linear plot" is made possible by "the distance that writing establishes between expression and real life" (Ong 145). According to him, the solitary aspect of writing as an activity encourages "growth of consciousness." He says:

> The tightly organized, classically plotted story both results from and encourages heightened consciousness, and this fact expresses itself symbolically when, with the arrival of the perfectly pyramidal plot in the detective story, the action is seen to be focused within the consciousness of the protagonist—the detective. (Ong 147)

Steinbeck's deliberate refusal to give his extradiegetic narrator access to the thoughts of the characters, often limiting his intervention to what they see, what they hear and what they say, restricts the possibility of telling the story within a dramatic structure leading to a narrative climax. There is no controlling consciousness to serve as a mental stage for such a plot. However, close attention to the functioning of the characters within the episodic framework reveals a subtle use of orality as a mode of both

expression and action, creating a bridge between the oral underpinnings of the novel's form, the realism of its content and the meaning which Steinbeck confers on the experiences of the Joad family.

Ong points out that in primary oral cultures, narrative is used as a way of storing, organizing and communicating knowledge. This is a persistent function of narrative, as has been successfully demonstrated by Christian Salmon, who writes a column called "Storytelling" in *Le Monde* and has published a book on the function of narrative in marketing and politics. Salmon's analysis shows that recourse to narrative is a way of simplifying experience in an increasingly complex world. This is the source of its appeal in situations of mass communication. Steinbeck uses this dimension of storytelling to explore the ways in which his characters make sense of their personal experience and to suggest a deeper meaning in their penchant for storytelling. A particularly clear example of this strategy can be found in the encounter between Tom, Jim Casy and Muley Graves in chapter 5. This chapter is fundamental to both the structure and the meaning of the novel, as it connects the story of the Joad family directly to the farm that was the framework for their lives. Tom Joad is troubled by the fact that the appearance of the farm does not correspond to what he remembers about the past. He explains to Casy that his mother would never have left the gate open, illustrating this remark by the story of a child eaten by a pig. He accounts for his feeling that something strange has happened by telling the story of Albert Rance, whose possessions were stolen by people who thought he had gone away for good. The fact that the farmhouse is still standing although his family has gone leaves him puzzled, because it does not fit with his knowledge of people's behavior. During the night that the three men spend on the deserted farm, each of the characters reacts in a specific way to this setting, in which the narratives of the past no longer make sense. Muley Graves appears as a caricature of the oral storyteller who is unable to answer a request for information without telling his own story. When Tom asks him where his parents have gone, Muley launches into a long story involving himself as much as the Joad family. Tom sums up this characteristic of the storyteller by saying, "'You ain't changed a bit, Muley. If you want to tell about somepin off northwest, you point your nose straight southeast'" (*GW* 49). When Muley expresses shame at his own reluctance to share the rabbits he has caught with the other two men, it is Jim Casy who points out Muley's difficulty in dealing with abstraction: "'Muley sees somepin there, Tom. Muley's got a-holt of

somepin, an' it's too big for him, an' it's too big for me'" (*GW* 52). If Muley stands for the past, for the inability to see beyond his own grief, then Casy represents the future and the search for collective meaning. Tom Joad occupies an intermediary position in this structure. It is Tom who prepares and cooks the rabbits, revealing his capacity to function in the present and to adapt a pragmatic approach to experience. As Casy begins to theorize, Tom asks "'Who got a knife? Le's get at these here miserable rodents. Le's get at 'em'" (*GW* 52). When Muley begins to lament the loss of his family and his past, Tom cries, "'Jesus Christ, le's eat this meat 'fore it's smaller'n a cooked mouse!'" (*GW* 55). If Tom reveals his adaptability by camping out on what used to be his family's farm, he also shows the limits of his capacity to imagine the future in a setting that belongs to the past. He tells the story of his mother chasing a tin peddler with a chicken and then wonders why his grandfather did not kill somebody rather than give up the farm. Tom is hungering for a fight, but Muley convinces him that the superintendent, who is also a deputy sheriff, will have a gun, which means that any game of cops and robbers with the law will inevitably end with a murder. Muley argues that it's better to play the weasel than the wolf: "'Come on, Tommy. You can easy tell yourself you're foolin' them lyin' out like that. An' it all just amounts to what you tell yourself'" (*GW* 61). Tom does not like the idea of "'hidin' out on [his] old man's place'" (*GW* 62), until he recognizes the hiding place suggested by Muley and links it to the stories he and his brother made up about looking for gold when they were children.

This passage reveals the role played by storytelling in the lives of the characters. The anecdote Tom tells about his mother shows the extent to which his vision of her is based on the humor and exaggeration found in "tall tales." Muley, for his part, in advising Tom to "play the weasel," is also referring to a pattern of behavior illustrated in stories and fables. In the chapters that follow, the pattern suggested here, in which the characters deal with unknown situations through the mechanisms of oral storytelling, is played out in a variety of situations. The control that would normally be possessed by an extradiegetic narrator is exercised by the characters as a group and demonstrated through their verbal interaction. Tom's sense of humor gives narrative credibility to situations in which the characters are called upon to perform heroic actions. In the pivotal scene in which Ma rebels against Pa by refusing to let the family be separated, Tom humorously treats Ma as if she were a character from a tall tale:

> "Pa," he said, if you was to rush her one side an' me the other an' then the res' pile one, an' Granma jump down on top, maybe we can get Ma 'thout more'n two-three of us gets killed with that there jack handle." (*GW* 171)

Tom possesses the humor and to some extent the worldview of a folk hero. His remark to his mother that living in the cave has obliged him to live "like a rabbit" (*GW* 416) can be interpreted on several levels. While it hints at the necessity of reverting to nature in order to survive, if viewed in the perspective of the numerous references to animals found in folk expressions, it also suggests a capacity to live by his wits like Brer Rabbit in the Uncle Remus tales. Along the road he meets a man in a junk yard who has lost an eye, but who, more importantly, has lost the ability to speak for himself. When the man laments the loss of his eye and his inability to attract a woman, Tom advises him to invent a story to compensate for his physical loss: "'Tell 'em ya dong's growed sence you los' your eye'" (*GW* 181).

Ma Joad also illustrates her capacity to deal with adversity by obliging people to engage with her verbally. Although at the beginning of the journey she does not see that printing handbills to announce the recruiting of fruit pickers is a cheap way for the farmers to attract a large number of potential workers, thus enabling them to pay low wages, she learns in the course of her journey to answer people according to the logic they use to trick her. Unlike the men in the family, who are unable to bargain with the man who bought "every movable thing from the farm" (*GW* 99) for eighteen dollars, Ma Joad holds her own with the company storekeeper who wants to overcharge her. The storekeeper argues that the hamburg he sells is more expensive because, "'Time you go on in town for a couple poun's of hamburg, it'll cos' you 'bout a gallon gas'"; Ma replies, "'It didn' cos' you no gallon a gas to get it out here'" (*GW* 373-374). The storekeeper jokes that she is looking at it "bass-ackwards," but Ma Joad finally gets the upper hand by shaming him into giving her sugar on credit.

Jim Casy plays a particularly important role in relation to orality, for like the poet Walt Whitman, whose rhetoric he often imitates, Casy plays the role of translator, interpreting what he sees and hears in terms that all can understand.[3] Like the turtle which carries seeds in its shell, Casy carries

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3 "I do not say these things for a dollar or to fill up the time while I wait for a boat,/(It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue of you,/Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen'd." Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," Section 47 (85).

words with him, spreading them as he goes, disseminating a language that bridges the gap between folk culture and the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The moment when he tries to explain to Pa why William Randolph Hearst is "'mean an' lonely an' old an' disappointed'" (*GW* 206) even though he owns a million acres, is a good example. He concludes by saying:

> "I ain't tryin' to preach no sermon, but I never seen nobody that's busy as a prairie dog collectin' stuff that wasn't disappointed." He grinned. "Does kinda soun' like a sermon, don't it?" (*GW* 207)

While it would certainly be a mistake to overemphasize oral communication and folk wisdom as elements that allow the Joads to cope with an unfamiliar world, it is important to see the ways in which Steinbeck uses orality as a way of suggesting a linguistic continuity between the world the Joads have left behind and the new world they are trying to build. The orality that characterizes the way they speak is not simply a marker of their difference, of their quaintness as country folk. Steinbeck uses the codes of an oral culture which was rapidly disappearing to create a verbal representtation of the cultural and linguistic space inhabited by the Joad family. The family's capacity to hold their ground verbally will not save them. However, within the narrative economy of the novel, their verbal resilience represents the Okies' capacity to tell their own story. Their essentially oral culture is, of course, both shared and extended by Jim Casy, whose function is to bridge the gap between the world of the Joads and the abstract ideas that are the foundation of Steinbeck's vision. He has one foot in the world of folk culture and another in the world of Emerson, Whitman and the King James Bible.

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PROGRÈS, PROGRESSION ET RÉGRESSION DANS *THE GRAPES OF WRATH* : EN SUIVANT LE FIL ROUGE DE L'INDIEN

Mouvement et changement sont les deux leitmotivs qui structurent le roman de John Steinbeck *The Grapes of Wrath*, du début jusqu'à la fin. Entre le refus du changement qui marque les premiers chapitres et la remarque de Ma Joad à la fin, remarque en forme d'acceptation : « "It'll be awright. They's changes—all over" » (*GW* 443), le roman présente toute une palette de réactions possibles aux transformations du monde, perçues comme globalement inévitables, même s'il est souhaitable d'y apporter des correctifs pour que ces changements n'écrasent pas totalement les individus qui y sont soumis.

Rien ne semble pouvoir entraver la marche du monde, et Steinbeck présente ce mouvement en avant permanent de deux façons qui semblent quelque peu contradictoires. D'une part il s'agit d'un instinct de survie, à l'instar de la tortue du chapitre 3 qui continue son chemin sans dévier de sa trajectoire, même après avoir été heurtée par un camion au moment où elle traversait la route – image dans laquelle les critiques voient une métaphore du destin des Joad suivant la droite ligne de la route 66 pour accomplir leur destin en Californie. Et d'autre part ce mouvement en avant est la caractéristique même de l'être humain (baptisé « Manself »), qui peut transcender les difficultés et dépasser la routine de l'instinct préprogrammé, pour non seulement s'adapter à de nouvelles circonstances mais aussi inventer de nouvelles manières de s'inscrire dans le monde : « For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments » (*GW* 151). En fait, l'ambiguïté entre ces deux interprétations n'est jamais résolue dans le texte, où le mouvement, parfois comparé à la multiplication des cellules des organismes primitifs, ressemble davantage aux mutations

nécessaires à la survie de l'espèce telles que les envisage la théorie de l'évolution, qu'à un processus conscient de transformation du monde qui serait la manifestation d'un libre arbitre capable de transcender les données objectives pour forger un destin original de manière non purement réactive. En d'autres termes, dans ce roman où les êtres humains sont constamment comparés à des animaux, il est difficile de voir en quoi ils s'élèvent au-dessus de la simple survie animale et de l'adaptation pavlovienne à l'environnement. C'est en tout cas ainsi que Ma voit les choses lorsqu'elle explique à son mari au chapitre 28 :

> "We ain't gonna die out. People is goin' on—changin' a little, maybe, but goin' right on. […] Ever'thing we do—seems to me is aimed at goin' on. […] Even gettin' hungry—even bein' sick; some die, but the rest is tougher. Jus' try to live the day, jus' the day." (*GW* 423)

Ces changements se font de manière continue ou par à-coups. Là-dessus, Ma a également une théorie : ce sont les hommes qui avancent par à-coups (« "Man, he lives in jerks" » [*GW* 423]), alors que les femmes ont un parcours plus fluide : « "Woman, it's all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, like waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on" » (*GW* 423). Dans un cas comme dans l'autre, le mouvement, même s'il n'est pas linéaire, semble toujours être globalement une progression vers l'avant. C'est ainsi que le définit la voix narrative au chapitre 14 : « Having stepped forward, he [Manself] may slip back, but only half a step, never the full step back » (*GW* 151). Cette définition est reprise par Casy au chapitre 26 presque dans les mêmes termes : « " [...] the on'y thing you got to look at is that ever'time they's a little step fo'ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back" » (*GW* 384). En fait, entre le chapitre 14 (qui est plus ou moins le milieu du roman) et la fin, le texte est ponctué de références au mouvement et au changement[1].

Dans ces différents exemples, la progression implique presque toujours un progrès, même si le mouvement se fait parfois erratique et s'accompagne

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1 On trouve les principales occurrences aux chapitres 16, 17, 21, 24, et 28. Par exemple :
« the highway became their home and movement their medium of expression » (*GW* 164) ;
« [...] flying from the road, flying from movement » (*GW* 197) ;
« The movement changed them » (*GW* 282) ;
« Pa said, "They's change a-comin'. I don' know what. Maybe we won't live to see her. But she's a-comin'. They's a res'less feelin'. Fella can't figger nothin' out, he's so nervous" » (*GW* 344).

d'une régression temporaire. Il m'a donc paru intéressant d'examiner ici l'articulation entre ces différents termes (progrès, progression et régression) et la façon dont les notions auxquelles ils renvoient évoluent au cours du récit. Pour ce faire, je poserai d'abord quelques définitions, en me référant au Larousse. Le progrès est soit une « amélioration, un développement des connaissances ou des capacités de quelqu'un » ou un « développement de la civilisation ». La progression, elle, se définit comme un « mouvement en avant, une marche ». Le premier terme (surtout lorsqu'il est employé au singulier) est essentiellement positif et marque l'aboutissement d'un processus, alors que « progression » renvoie au processus lui-même, qui peut (ou non) conduire à un progrès. Si le progrès est un aboutissement, il ne se définit pas pour autant comme un état stable (on pense ici à l'expression populaire « on n'arrête pas le progrès »). Il est donc à la fois un but recherché et un mouvement permanent. Progrès et progression sont par conséquent intimement liés. La question qui se pose est de savoir si, dans le roman, le progrès est toujours présenté comme positif ; pour y répondre, il faut d'une part l'envisager dans une dynamique (l'évolution de la notion selon les étapes du récit) et d'autre part voir comment les deux termes de progrès et de progression jouent par rapport à leurs contraires : le repli ou la régression pour le progrès, l'immobilisme ou la stase pour la progression.

En combinant ces différents termes, j'examinerai dans un premier temps comment le progrès est lié au mouvement (la progression) ou à la stase (l'absence de progression) au niveau de la diégèse. Dans un deuxième temps, j'étudierai la régression, également dans son rapport au mouvement ou à l'immobilisme. Enfin, je me demanderai si la progression narrative s'inscrit ou non dans une démarche de progrès, et de quelle manière. Je lirai/lierai chacune de ces étapes en suivant le fil rouge des références récurrentes aux Indiens d'Amérique[2] qui parsèment le récit et forment un texte sous-jacent qui est à la fois l'envers et le révélateur du destin des Joad et le focalisateur des contradictions du rêve américain.

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2 Voir, en fin d'article, l'annexe qui répertorie les passages faisant référence aux Indiens. Il faut noter qu'un basculement s'opère à partir de la page 198 : les Indiens sont par la suite de plus en plus associés à la beauté, et une continuité s'instaure entre eux et les *Okies*. Ils deviennent une partie de la vie, de l'histoire, voire du sang des fermiers de l'Oklahoma.

Le progrès dans ses rapports à l'immobilisme et au mouvement

Le roman ouvre sur un monde en état de quasi pétrification. Enfouie sous des couches de poussière, la campagne de l'Oklahoma semble fossilisée. Les habitants terrés dans leurs maisons ne sortent plus, ne bougent plus. Pourtant, les quelques éléments de flashback apportés par les dialogues (Tom/Casy ou Tom/Muley) montrent que la situation des fermiers était à cette époque, pour eux, l'aboutissement d'un processus – donc un progrès. En effet, leurs ancêtres pionniers avaient conquis ce territoire sur des populations qui leur semblaient bien moins élevées sur l'échelle de l'humanité : les Indiens. Le sédentarisme des premiers, par rapport au nomadisme des seconds, faisait d'eux des êtres plus avancés dans les stades de développement de l'Histoire, du moins si l'on se réfère au concept hégélien de l'Histoire comme progrès, comme vecteur tendu vers un avenir forcément supérieur au passé. La théorie du « stadisme » (*stagism*), qui établit une hiérarchie entre différents stades d'évolution et place le primitivisme en bas de l'échelle et la civilisation au sommet, avait été particulièrement défendue aux États-Unis par Thomas Jefferson. Cette idéologie, qui a conduit les pionniers à domestiquer la terre et à la faire fructifier pour réaliser l'idéal jeffersonien de la pastorale, a aussi justifié l'extermination sans scrupule des Indiens. Il est frappant en effet de constater que les premières références aux Indiens dans le texte présentent cette extermination comme inévitable (« Grampa took up the land, and he *had to* kill the Indians and drive them away » [*GW* 36], je souligne), comme un processus naturel sur lequel il est inutile de s'interroger. Il faut dire qu'à la justification scientifique empruntée à la théorie de l'évolution s'ajoute une symbolique chrétienne/puritaine qui voit la nature sauvage, la *wilderness*, comme le domaine du Mal et de la barbarie, et postule donc que cette nature dépravée doit être domptée et contrôlée pour devenir féconde. La pastorale, c'est le jardin d'Eden *après* la chute, où le nouvel Adam américain doit gagner son pain à la sueur de son front. Quant à l'habitant originaire de ces contrées, loin d'être perçu comme le bon sauvage des théories primitivistes ou des philosophies des Lumières, il est au contraire vu comme un être cruel et fourbe qu'il faut combattre, le mal qu'il faut éradiquer. C'est donc en se fondant sur sa disparition que peut se constituer l'idéal d'un paradis terrestre reconstruit, reconstitué, reconquis sur la *wilderness* américaine.

Au moment où débute le récit, ce mode de vie pastoral établi depuis plus d'un siècle commence à donner des signes d'épuisement, métaphorisés par le sol épuisé de la région du *Dust Bowl*, la fin des petites propriétés et des *forty acres and a mule*, l'avènement de l'ère de la machine et la perte du rapport initial à la terre. C'est aussi le désir de ces fermiers d'arrêter là le cours de leur évolution, de stopper le mouvement, de croire qu'ils ont atteint le sommet du progrès, qui, au bout du compte, cause leur perte, car la stase équivaut à la mort (littéralement pour Grampa et Granma, qui meurent au cours du périple vers la Californie et, avant eux, de manière emblématique pour le chien de la famille Joad, qui ne peut s'adapter à la vitesse des véhicules sur la grand route et donc à la modernité). En effet, pendant qu'ils s'installaient dans l'immobilisme, le monde autour d'eux changeait et leur inadaptation creusait tous les jours un peu plus l'écart entre eux et ces nouvelles forces de progrès.

Cet écart devient un gouffre si large que leur situation n'est plus tenable. L'idée est symboliquement représentée par la scène du tracteur qui avance inexorablement, quitte à détruire les maisons des petits fermiers qui se trouvent sur son passage (*GW* 38). Cette image frappante crée un sentiment d'inévitabilité et donne l'impression qu'un destin implacable transforme les *Okies* en victimes impuissantes. Pourtant, le processus qui veut que les petits fermiers soient chassés de leurs terres par la machine ne fait en réalité que déplacer et reproduire ce qui s'est passé lors de l'arrivée des premiers colons, qui ont chassé (qui ont *dû* chasser ?) les Indiens pour s'installer à leur place[3]. Il semble donc que l'Histoire se répète ou se poursuive un cran au-dessus. L'universalité de la démarche est contenue dans la métaphore de la tortue. Chez les hommes comme chez les animaux, un instinct préprogrammé les pousse à aller constamment de l'avant, à tracer leur route, à accomplir leur destinée. Le mouvement de la modernité et de la machine déracine donc les fermiers de la pastorale et les remet littéralement en mouvement en les forçant à partir chercher fortune en Californie[4]. Le progrès matériel et technique a rendu le mode de vie des petits fermiers obsolète et ceux-ci n'ont plus qu'une solution : vendre leur mule (symbole de l'ordre passé, des *forty acres and a mule*) et acheter un camion (symbole de l'ordre nouveau). Au passage, on notera que, si le

3 Voir Paquet-Deyris et Perrin-Chenour, chapitre 2.

4 Ce processus est détaillé plus particulièrement aux chapitres 14 et 21 du roman.

tracteur apparaît comme monstrueux parce qu'il détruit l'ordre ancien, le camion, lui, ne l'est pas car il représente un refuge temporaire que l'on apprivoise et s'approprie, en particulier par l'intermédiaire des plus jeunes membres de la famille, qui s'adaptent plus facilement à la modernité. Tout le paradoxe du voyage des Joad est d'être un mouvement qui vise à reproduire ailleurs la stase de l'ordre ancien perdu, représenté par le rêve de la petite maison blanche avec son jardin d'orangers. En ce sens, donc, le voyage ne pouvait représenter un progrès puisque ce mouvement ne devait conduire qu'à un nouvel immobilisme. En fait, l'idéal de la pastorale repose sur un équilibre difficile à tenir, puisqu'il est pris constamment en étau entre le danger d'un retour au chaos des origines, à un mode de vie primitif dont on a souhaité s'extraire, et la menace de la mécanisation à outrance, de la vitesse et des excès de la modernité. Ceci explique que le changement qui transforme les fermiers en migrants (« They were not farm men any more, but migrant men » [*GW* 196]) soit perçu comme une régression. Leur nomadisme, l'obligation de dormir sous des tentes regroupées en *units*, comme des clans ou des tribus, apparentent leur nouveau mode de vie à celui des Indiens et représentent une remontée à rebours de l'Histoire, une perte des valeurs de la civilisation qui ne peut être vécue que comme une déchéance.

Pourtant, le texte s'applique aussi à démontrer que le mouvement peut être vecteur de progrès. Les Joad sont des aventuriers malgré eux et sont partis contre leur gré, mais leur périple, aussi difficile soit-il, est présenté comme la période la plus heureuse de leur histoire : c'est une phase de rêve et d'espoir, ainsi que d'unité, de cohésion entre les membres de la famille et de solidarité avec les autres migrants. C'est l'occasion d'une ouverture aux autres, d'une découverte du monde, les paysages naturels et le monde urbain offrant de nouvelles curiosités – même le camp de Weedpatch combine les aspects positifs de la modernité technologique (meilleure hygiène, meilleur mode de vie) et un sens nouveau de la communauté. Les étapes le long de la route rendent possible la construction progressive d'une identité communautaire (on passe du « I » au « we »). Le progrès n'est donc plus seulement matériel, il est aussi spirituel et moral. Et, progressivement, ce progrès moral devient antinomique du progrès matériel qui avait initié le mouvement. Ainsi les migrants retrouvent-ils les valeurs de sociétés primitives ancrées non pas dans la défense de la propriété individuelle mais dans la création et la préservation du lien social. Weedpatch, le seul havre de paix dans la deuxième moitié du roman, se

voit même qualifié de « reservation » (*GW* 334) et se pare de connotations étonnamment positives. D'ailleurs, dans un épisode de la vie de ce camp, un personnage nommé Jule Vitela est décrit comme « "half Cherokee. Nice fella" » (*GW* 339). C'est la première fois dans le récit qu'un Indien, même métis, ne doit pas être exterminé. Au contraire, c'est lui qui sauve ses camarades migrants, en repérant les intrus payés par les grands propriétaires pour lancer une rixe devant entraîner la fermeture de ce lieu, censé donner de mauvaises habitudes de confort aux travailleurs saisonniers ; et il est capable de le faire justement parce qu'il est Indien : « "His Injun blood smelled 'em" » (*GW* 340). Plus surprenant encore, être un Indien pur sang devient ici un avantage recherché :

> Tom looked at the hawk nose and the high brown cheek bones and the slender receding chin. "They says you're half Injun. You look all Injun to me."
> "No," said Jule. "Jes' half. Wisht I was a full-blood. I'd have my lan' on the reservation. Them full-bloods got it pretty nice, some of 'em." (*GW* 339)

Évidemment, cette remarque est ambiguë : d'une part elle laisse délibérément de côté la véritable situation des Indiens dans les réserves, et d'autre part l'identification est sans doute rendue possible par leur nouvelle condition de sédentarisation. Toutefois, nous verrons plus loin que cette identification joue à de multiples niveaux et qu'elle accompagne en particulier une valorisation progressive du concept de régression au cours du récit.

Renversement structurel : la régression dans ses rapports à l'immobilisme et au mouvement

Les excès du progrès matériel sont représentés par l'accumulation et la concentration du capital (monopole des *big corporations* : elles possèdent les biens et ont tous les pouvoirs) et par la transformation à outrance des données naturelles (rendue possible par les monstrueuses découvertes des *men of science*). Ces excès produisent un basculement par lequel le progrès se mue en son contraire. C'est ce que montre le chapitre 25, où les fruits magnifiques, produits de greffes et de manipulations miraculeuses, pourrissent sur place faute de pouvoir être cueillis à temps. Ce qui était une avancée, une expression de l'intelligence humaine et de la connaissance, devient l'agent de la perte et de la destruction des hommes et de la nature. Devant ces effets pernicieux de la science et de la modernité incontrôlées, certains personnages choisissent la résistance : soit passive (combinaison

de régression et d'immobilisme), soit active (association de la régression et du mouvement).

Certains personnages, comme Muley Graves, refusent le déracinement dès le début. Vivant caché et traqué sur ses anciennes terres qu'il n'a pas voulu quitter, dormant dans un trou creusé à même le sol comme un animal dans son terrier, Muley régresse sur l'échelle sociale et sur celle de l'humanité. Son mode de vie est un retour aux premiers temps de l'homme sur la terre, une remontée littérale à la préhistoire, c'est-à-dire à la période d'avant l'inscription d'une Histoire linéaire comme vecteur de progrès. Dans son cas, il s'agit plus de peur du changement que du choix positif d'un mode de vie primitif, ce qui est souligné par la symbolique de son nom, *Graves*, associé au fait qu'il se croit fou ou se voit comme un fantôme qui hanterait le *graveyard*, le cimetière de ses rêves perdus de prospérité. En revanche, la régression de Noah est un choix délibéré. Sa satisfaction à l'idée de s'immerger dans une rivière à la douceur amniotique et son plaisir à vivre au plus près de la nature sont une remontée aux sources de la vie, mais aussi un refus de la pastorale (ce que ne représente pas Muley, dont le prénom renvoie à la symbolique des *forty acres and a mule*) et un rejet de la modernité. Noah est diamétralement opposé à tous ceux, dans le roman, qui font du progrès matériel une fin en soi sans se préoccuper de savoir si ce progrès sert encore l'humain. Sa décision de rester vivre près de la rivière est un choix de type transcendantaliste, une prise de position à la manière de Thoreau allant s'installer dans les bois près du lac de Walden, ou d'Emerson niant l'existence d'un quelconque progrès dans son essai intitulé « Self-Reliance ». C'est un pari de retour à la *wilderness*, au paradis d'avant la chute ainsi qu'au domaine du bon sauvage, celui à qui la nature fournit sans effort les moyens de sa subsistance.

Pour d'autres personnages qui s'inspirent également de l'idéal transcendantaliste, la régression n'implique pas forcément la stase et l'immobilisme ou le refus d'une quelconque transformation du monde. Pour Casy et, plus tard, pour Tom, le retour à la *wilderness* représente, comme pour Noah, une expérience positive ; leurs périodes de retraite solitaire ou d'érémitisme dans divers lieux clos, matriciels et régressifs, comme la caverne obscure où Tom a sa dernière conversation avec sa mère, sont des parenthèses qui leur apportent la sérénité et le recul nécessaires pour mener une réflexion sur le monde. Mais le comportement de Tom et de Casy, contrairement à celui de Noah, indique que la régression n'est pas une fin en soi. Casy

d'abord, puis Tom, voient dans cette expérience une façon de se ressourcer, de revenir à des valeurs fondamentales pour repartir affronter la société en ayant une vision plus juste des priorités. Leur but est aussi d'éviter les excès des autres personnages et de trouver un équilibre entre les extrêmes – cette notion d'équilibre entre des forces opposées étant elle-même un des principes de base de la philosophie transcendantaliste. Cette recherche d'un juste milieu entre progression et régression se retrouve également dans l'écriture même du roman et en particulier dans sa composition. Là encore, nous verrons que cette notion s'articule sur la nécessaire reconnaissance de l'existence des Indiens dont la cosmogonie forme, en filigrane, la trame sur laquelle est tissée l'aventure des Joad.

Progrès et progression de la trame narrative

Le progrès technique est ce qui met la narration du périple des Joad en mouvement. Au chapitre 9, on passe d'un roman pastoral, régionaliste et symboliste à un autre type de récit plus réaliste : le *road novel*, avec ses étapes qui font avancer la trame narrative et permettent de construire des aventures variées. Entre les chapitres 9 et 18 (l'arrivée en Californie), le roman est donc un récit de voyage. Il peut se lire aussi comme une version américaine du *Pilgrim's Progress*, titre dans lequel le mot *progress* signifie à la fois progrès et progression (l'avancée dans l'espace et dans le temps correspond à un progrès spirituel) ; néanmoins, sur le plan de la structure, le texte joue également sur l'alternance entre progression et régression.

D'une certaine façon, l'aventure des Joad se poursuit en Californie. Mais au fur et à mesure que la progression spatiale se fait erratique et désordonnée (les mouvements ne sont plus ceux de la belle ligne droite de la route 66) et que le dénuement des personnages augmente, la notion de progrès est de plus en plus intériorisée, ce qui est réfléchi par la structure du roman. Composé de deux types de chapitres présentés en alternance (les chapitres narratifs consacrés aux péripéties de la vie des Joad et les chapitres d'exposition générale de la situation économique, dits inter-calaires), le récit progresse à la fois de façon linéaire et circulaire. Une lecture scientifique du roman montre que la linéarité suit l'évolution de l'espèce et de sa survie, qui culmine dans la remarque de Ma : « "we're the people that live" » (*GW* 280). Une interprétation politique, économique et sociale semble indiquer le Progrès de l'Histoire : la fin du récit paraît bien

en effet signer la mort de la pastorale et l'avènement d'une nouvelle ère. Enfin, si l'on voit dans le texte une symbolique religieuse, la progression de la narration reprend les trois étapes de l'Exode : l'oppression en Égypte, l'Exode proprement dit, et le séjour au pays de Canaan avec ses tribus hostiles. On peut aussi y lire, avec certains critiques, un mouvement allant de l'Ancien au Nouveau testament, qui passe ensuite à une vision plus séculière et politique du salut. Mais le déluge à la fin et l'impossibilité d'atteindre la Terre Promise ramènent les personnages au point de départ du circuit narratif. Le dernier chapitre de la saga des Joad appelle un chapitre intercalaire et structurellement renvoie donc au premier chapitre (qui est un chapitre général). Le récit se clôt sur lui-même, créant un effet d'immobilisme résumé par la dernière image du livre, en forme de tableau. Les deux types de chapitre progressent eux aussi suivant leur logique propre, chacun visant à créer un univers clos et circulaire ou cyclique, notamment au niveau temporel. Les chapitres intercalaires enferment le récit dans le cycle des saisons (ils vont de la fin du printemps au début du printemps de l'année suivante), tandis que les autres suivent les cycles biologiques de la naissance et de la mort (l'histoire des Joad dure le temps de la grossesse de Rose of Sharon et se termine par une mort et un espoir de renaissance).

Cette juxtaposition entre structure linéaire et structure cyclique est également une façon de réconcilier progrès, progression et régression. Socialement, le destin des Joad semble inverser la théorie de l'évolution et s'apparente à une régression, mais l'acceptation sereine de leur inscription dans les cycles naturels leur donne une dimension plus profonde et signe leur progrès spirituel. La progression qui les ramène au point de départ crée dans le texte ce sentiment d'unité que les personnages inspirés d'Emerson recherchent. Les deux types de chapitres dessinent dans la structure narrative l'équilibre entre des forces opposées qui caractérise la représentation transcendantaliste du monde ; le tableau final, en forme de réconciliation des contraires, en donne une mise en abyme emblématique. Stylistiquement, le roman combine les caractéristiques formelles de courants littéraires passés et présents (réalisme mêlé de symbolisme biblique des chapitres sur la terre et écriture moderniste des chapitres consacrés à l'ère de la machine). Pour finir, les structures cycliques et les répétitions formelles d'un chapitre à l'autre visent à faire de l'histoire des Joad un Mythe, un récit universel quasi atemporel qui, au bout du compte, échappe à l'Histoire et au Progrès. Plus exactement, le roman fait coexister deux conceptions du

temps (l'une occidentale, c'est-à-dire historique, linéaire et continue, et l'autre primitive, c'est-à-dire mythique, circulaire et cyclique) dont les valeurs s'inversent au cours du récit, au fur et à mesure que les personnages sont dépouillés de leurs biens matériels et qu'ils perdent leurs repères ancrés dans la civilisation.

Cette transformation de l'Histoire en Mythe est elle aussi mise en abyme dans le texte, mais cette fois au chapitre 23, dans un récit enchâssé qui montre l'évolution du regard que les personnages portent sur les Indiens, ce qui par ricochet les éclaire sur leur propre situation. Dans ce chapitre, la voix narrative détaille les différentes manières dont les migrants essaient d'échapper à la dure réalité de leur existence, la principale étant, semble-t-il, de raconter des histoires. Or le récit emblématique choisi ici comme exemple commence par : « I was a recruit against Geronimo— » (*GW* 325). C'est une histoire typique de cow-boys et d'Indiens (ou plutôt de soldats fédéraux et d'Indiens) dont on comprend bien que la première fonction est de redonner un sentiment de supériorité à ces hommes qui ont tout perdu, de leur faire retrouver, le temps d'un récit épique, la nostalgie et la fierté de leur grandeur passée, du temps du Progrès. Pourtant, contrairement aux précédentes références aux Indiens, qui consistaient en une justification, sans état d'âme, de leur extermination, ce récit enchâssé introduit pour la première fois un doute, un malaise inhabituel. Dans l'histoire, les soldats, fascinés par la beauté d'un jeune Indien qui se tient, nu, sur un rocher et semble les défier en bravant la mort, ne parviennent pas à obéir à leur supérieur et à faire feu sur lui. Le dilemme n'est pas présenté en termes éthiques, mais esthétiques. Comme les autres membres de sa tribu, ce jeune Indien est « cute » (*GW* 325). Il est comparé à un « cock pheasant, stiff and beautiful, ever' feather drawed an' painted, an' even his eyes drawed in pretty » (*GW* 326). La comparaison animale et les références à la nature (il est « Naked as morning » ou « naked as the sun » [*GW* 325]) montrent que les soldats comprennent qu'avec l'Indien sont en train de disparaître un peu de la beauté et de la vitalité de ce pays qu'ils sont venus domestiquer, un peu de cette *wilderness* que les pionniers ont remplacée par des fermes, puis par des villes. À l'époque où se passe ce récit, l'anthropologue Edward S. Curtis avait déjà publié une partie de son énorme collection de photos d'Indiens dans un volume intitulé *A Dying Race*. Et lorsqu'on nous dit que le regard des auditeurs du conte réfléchit « the dying fire » (*GW* 325), il est difficile de ne pas voir là non seulement une allusion aux images de Curtis, mais aussi une identification des

personnages au jeune Indien et une possible prise de conscience : eux aussi, en tant que derniers vestiges de la pastorale américaine, sont à leur manière « a dying race ». Leurs plaisanteries sur l'inefficacité de l'armée (« Ever hear of the army doing anything right? » [*GW* 325]) montrent qu'ils ne s'identifient plus aux chasseurs mais à ceux qui sont chassés, ce que le conteur souligne dans sa conclusion auto-réflexive, après que l'Indien a finalement été tué : « 'cause you spoiled somepin in yaself, an' you can't never fix it up » (*GW* 326). En définitive, à la fin de l'histoire, le conteur et ses auditeurs deviennent eux-mêmes, par un effet de basculement, les anti-héros de l'histoire d'Indiens qu'ils avaient voulu raconter ou écouter pour retrouver un sentiment d'héroïsme.

Le récit qui suit ce conte – un commentaire fait par un migrant sur un film qu'il a vu au cinéma – éclaire indirectement la fonction profonde de cette histoire d'Indien. Le narrateur explique en effet : « I was to a show oncet that was me, an' more'n me; an' my life, an' more'n my life, so ever'thing was bigger » (*GW* 327). Le but recherché par le conteur n'est pas de créer un récit réaliste mais une épopée des pauvres et des opprimés que l'on pourrait appeler « the tall tale of the dominated ». Le personnage fabuleux auquel les migrants s'identifient prend une dimension mythique. Conteur et auditeurs sont magnifiés par le récit : « [...] the story teller grew into being [...]. And they listened while the tales were told, and their participation made the stories great » (*GW* 325). Par le biais du processus de création ou de re-création, ils retrouvent un certain degré de maîtrise sur leur vie, ou du moins sur la forme qu'ils choisissent de donner à l'histoire dans laquelle ils se reconnaissent et se projettent. Cela nous renseigne sur ce que Steinbeck a voulu faire de son roman : un récit épique qui redonne un sentiment de dignité aux migrants de Californie, une légende qui réinvente les *Dust Bowl Okies* et leur confère le statut de victimes grandioses et généreuses.

Cette histoire enchâssée rassemble toutes les étapes examinées plus haut. Là, comme dans l'ensemble du roman, le progrès et la progression jouent selon des modalités paradoxales, en s'associant ou se dissociant. Au milieu du récit, ils se renversent en leurs contraires, la régression et la stase. Pourtant il ne faut voir dans ce basculement qu'une étape d'un processus conduisant à une nouvelle forme de progrès et de progression : la régression matérielle se fait progrès spirituel – ou progrès de l'imagination et de la création –, et la progression non linéaire qui ramène l'histoire à son début (à la vie du conteur et de son public) devient la spirale

indéfiniment renouvelée de l'Éternel Retour (Eliade), la forme privilégiée du Mythe universel.

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Annexe

« Grampa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away ». (*GW* 36)

« We'll get our guns, like Grampa when the Indians came ». (*GW* 37)

« On the wall a picture of an Indian girl in color, labeled Red Wing ». (*GW* 44-45)

« "He got all of it back—all but a sofa pilla, velvet with a pitcher of an Injun on it. Albert claimed Grampa got it. Claimed Grampa got Injun blood, that's why he wants that pitcher. Well, Grampa did get her, but he didn't give a damn about the pitcher on it. [...] Jus' set on that Injun pilla an' says, 'Let Albert come an' get her. Why,' he says, 'I'll take that squirt and wring 'im out like a pair of drawers'" ». (*GW* 46-47)

Tom à propos de Muley : « "You'd think Injuns was after him. Think he's nuts?" ». (*GW* 69)

« If Mary takes that doll, that dirty rag doll, I got to take my Injun bow. [...] if Sam takes his Injun bow an' his long roun' stick, I get to take two things ». (*GW* 90)

« "Grampa's way was t'come out a-shootin'" ». (*GW* 141)

« Simon Allen, ol' Simon, had trouble with his first wife. She was part Cherokee. Purty as a black colt ». (*GW* 198)

« And the circle sang. He wailed the song, "I'm Leaving Old Texas," that eerie song that was sung before the Spaniards came, only the words were Indian then ». (*GW* 200)

« "Grampa would a been a-seein' the Injuns an' the prairie country when he was a young fella" ». (*GW* 229)

« Grampa took his lan' from the Injuns ». (*GW* 236)

« I was a recruit against Geronimo— ». (*GW* 325 *ff*.)

« Look at him swing that Cherokee girl, red in her cheeks an' her toe points out ». (*GW* 329)

« "He's half Cherokee. Nice fella" ». (*GW* 339)

« "His Injun blood smelled 'em" ». (*GW* 340)

À propos de la fille de Jule : « "You know how purty she is" ». (*GW* 358)

« "[...] Uncle John converted an Injun an' brang him home, an' that Injun et his way clean to the bottom of the bean bin, an' then backslid with Uncle John's whisky" ». (*GW* 395-396)

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Je ressens donc je pense : L'écriture des émotions dans *The Grapes of Wrath*

Il existe dans *The Grapes of Wrath* une dynamique du sensible, du sensoriel, et par extension, de l'émotion, qui s'inscrit dans un schéma anthropologique et esthétique où s'expriment le pouvoir de l'imagination et la représentation réaliste d'un univers de transition, entre un style de vie hérité de l'agrarianisme jeffersonien et la logique d'un mode de production marchand. John Steinbeck offre aux victimes de ce monde en mutation l'espace nécessaire à l'expression de leur vérité. Il sait reconnaître les bienfaits de la science, mais dans le même temps, il stigmatise l'industrialisation systémique de l'agriculture et son évolution vers un mode de production capitaliste qui transforme la terre et la force de travail en marchandises. En maintenant le lecteur dans un rapport romanesque au monde grâce à une écriture du sensible, il l'amène à s'identifier avec le narrateur dans la vision que celui-ci propose de la force de caractère très particulière dont font preuve des individus économiquement opprimés et socialement marginalisés : les fermiers de l'Oklahoma forcés de quitter leur terre en raison du *Dust Bowl* des années 1930 et de migrer vers la Californie. Le lecteur devient alors le spectateur d'une théâtralisation de l'oppression économique, et le cadre idéologique du roman se dessine.

Que faut-il entendre par « idéologie » ? Pour reprendre les théories d'Althusser, « dans l'idéologie est représenté non pas le système des rapports réels qui gouvernent l'existence des individus, mais le rapport imaginaire de ces individus aux rapports réels sous lesquels ils vivent » (25). En fait, explique Althusser, l'idéologie a fort peu à voir avec la « conscience », à supposer que ce terme ait un sens univoque. Elle est, ajoute-t-il, profondément « inconsciente », même lorsqu'elle se présente (comme dans la philosophie pré-marxiste) sous une forme réfléchie. L'idéologie est, selon

lui, un système de représentations qui n'ont la plupart du temps rien à voir avec la « conscience ». Ce sont généralement des images, parfois des concepts ; mais c'est avant tout comme « structures » qu'elles s'imposent à l'immense majorité des hommes, sans passer par leur conscience. Ce sont, insiste Althusser, « des objets culturels perçus-acceptés-subis ». L'idéologie, conclut-il, est « l'expression du rapport des hommes à leur monde, c'est-à-dire l'unité (surdéterminée) de leur rapport réel et de leur rapport imaginaire à leurs conditions d'existence réelles » (32).

L'introduction de l'écriture de l'affect dans le traitement de l'histoire invite à réfléchir sur la vision sensible de l'Amérique proposée par Steinbeck et à s'interroger sur l'implication de l'affectivité dans l'écriture. À première vue, le roman s'apparente à un monde clos où le récit place le lecteur en position d'attente d'un avenir meilleur. Pourtant, cette impression de clôture n'est qu'un leurre : à l'intérieur de ce monde, des images, des idées, des désirs s'éveillent, évoluent, ou disparaissent. Le texte est un « vouloir dire » à destination du lecteur ; il met en scène une chaîne d'actes significatifs propres à susciter l'émoi. Un rapport dialectique s'instaure entre l'expression fluide, spontanée, d'une idéologie portée par un idéal social clairement affiché et une écriture complexe, celle de l'émotion, qui donne aux mots et à la perception du sensible une intentionnalité. Le style combine, comme dans un photomontage, divers champs d'expression : oralité d'un parler populaire brut dont la syntaxe est défaillante, mais aussi descriptions et commentaires d'un narrateur omniscient alliant musicalité, théâtralité et expression poétique sensorielle. Cette alchimie permet de passer d'une appréhension tactile d'un monde où surgissent formes, couleurs, sons et odeurs, à un processus de rationalisation de l'expérience. Les modes expressionnistes et réalistes se chevauchent, ce qui soulève la question de l'illusion réaliste et de l'objectivité de l'instance narrative. Si l'explicite du texte se trouve renforcé au niveau de l'implicite par la dissémination artistique du sensible, et si l'écriture des émotions débouche sur une prise de conscience du substrat idéologique tel que le définit Althusser, alors le lecteur ne peut que conclure : « je ressens donc je pense ». Or le recours à l'affect peut aussi bien contribuer à brouiller la perception d'une « vérité » historique. Une réflexion sur la triangulation du sens s'impose. On proposera d'abord une approche anthropologique des formes sensibles de la vie sociale, pour ensuite étudier les voix du texte et enfin mettre en perspective l'esthétique sensorielle.

Approche anthropologique des formes sensibles de la vie sociale

L'histoire géographique s'inscrit d'emblée dans le roman à travers l'évocation de la sécheresse dans les grandes plaines, de l'érosion des sols et des tempêtes de poussière qui balaient l'Oklahoma en laissant sur le sol d'énormes dépôts. Puis, par touches successives, l'auteur entreprend de reconstituer de l'intérieur un passé touchant aux mythes fondateurs de la nation : la Frontière, la marche vers l'Ouest, les avancées pionnières sur le continent américain avec, au chapitre 5, l'évocation des terres arrachées aux Indiens et, au chapitre 19, un rappel de l'annexion de toutes les terres appartenant aux Mexicains. Réalité historique et contexte socio-économique forment la toile de fond du roman, mais le texte reste ouvert aux formes sensibles et aux affects. Il devient alors porteur d'une vérité qui n'est pas nécessairement « la » vérité mais qui correspond à une vision de l'histoire telle que Steinbeck l'a intériorisée. Un relevé analytique de quelques exemples permet de voir comment l'auteur s'appuie sur un recours au sensitif et à l'émotion pour inscrire sa vision idéologique dans la forme du roman.

Le premier chapitre reconstitue le contexte du *Dust Bowl* avec un réalisme descriptif qui fait pendant aux écrits des habitants de l'Oklahoma parus dans *The Atlantic Monthly* en mai 1936. Construit à partir du réel, le roman se fait vrai pour être crédible. L'authenticité de la représentation que Steinbeck donne de l'érosion du sol et des tempêtes de poussière est aisément vérifiée si l'on se réfère, entre autres, à l'ouvrage d'Ivan Ray Tannehill, *Drought: Its Causes and Effects* (1948)[1], qui établit une perspective historique, et à l'article de Morris M. Leighton, « Scientific Aspects of the Control of Drifting Soils », publié dans *The Scientific Monthly* en juillet 1938[2], où sont exposées les causes géologiques des tempêtes. La confrontation d'un extrait de l'étude de Tannehill et d'un passage tiré du premier chapitre de *The Grapes of Wrath* est riche en enseignements :

> April 6, 1893 : The dust was blinding and was deposited so thickly on office furniture that everything looked as though it were covered by a layer of dirt prepared for a hot-bed. (Tannehill cité dans Clary 2008a 35).

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1 Ivan Ray Tannehill était alors responsable adjoint du service des prévisions météorologiques au United States Weather Bureau. Voir Clary 2008a, 34-36.

2 Morris M. Leighton était à l'époque chargé des questions environnementales de l'État de l'Illinois. Voir Clary 2008b, 20-22.

> All day the dust sifted down from the sky, and the next day it sifted down. An even blanket covered the earth. It settled on the corn, piled up on the tops of the fence posts, piled up on the wires; it settled on roofs, blanketed the weeds and trees. (*GW* 7)

La représentation visuelle que donne Steinbeck des éléments relatifs à la texture et à l'épaisseur de la poussière fournis par Tannehill témoigne de sa volonté d'introduire dans le roman un authentique reflet de la réalité. On remarque notamment dans ces extraits que météorologue et romancier insistent sur les mêmes détails.

Le roman donne à voir des champs de maïs desséchés, des plants déracinés. Il fait prendre conscience au lecteur de la force du vent accélérant sa course à travers la campagne, soulevant la poussière, et de la façon dont celle-ci s'infiltre à l'intérieur des maisons, pourtant protégées par des bourrelets d'étoffe, et se dépose sur les chaises, les tables et jusque dans les plats. Steinbeck s'emploie à reconstruire cet épisode historique sur un mode expressionniste en sollicitant plusieurs sens : tout d'abord la vue, dans l'évocation du paysage où le rouge soutenu de la terre et du soleil s'affadit sous l'effet dévastateur des vents en un camaïeu de gris ; ensuite l'ouïe, avec le froissement sec du maïs brassé par le vent ; et dans une moindre mesure l'odorat, par une remarque sur les difficultés respiratoires provoquées par l'air saturé de poussière. La force de la description sensorielle est telle que le lecteur est en mesure de ressentir l'impact de ce nuage de poussière sur le corps humain, qu'il s'agisse d'une sensation tactile (« […] there was a raw sting in the air » [*GW* 6]), de l'odeur (« The people came out of their houses and smelled the hot stinging air » [*GW* 7]) ou d'une perception auditive (« The dust-filled air muffled sound more completely than fog does » [*GW* 7]). L'accumulation de constructions négatives transcrit la régression de la fertilité du sol, une impression de faiblesse grandissante, de perte de vitalité, de déclin généralisé de toute la sphère environnementale, et souligne la fragilité de l'existence humaine, à l'image des pieds de maïs qui s'affaissent sur le côté, épuisés, couchés dans la direction du vent.

Le désarroi des fermiers, rendu par leurs postures et leur gestuelle, notamment dans le premier chapitre, contraste avec l'absence d'humanité des banques, de leurs représentants et de l'industrialisation de l'agriculture mise en place par les entreprises capitalistes : la valeur symbolique que prennent les images marque le passage du sensible à l'idéologique. Le comportement des métayers et des propriétaires, après la tempête de poussière, est fortement contrasté. Les fermiers sont silencieux, immobiles,

les femmes et enfants attentifs ; tous se tiennent en retrait, humbles devant la force de la nature, comme pétrifiés : « They *lay* quietly [...] the children […] *did not run* [...]. Men *stood* by their fences [...]. And the women came out of the houses *to stand* beside their men [...]. The children *stood* near by [...] » (*GW* 7, je souligne). L'odorat et la vue sont les seuls sens en éveil : « The people […] *smelled* the hot stinging air [...]. Men [...] *looked* at the ruined corn [...]. The women *studied* the men's faces secretly [...], and the children *sent exploring senses out to see* whether men and women would break. The children *peeked* at the faces of the men and women [...] » (*GW* 7, je souligne). Les propriétaires, en revanche, sont caractérisés par le mouvement, en particulier celui de leurs voitures qui longent les champs puis envahissent la cour de la ferme. Dans la confrontation qui s'ensuit entre eux et les métayers, l'accent est mis sur l'absence de communication et la distance grâce au réseau lexical du retrait, amplifié par un effet de répétition et d'opposition, et grâce aux attitudes corporelles des uns et des autres. Les propriétaires restent à l'intérieur de leurs véhicules, portières closes, tandis que les fermiers se tiennent debout dans l'encadrement de la porte de leurs maisons : « They came in closed cars », « [they] sat in their cars to talk out of the windows » contraste avec « In the open doors the women stood looking out […] » (*GW* 34). Le texte fait ressortir le fossé qui sépare les deux camps en permutant l'ordre de certains segments (« They came in closed cars » et « In the open doors the women stood ») et en utilisant des contraires (« closed »/« open », « sat »/« stood »). D'autre part, si le regard des femmes est mentionné (« looking out »), celui des propriétaires est absent ; seule la parole sort des voitures, comme désincarnée, ce qui vient renforcer l'impression d'absence d'humanité et l'incapacité à communiquer des représentants du capitalisme bancaire. Le refus de descendre de voiture montre également que les propriétaires sont étrangers à la terre, à l'inverse des fermiers, dont la relation affective, tactile et authentique avec la terre est soulignée au chapitre 5 : l'image de la poussière cède la place à celle des mottes de terre chaudes que le métayer, accroupi pour être au plus près du sol, effrite et fait glisser entre ses doigts, puis à celle de la semence porteuse de vie et d'espoir qu'il effleure avec douceur. Avec des références subtiles au passage du temps, l'auteur montre que ce rapport privilégié s'est construit au fil des générations et il fait de l'Oklahoma un lieu de mémoire, le symbole d'un passé mythique.

Le langage du corps devient un signifiant intégré dans la relation mimétique immédiate au réel. Dans les multiples reproductions de l'espace

social dont le contenu se réactualise en fonction des situations vécues par les personnages, on constate, pour citer Deleuze, que la corporalité est « un langage qui parle avant les mots » (19). Non seulement le roman présente une approche esthétique qui fait du corps le moyen d'entrer en connivence avec le monde, mais la physionomie, le regard, le geste, les paroles s'affirment comme des expressions métonymiques de l'être. Le langage du corps chez Granma est particulièrement éloquent. Lors du décès de Grampa, la posture digne et fière de la vieille dame fait d'elle l'incarnation du courage et de l'orgueil de toute la famille Joad, comme le montre la répétition de l'expression « for the family » :

> Sairy took Granma by the arm and led her outside, and Granma moved with dignity and held her head high. She walked for the family and held her head straight for the family. Sairy took her to a mattress lying on the ground and sat her down on it. And Granma looked straight ahead, proudly, for she was on show now. (*GW* 139)

Le corps redressé de Granma s'affirme comme un des symboles les plus importants du roman. En effet, son langage corporel et le prolongement symbolique qui s'y rattache inscrivent dans l'histoire des Joad la mémoire de la cérémonie funèbre, si brève et rustique soit-elle. Mots, images et corporalité introduisent une perspective temporelle en rendant compte du processus mémoriel que Granma met en œuvre. Dans le même temps, l'insistance sur sa maîtrise d'elle-même et sur le fait que sa fierté est affichée (« she was on show ») témoigne de l'intensité de sa douleur ; et en effet, à ce langage codé du corps redressé succède, dès que Granma se retrouve seule, le relâchement d'un corps recroquevillé qui s'abandonne au chagrin.

Véritable appel à la révolte, le texte prend appui sur le sensitif pour éveiller la conscience du lecteur à la souffrance morale des fermiers. Pour lutter contre l'émoussement des sensations face à la réalité choquante (ouvriers agricoles englués dans la misère, enfants morts de malnutrition sur une terre d'abondance, injustice d'un système socio-économique orienté vers le profit) et faire comprendre au lecteur le sens de l'hospitalité, de l'unité et du partage, Steinbeck instaure un flottement entre le sensible et l'intelligible : le premier donne sens au second et assure la représentation de l'objectivement vrai. Ainsi, au chapitre 5, on ne trouve pas de long discours sur le problème de la faim, mais une scène où des enfants déguenillés font cercle autour d'un conducteur de tracteur pendant sa pause déjeuner :

> Curious children crowded close, ragged children who ate their fried dough as they watched. They watched hungrily the unwrapping of the sandwiches, and their hunger-sharpened noses smelled the pickle, cheese, and Spam. They didn't speak to the driver. They watched his hand as it carried food to his mouth. They did not watch him chewing; their eyes followed the hand that held the sandwich. (*GW* 39)

Certes, une référence directe est faite à la faim à travers l'adverbe « hungrily », mais celle-ci est surtout rendue par l'accent mis sur les yeux des enfants qui suivent les mouvements de la main de l'homme – et donc du sandwich. Ce passage annonce les images du camp de Hooverville, au chapitre 20 : « Their faces were blank, rigid, and their eyes went mechanically from the pot to the tin plate she held. Their eyes followed the spoon from pot to plate [...] » (*GW* 257). Avec la même économie de moyens, et toujours en ayant recours au sensoriel, Steinbeck fait ressentir au lecteur la douleur des parents qui perdent un enfant faute d'avoir pu le nourrir. Lorsque les mots manquent, la description de la souffrance physique prend le relais de la douleur morale, comme par exemple aux chapitres 16 et 19 :

> "I can't tell ya about them little fellas layin' in the tent with their bellies puffed out an' jus' skin on their bones, an' shiverin' an' whinin' like pups, an' me runnin' aroun' tryin' to get work […] jus' for a cup a flour an' a spoon a lard. […] Shiverin', they was, an' their bellies stuck out like a pig bladder." (*GW* 191)
>
> [...] that kid's been a-cryin' in his sleep an' a-rollin' in his sleep. […] It was what they call black-tongue the kid had. Comes from not gettin' good things to eat.
>
> Poor little fella. (*GW* 238)

En transcrivant cette canalisation de l'émotion, Steinbeck met également en relief un certain type de voix, celles de la marge, et montre leur force subversive.

Les voix du texte

Riche en récurrences idiomatiques propres au vernaculaire, le langage des métayers a été beaucoup critiqué pour sa « vulgarité » lors de la parution du roman – « obscene, vulgar, lewd, stable language », pouvait-on lire dans le *Oklahoma City Times* (Shockley 493). Situé à la marge des règles et canons de la culture dominante en raison de sa liberté syntaxique et lexicale, il oscille entre ce que le dictionnaire définit comme familier, populaire, voire vulgaire. Mais ce qui pourrait être classé dans une catégorie inférieure n'est qu'un parler vrai, celui des gens simples. À ce titre, il fait partie intégrante de la tactique choisie par Steinbeck dans ce roman :

d'une part il égratigne les normes de la culture « dominante », et d'autre part il représente la langue « dominée » d'un système socioculturel hiérarchisé, la voix enfouie des gens du peuple. Infiltré dans la narration, ce langage prend possession de cette dernière et s'approche de ce que Derrida définit comme « une langue de pure effusion, au-delà du cri, mais en deçà de la brisure qui articule et du même coup désarticule l'unité immédiate du sens, dans laquelle l'être du sujet ne se distingue ni de son acte ni de ses attributs » (396). Cette langue du peuple, véritable sociolecte, est plus précisément celle des opprimés – non seulement des fermiers contraints à l'errance, mais de toutes les victimes du système économique, entrées en résistance. En effet, les voix des migrants et des indigents se mêlent : tous parlent une langue érodée par les rigueurs d'une vie à la marge.

En donnant la parole à ces voix marginalisées, Steinbeck fait de l'oralité un symbole de rupture d'autant plus flagrant que le va-et-vient entre la voix narrative et celles des personnages est constant. La valeur du parler vrai populaire est amplifiée notamment à travers Casy, la conscience sociale du groupe, qui n'hésite pas à remettre en cause l'ordre établi et à admettre l'impuissance de la religion à résoudre la misère : « "An' Almighty God never raised no wages. These here folks want to live decent and bring up their kids decent. An' when they're old they wanta set in the door an' watch the downing sun"» (*GW* 250). Il possède l'anticonformisme qui, selon Emerson, est une caractéristique fondamentale de l'esprit américain, comme en témoigne par exemple sa conversation avec l'oncle John au sujet du péché. Il critique ouvertement les gens qui veulent donner des leçons alors qu'eux-mêmes ne sont pas des modèles de vertu : « "Them people that's sure about ever'thing an' ain't got no sin—well, with that kind a son-of-a-bitch, if I was God I'd kick their ass right outa heaven! I couldn' stan 'em!" » (*GW* 224), et surtout il invite son interlocuteur à croire en lui-même et à ne pas tenir compte de l'opinion du monde : « "I know this—a man got to do what he gotto do. […] On'y one thing in this worl' I'm sure of, an' that's I'm sure nobody got a right to mess with a fella's life. He got to do it all hisself. Help him, maybe, but not tell him what to do" » (*GW* 224). La pensée de Casy gagne en force parce qu'elle est articulée dans la langue du peuple.

La puissance expressive de la langue parlée justifie donc la place privilégiée qu'elle occupe dans le roman. Elle est non seulement l'auxiliaire de toute pensée, sociale, transcendantale, communautaire ou intimiste, un moyen de communication entre les personnages, mais aussi l'un des

modes de fonctionnement de la narration : elle fait avancer l'action, dirige l'attention du lecteur vers le caractère général du sujet (la migration des populations agricoles), dégage ce qu'il y a de général dans les cas particuliers, établit le rapport du son au sens, du mot au concept, et finalement dirige le sens de la lecture. La langue parlée apparaît également dans les chapitres intercalaires : imbriquée dans le texte, sans guillemets, elle apporte une multivocalité dynamique et une plus grande force de conviction aux commentaires généralistes et distanciés de la voix narrative principale. En oralisant le discours narratif, les personnages sans identité définie qui s'expriment là ajoutent au texte une dimension émotionnelle et rendent le discours vraisemblable. Leurs voix enfouies font en quelque sorte « entendre » le sens du texte. Par exemple, dans le chapitre intercalaire où les migrants s'assemblent autour du joueur de guitare (chapitre 22), elles nourrissent l'implicite du récit et font ressortir le sentiment qu'ont ces gens d'appartenir à une communauté (ce que souligne l'expression « welded to one thing, one unit »), qui est également traduit visuellement par le cercle qu'ils forment. La valeur d'une idéologie d'unité sociale et d'entraide est ainsi réaffirmée :

> And now the group was welded to one thing, one unit, so that in the dark the eyes of the people were inward, and their minds played in other times, and their sadness was like rest, like sleep. He sang the "McAlester Blues" and then, to make up for it to the older people, he sang "Jesus Calls Me to His Side." The children drowsed with the music and went into the tents to sleep, and the singing came into their dreams.
>
> And after a while the man with the guitar stood up and yawned. Good night, folks, he said.
>
> And they murmured, Good night to you. (*GW* 200)

En choisissant des chants variés pour satisfaire les goûts de tout le monde, notamment des plus âgés (« to make up for it to the older people »), le guitariste établit un pont entre les générations. La langue parlée (ou chantée, comme ici) vient renforcer la cohésion du groupe. Elle sert aussi à traduire l'humour, la tendresse ou même l'inquiétude.

Avant le jour du grand départ, chez les Joad, la langue parlée tout à la fois révèle et dissimule les sentiments contradictoires qui étreignent les personnages. Tous sont dans le même temps inquiets et fébriles, impatients de partir et angoissés par l'inconnu, comme le montrent les échanges entre Pa Joad et Grampa. La maîtrise de soi et l'assurance affichées par le biais des paroles masquent un sentiment de crainte et une réalité changeante. Aux « "Sooner the better" » et « "Quicker the better, now" » de Pa correspond l'exclamation de Grampa : « "Come time we get to California I'll have a big

bunch a grapes in my han' all the time, a-nibblin' off it all the time, by God!" » (*GW* 105). Cette affirmation se révèle n'être qu'une bravade puisque quelques pages plus loin le même Grampa refuse de quitter le sol de ses pères : « "This here's my country. I b'long here. […] I'll jus' stay right here where I b'long" » (*GW* 113). Au-delà des paroles contradictoires de Grampa il faut lire l'ordre qu'il intime aux membres de la famille de prendre pleinement conscience de leur appartenance identitaire à la terre qui les a vus naître et à laquelle ils sont physiologiquement et émotionnellement attachés. L'élément important est assurément la parole intérieure, transmise d'un esprit à l'autre, d'une génération à l'autre. Les Joad se transmettent une sorte de capital affectif, ce qu'illustre cette remarque de Tom à Casy à propos de l'attitude des hommes devant la mort. Pour Tom, Grampa demeure un modèle car il a su affronter les choses de la vie et défier la mort avec humour :

> "Grampa wasn't scairt," Tom said. "When Grampa was havin' the most fun, he come clostest to getting' kil't. Time Grampa an' another fella whanged into a bunch a Navajo in the night. They was havin' the time a their life, an' same time you wouln' give a gopher for their chance." (*GW* 206)

Chez ces gens peu habitués à mettre des mots sur leurs émotions, le langage du corps prend le relais de la langue parlée pour exprimer l'intime, voire l'ineffable. Trop accoutumée à maîtriser ses sentiments, Ma Joad n'arrive pas à exprimer son amour maternel avec des mots. C'est donc son corps qui traduit la profondeur de son émotion, comme par exemple avec sa fille. La manière dont sa bouche prononce le prénom de Rosasharn révèle l'amplitude de son amour : « "I know, I 'member, Rosasharn." Her mouth loved the name of her daughter » (*GW* 209). De la même façon, lorsque Ma se retrouve brusquement face à son fils Tom tout juste sorti du pénitencier, le corps devance les mots. Le bras et la main se détendent et laissent tomber la fourchette avec fracas sur le plancher : « […] the fork clattered to the wooden floor » (*GW* 76), puis les mouvements réflexes, inconscients, gagnent son visage : « Her eyes opened wide, and the pupils dilated. She breathed heavily through her open mouth. She closed her eyes » (*GW* 76). La sensation, c'est-à-dire la plénitude du bonheur, n'apparaît qu'ensuite. Parce qu'il y a rupture entre le monde des sens et celui de la conscience, le regard s'abstrait du réel et associe la sensation à la conscience. Les yeux de Ma qui se ferment au lieu de s'attarder sur le visage de Tom expriment la difficulté de la mère à faire la distinction entre perception et rêve. Pour elle, à cet instant précis, le rêve est une vision

intérieure qui pousse son corps, à défaut de sa voix, à admettre la réalité de la présence physique de son fils. Lorsque vers la fin du roman Ma doit se résigner à laisser Tom s'éloigner sans véritable espoir de le revoir un jour, c'est à nouveau le corps qui prend le relais de la verbalisation, mais cette fois à travers le contact physique : « "Come clost" », répète-t-elle à plusieurs reprises. Le rapprochement des corps (« He crawled near. […] She crawled close to his voice ») est nécessaire pour exprimer l'amour qu'elle ressent ; il lui faut toucher le visage de son fils du bout des doigts, comme pour l'apprendre par coeur : « "I wanta touch ya again, Tom. It's like I'm blin', it's so dark. I wanta remember, even if it's on'y my fingers that remember" » (*GW* 417). Et c'est sur cette symbolique du regard intérieur, du corps devenu l'extension d'un impossible regard, que la mère quitte son enfant.

C'est aussi le regard qui véhicule la tendresse unissant Ma et Pa Joad, comme en témoigne la scène où ils observent des canards passer au-dessus d'eux. Le spectacle leur rappelle les jours heureux de leur vie à la ferme, qu'ils évoquent avec nostalgie :

> Ma smiled. "Remember?" she said. "Remember what we'd always say at home? 'Winter's a-comin' early,' we said, when the ducks flew. Always said that, an' winter come when it was ready to come. But we always said, 'She's a-comin' early.' I wonder what we meant."
> [...]
> Pa pointed at the sky. "Look—more ducks. Big bunch. An' Ma, 'Winter's a-comin' early'." (*GW* 323)

L'échange entre Pa et Ma montre également à quel point la parole doit son pouvoir à la musique qui l'habite : celle-ci traduit, par-delà la pensée, l'âme même du personnage, ses désirs, ses élans, ses révoltes, souvent grâce au rythme construit sur la récurrence de certaines sonorités. Ici, la répétition en alternance des formes verbales « remember » et « a-coming » instaure un balancement que vient compléter la reprise rythmique et musicale des termes « winter » et « always ».

Parfois, cependant, au lieu de se teinter de mélancolie, la musique des voix fait ressortir l'agressivité, comme par exemple dans la scène où les Joad veulent acheter du pain. À la voix bourrue d'Al, le patron du petit bistrot de fortune au bord de la route 66 (« Al said snarlingly, "Goddamn it, Mae. Give 'em the loaf" » [*GW* 161]) succède celle de Mae, qui répond aux critiques des camionneurs avec une sorte de férocité :

> Big Bill wheeled back. "Them wasn't two-for-a-cent candy," he said.
> "What's that to you?" Mae said fiercely.

"Them was nickel apiece candy," said Bill. (*GW* 162)

C'est ensuite l'humeur apparemment belliqueuse des camionneurs qui ressort, à travers le sonore « "You go to hell" » (*GW* 162) qu'ils lancent à la serveuse avant de claquer la porte ; elle venait de les rappeler pour leur rendre leur monnaie, alors qu'ils lui laissaient un généreux pourboire. On retrouve ici l'idée de la langue parlée utilisée comme masque du sens véritable et des émotions. Si Pa et Grampa tentaient de cacher leur inquiétude avant le départ par des bravades, ici la pudeur des personnages à avouer leur compassion prend la forme détournée d'une agressivité et d'une indifférence affichées : les mots sont démentis par les actes. Il importe donc de prêter attention au non-dit et aux signes (scansion, souffle, pauses, accélération du rythme) et d'aller au-delà de la parole.

Enfin, il arrive que le langage soit un outil d'agression et fasse obstacle à la communication. Les voix enfouies du roman sont aussi celles qui interpellent les migrants avec brutalité. Pourtant, là encore il faut aller au-delà du texte, au-delà des insultes et des menaces que les habitants de Californie adressent aux Joad et à tous les *Okies*, pour entendre la voix de leur angoisse devant le flux des migrants et l'extension de la misère : « "If you're here tomorra this time I'll run you in. We don't want none of you settlin' down here" » (*GW* 213) ; « [...] "we don't want you goddamn Okies settlin' down" » (*GW* 214) ; « "Well, goddamn it, you're goin' the wrong way. We ain't gonna have no goddamn Okies in this town" » (*GW* 279). Ce langage brutal devient l'auxiliaire de la pensée intérieure de tous ceux qui ne comprennent pas le migrant – l'Autre –, et l'adjuvant de la peur : « And in the little towns pity for the sodden men changed to anger, and anger at the hungry people changed to fear of them » (*GW* 433).

Mise en perspective de l'esthétique sensorielle

La situation narrative des premiers chapitres articule les différents niveaux du discours et permet d'ancrer la dialectique de la raison et du sensible. Tout est axé sur le voir et le ressentir. Percevoir, suggère Steinbeck, revient à percer du regard, voir à travers les faits, considérer le choix des actes, toucher la réalité en traversant le flou des apparences. Les images se suivent et se recoupent, tel un collage de fragments de vie juxtaposés selon la technique du simultanéisme de Dos Passos. Par leur accumulation et leur disparité (les chapitres intercalaires font apparaître un

fourmillement de personnages secondaires), elles constituent une vaste fresque de l'Ouest et reconstruisent le ressenti d'une réalité économique en en reproduisant la complexité et la fragmentation. Steinbeck confronte le monde extérieur (marqué, tant dans l'Oklahoma qu'en Californie, par la domination d'un capitalisme dévastateur) avec celui des perdants. Chaque détail devient un indice de la perception, et les sensations sont vues comme un critère de vérité. Steinbeck veut mettre en évidence la présence de l'homme au monde : quel que soit le personnage concerné, le point de vue porté sur le monde est toujours un regard sur soi dans le monde – ce qu'illustre bien le personnage de Tom Joad. Comme le montre le passage suivant, sa vision du monde fait écho à celle d'Emerson (« a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one ») et la façon dont il envisage son rôle et sa place rappelle Whitman (« I'll be ever'where—wherever you look ») :

> "Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one […]. Then I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. […] I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. (*GW* 419)

Dans cette société en mutation où la famille éclate, la relation à l'Autre doit constamment être redéfinie. Au lieu de mettre en scène des perdants dominés par les règles du capitalisme, comme le fait John Dos Passos dans *Three Soldiers* (1921), ou de montrer comment la misère peut conduire à l'égoïsme, comme Erskine Caldwell dans *Tobacco Road* (1933), Steinbeck insuffle dans les relations entre les êtres compassion, humanisme, et foi dans un idéal social. L'attachement aux personnes d'une même famille se transforme en dévouement pour la famille humaine dans sa globalité : « "Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do" » (*GW* 444). L'amour sous-tend le roman d'un bout à l'autre et se manifeste sous différentes formes : entraide, fraternité, responsabilité, patience, mais aussi à travers la souffrance, la mort, la faim, le temps, la transcendance. Tous ces thèmes sont mis en relief à travers les aventures des Joad, qui deviennent des figures archétypales et permettent la mise en perspective d'une idéologie. Leur histoire est posée comme un témoignage qui ne peut être séparé du contexte historique et social et qui s'inscrit donc dans l'Histoire. Cet élargissement amène le lecteur à chercher dans le récit de leur épopée l'histoire de l'être. « L'Histoire est, elle aussi, une écriture » (27), dit Roland Barthes ; pour Steinbeck, écrire l'Histoire, c'est écrire pour l'Autre. De ce fait, la réécriture

à laquelle il procède s'apparente à un acte de communication intime. Il va au-delà du réalisme, cherche à pénétrer le monde secret de l'imaginaire pour dévoiler les peurs et les désirs clandestins, inconscients ou masqués, à créer une intimité avec un lecteur singulier auquel il s'adresserait personnellement. Cela se perçoit aisément dans les chapitres intercalaires : les commentaires sur l'Histoire ne se limitent pas à l'expression d'une certaine idéologie mais se teintent d'émotion grâce aux procédés stylistiques auxquels l'auteur a recours.

Au chapitre 15, par exemple, il présente les terres, les États et les grands propriétaires comme des entités dotées de réactions, gagnées par l'inquiétude devant le changement qui s'annonce : « The western land, nervous under the beginning change. The Western States, nervous as horses before a thunder storm. The great owners, nervous, sensing a change, knowing nothing of the nature of the change » (*GW* 151). L'adjectif « nervous » est repris dans les trois segments, mais ceux-ci vont en s'étoffant : on passe du seul adjectif à une comparaison puis à des propositions participiales qui reprennent le terme introduit dans le premier segment, « change », non pas une mais deux fois, ce qui porte là aussi à trois le nombre d'occurrences. Ce rythme ternaire complexe permet à Steinbeck de mettre en relief les éléments les plus importants, le changement et la peur. L'auteur interpelle ensuite le lecteur en annonçant, sur un ton qui n'est pas sans rappeler les discours prophétiques de la Bible : « [...] fear the time when the strikes stop while the great owners live—for every little beaten strike is proof that the step is being taken » (*GW* 151). Au-delà de la mise en garde il faut voir une réflexion sur la lutte des classes et la dénonciation de l'injustice sociale, poursuivie plus loin sur le même rythme ternaire, qui cette fois fait ressortir la faim et le nombre de personnes touchées par la situation (« hunger » et « multiplied a million times » sont repris chacun trois fois) : « The causes lie deep and simply—the causes are a hunger in a stomach, multiplied a million times; a hunger in a single soul, hunger for joy and some security, multiplied a million times; muscles and mind aching to grow, to work, to create, multiplied a million times » (*GW* 151). La fin du chapitre 25 fonctionne sur le même mode, mais Steinbeck ajoute l'ironie et l'antiphrase :

> Burn coffee for fuel in the ships. Burn corn to keep warm, it makes a hot fire. Dump potatoes in the rivers and place guards along the banks to keep the hungry people from fishing them out. Slaughter the pigs and bury them, and let the putrescence drip down into the earth. (*GW* 348)

Les verbes à l'impératif (« burn », « dump », « slaughter ») sont en réalité une « pseudo incitation » injonctive, puisqu'il est clair que l'auteur dit ici le contraire de ce qu'il pense. Le message idéologique surgit à travers l'implicite : il s'agit de dénoncer la paupérisation de la population agricole et de donner à ceux qui ont été jusqu'alors les muets de l'Histoire la possibilité de quitter les coulisses pour occuper le devant de la scène. Le rythme ternaire, l'itération, la permutation, la segmentation, l'éclatement des phrases en unités allant crescendo, la circularité des motifs (rythmiques ou thématiques), la correspondance entre l'imaginaire et l'image comme outil de restitution du réel, sont autant d'éléments qui orientent le récit vers une esthétique émotionnelle. Grâce à cette vision compassionnelle, le roman passe d'une simple chronique historique événementielle à une Histoire sociale et, dans une sorte de démonstration-spectacle de la vérité du texte, donne aux événements comme aux personnages une dimension épique.

On peut s'interroger sur la place que doit occuper l'affect dans la pratique de l'Histoire, comme le fait Christophe Prochasson dans son ouvrage *L'Empire des émotions, les historiens dans la mêlée*, et l'on pourrait être tenté de percevoir dans *The Grapes of Wrath* un épanchement doloriste entravant toute analyse objective de la situation des victimes du désastre du *Dust Bowl*. Il est vrai que l'écriture romanesque de Steinbeck est imprégnée du style de l'École prolétarienne[3] qui apparaît aux États-Unis pendant la Dépression : l'auteur laisse clairement transparaître sa colère contre une logique capitaliste axée vers une quête exclusive du profit et contre l'injustice sociale. Mais le message social ne l'emporte pas sur la forme, à l'inverse des autres productions littéraires de cette époque dans lesquelles seuls comptent les faits, le témoignage, l'ardeur révolutionnaire et l'effet immédiat produit. En d'autres termes, chez Steinbeck la description de la misère, de la faim et du chômage ne se fait pas au détriment de l'expression esthétique. La représentation audacieuse qu'il propose de l'histoire des fermiers de l'Oklahoma ne dérive jamais vers un culte victimaire car elle se situe à mi-chemin entre l'écriture de l'affect et la réflexion. Sans aller jusqu'à dire que le roman restaure la vérité historique, l'élément humain et la charge affective qui lui est propre sont inscrits au cœur des

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3 Parmi les artistes de l'École prolétarienne, on relève les noms de Verne Bright, Sherwood Anderson, Vincent G. Burns, Ralph Cheyney, Will Craig, Marion Doyle, Lola Ridge et Langston Hughes.

événements narrés. Pour reprendre les termes de Paul Ricœur, « de cet entrecroisement (entre l'histoire et la fiction), de cet empiètement réciproque, de cet échange de place procède ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler *le temps humain* où se conjuguent la représentation du passé par l'histoire et les variations imaginatives de la fiction » (278). La pensée rationnelle ne peut être séparée de l'émotion, et c'est bien de l'univers subjectif de l'affectivité et de l'imagination que naissent la quête d'un idéal et l'expression esthétique. En reconstruisant l'Histoire de l'intérieur, Steinbeck rend sa force à l'événement et suscite chez son lecteur l'émotion juste.

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JOURNEYING WEST: A STUDY OF THE OPENING OF CHAPTER 17 IN *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

"The People"
The ants are walking under the ground,
And the pigeons are flying over the steeple,
And in between are the people.
Elizabeth Madox Roberts (65)

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* stages the long journey of migrant families on their way to California at the time of the Dust Bowl. The novel describes the ventures of three families but focuses mainly on the Joads, alternating chapters devoted to their story with interchapters whose philosophical and sociological undertones make them read like documentaries, and whose contrapuntal function contributes to what Marie-Christine Lemardeley-Cunci called the "syncopated" structure of the novel (11). They have a kind of timeless universality, in contrast to the chapters developing the plot. Peter Lisca notes that "in thirteen such chapters almost every aspect of the Joads' adventures is enlarged and seen as part of the social climate" (297). Chapter 17 belongs to this category and develops what happened in Chapter 13, when "the family became a unit" (*GW* 140); it describes how the migrants learn to live together during their journey, as they camp along the road leading to what they see as the Promised Land. But Steinbeck's interest in social matters goes further than the massive exodus of the Okies and their living conditions. Indeed, in describing how the migrants gradually come together and become first a social and then a political unit, he seems to be building upon the Aristotelian idea that "man is by nature a political animal" and to be arguing, like Aristotle and Plato, that

the “polis” is a natural phenomenon, not a conventional one.[1] The extract selected for study shows that the migrants’ need for community goes beyond gregarious instinct, beyond the mere association of individuals who crave one another’s company; indeed, a structured city-state gradually emerges, articulated around a set of laws meant to ensure the common good of the people. The geographical move west parallels the shift in the migrants’ social consciousness. With each stop along the road each man grows more and more into a “zoon politikon.” Though the merging of the scattered families into one big family as the lights go down in the makeshift camps every evening is said to be “a strange thing” (l. 14),[2] it becomes clear by the end of the extract that this is natural human behaviour.

This analysis will first center on the people’s westward migration as they search for place and home, then on the solidarity that grows out of the misfortunes each migrant experiences, and will finally focus on the group’s survival strategies.

Homo-viators on their Way to the West

Moving is one of the key themes of the novel; the cars are therefore as important as the lives of those who ride in them. Earlier in the narrative, the reader has been told that “the house was dead, and the fields were dead; but [the] truck was the active thing, the living principle” (*GW* 102). The extract opens with a comparison of “the cars of the migrant people” (l. 1) to insects: it is first implicit, as they are said to be “crawl[ing] out of the side of the road onto the great cross-country highway” (ll. 1-2) and then explicit, when they are likened to bugs (ll. 3-4). The simile initiated with the verb “crawl” is strengthened by the dynamic verb “scuttled” (l. 3)—two words which, like the adverb “westward” (repeated several times, l. 3-4, l. 36, l. 51, l. 64), express

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1 “Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either a bad man or above humanity; he is like the ‘Tribeless, lawless, hearthless one’ whom Homer denounces.” Aristotle, *Politics*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, in Book 1 part 2 of the online version at <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.html>. I want to thank Brigitte Zaugg for drawing my attention to this text.

2 The text under study is not the whole of chapter 17 but consists of the first two pages: from the beginning of the chapter (*GW* 194) to “[…] a family acting in the rules knew it was safe in the rules” (*GW* 195). Lines have been numbered from 1 to 63.

constant motion—and by more static ones, like “clustered” and “huddled” (l. 4, l. 8), which emphasize the large number of migrants. A three-fold link is established between the cars, the migrants and the bugs through the synecdoche that opens the chapter: the pronoun “they” first refers to the cars, then to the migrants and finally, implicitly, to the bugs. The comparison of human beings to insects is a fairly common way of addressing a societal issue (one may remember, for instance, the study H. D. Thoreau makes of two groups of ants in the “Brute Neighbors” chapter of *Walden*). Not only does it point out to the animality of human beings but also, more importantly, it underlines their resilience. Indeed, bugs, like the turtle mentioned in chapter 4, are among the oldest extant forms of life. The statement underlying the comparison is that human beings are spurred forward by some primeval force that enables them to resist extinction and to move on. Steinbeck’s text thus offers a modern take on Thoreau’s comment that “Man is an animal who more than any other can adapt himself to all climates and circumstances” (Thoreau 42).

As is shown by the sentence quoted below, the second factor that keeps the migrants going is the sense of kinship that emerges as they realize that they share the same feelings (“lonely and perplexed”), the same kind of background (“a place of sadness and worry and defeat”), the same goal (“a new [...] place,” “the new country”), and the same fears, as the terms “mysterious” and “huddled” imply. The conjunction “because” also functions as a common denominator that presents the migrants as victims of a superior order:

> And because they were lonely and perplexed, because they had come from a place of sadness and worry and defeat, and because they were all going to a new mysterious place, they huddled together; they talked together; they shared their lives, their food, and the things they hoped for in the new country. (ll. 5-9)

In order to deal with their predicament, the migrants create a new community that strongly relies on togetherness and sharing; this is made clear in the passage through the repeated use of “together,” “they” and “their.” As elsewhere in the extract and in the whole novel, ternary rhythms frequently support the structure of the narrative and point to the convergence of ideas and movement. In the above example, three clauses headed by “because” are followed by three independent clauses; in the third one, the last verb, “shared,” is accompanied by three complements, the last of which extends into a relative clause, as if to give greater scope to the keywords “hope” and “new” and to emphasize the migrants’ desire to leave the past behind.

Syntax reinforces meaning, echoing the change from melancholy and despair to hope, while the seemingly endless three-beat resonates with the ongoing movement of the migrants. A similar process is used later in the text, with the adverb "then" placed at the beginning of three successive clauses stressing the different stages of the structuring of society: "Then leaders emerged, then laws were made, then codes came into being" (ll. 35-36).

By bringing into relief the pattern of succession, the narrator shows that movement is not only spatial but also temporal. Everything is closely related; one behavioral pattern or one situation seems to lead naturally to another, so that evolution inside the group parallels the migrants' endless journey: "The families moved westward, and the technique of building the worlds improved so that the people could be safe in their worlds […]" (ll. 63-65). The plural form "worlds" implies that the movement westward is also a movement inward: every time a camp is erected, the people grow closer to their ultimate purpose and to one another, so that in the end "the twenty families became one family" (ll. 14-15). These men and women slowly evolve into a group, as the repeated use of "one" ("became one family," "became one loss," "was one dream" [ll. 15-16]) and of "units" suggests: "units of the camps, units of the evenings and the nights" (ll. 23-24). The worlds they create along the way are necessary—almost initiatory—steps towards the confrontation with the real world waiting for them at the end of the road. Building a new world also means finding one's place in it. For the reader to grasp the meaning of the worlds and their function, the inner organization of the camp is therefore an important feature.[3]

Building a New World

The narrator presents the gradual shaping of a community by making a count of the families that arrive in the camp and increase its size:

> it might be that one family camped near a spring, and another camped for the spring and for company, and a third because two families had pioneered the place and found it good. And when the sun went down, perhaps twenty families and twenty cars were there. (ll. 10-13)

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3 Françoise Clary has analyzed the issues at stake in this paragraph in the second part of her book, *Steinbeck:* The Grapes of Wrath, which I refer to for further developments.

The first sentence comprises three clauses linked by the conjunction "and," which puts the stress on the gradual accumulation of people. The same conjunction, placed at the beginning of the second sentence, both links it with the first and creates a pause in the narrative rhythm, with the result that the phenomenon of accretion stands out: as night falls, the camp has grown from one family to twenty. This phenomenon is also emphasized inside each clause: the first family settles in a particular spot for one reason (the spring), the second family for two reasons (the spring and company), and the third pitches camp in the same spot because two families are already there. Mimetism, intersubjectivity and the law of numbers seem to be ruling the migrants' behavior.

The process, though, is not as simple as it seems. The narrator reports that "At first the families were timid in the building and tumbling worlds, but gradually the technique of building worlds became their technique" (ll. 33-34). By resorting to gerunds, he demonstrates that "building worlds" is a tentative practice; it constantly undergoes development and therefore may be said to mirror the migrants' desire to recreate the life they have lost. This is reinforced by the repeated use of the verb "become" (l. 16, l. 17, l. 34, l. 51, l. 59), which points to a different form of movement: the transformation of one thing into another. Also reiterated is the phrase "the technique of building worlds" (l. 34, l. 64), which makes the activity almost amount to an art of survival. One of the instances of this coming into being can be found in the sentence "They grew to be units of the camps…" (l. 23): the choice of a verb referring to expansion ("grow") and the use of "to be" stress the process of transformation—"be" insisting on the new identity that the migrants acquire. The iterative and cyclical quality of the process plays an important role, since in repeating the same gestures the migrants improve their skill. The narrator points it out through the determiner "every": "Every night a world created […]. Every night relationships that make a world, established; and every morning the world torn down like a circus" (ll. 28-32; also ll. 37-38, ll. 64-65). Although the migrants' world stands as a "complete" (l. 28, l. 29) microcosm, the comparison with "a circus" and its juxtaposition to the verb "torn down" suggest the flimsiness of what has been built and therefore hint at the people's tragic plight. The reference to "a circus" also implies that the migrants have become the puppets of a system which ostracizes them; they are trapped in a never-ending mascarade that forces them to start over every day. Throughout the novel, the reader witnesses the harsh reality imposed by the American authorities to prevent the migrants

from “invading” the rest of the country. Route 66 thus becomes the stage of a twentieth-century Trail of Tears.

The link between loss and dream is made clearer in the second paragraph, which connects loss and hope: “The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream” (ll. 15-17). The emphasis on process through the use of the verb “become” points to the unity of thought that gradually builds up and culminates in the reference to a shared ideal. That same sense of unity is reinforced in the description of the illness of one child and the birth of another: “a birth there in a tent kept a hundred people quiet and awe-struck through the night and filled a hundred people with the birth-joy in the morning” (ll. 19-20). Each newborn stands as the symbol of the new beginning the migrants are longing for, the embodiment of their dream, the link between past and future. Births keep the group in motion and give the journey a biological rhythm. The dynamic quality of past losses can thus be perceived: “A family which the night before had been lost and fearful might search its goods to find a present for a new baby” (ll. 21-23). While the sentence stresses the evolution from separateness to togetherness, with the baby as its active principle (the adjective “new” echoing the people’s search for “a new mysterious place” [l. 7]), the fricative, in four keywords that encompass the migrants’ situation—“family,” “before,” “fearful” and “find”—, evokes the friction of the cars’ wheels on dust and their forward movement.

The extract demonstrates that the future depends on everyone’s contribution and that everyone must respect a specific code of conduct: “if one broke the laws his name and face went with him, and he had no place in any world, no matter where created” (ll. 57-58). The structure of the sentence reveals the danger of stepping across the boundaries. Each segment is separated from the next by a comma and takes the warning a little further; the sentence ends on two negations stressing the impossibility of reprieve. Not only is the outlaw banned from this community and, by implication, from any other (“he had no place in any world”), but his very identity is erased (“his name and face went with him”). The “worlds” referred to in the text are based on rules and laws reminiscent in form and content of the Ten Commandments; they strongly rely on moral imperatives that the community has to take into consideration if it is to live on.[4] The migrants

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4 On the biblical references see Paquet-Deyris and Perrin-Chenour 31-38.

seem to have realized that the key to survival lies in the construction of sturdy foundations.

Survival Strategies

The survival of the community's structure depends on everyone's good will. Each moment calls for a common effort toward harmony. The description of the first evening the people spend together may be seen as a metaphor for the way a community operates: "A guitar unwrapped from a blanket and tuned—and the songs, which were all of the people, were sung in the nights. Men sang the words, and women hummed the tunes" (ll. 24-27). Everyone has a part to play in the melody of the camp. Interestingly, the guitar does not belong to anyone; it seems to have a life of its own and to initiate the singing and the coming together of the people. The guitar and the songs are unifying principles, just like the rules and laws that preserve the harmony of the camp. The songs themselves tell the story of the migrants. Everything blends: tune, song and, through them, the people. Both men and women are needed for the melody to emerge fully, nobody is left aside.

Paragraphs 5 and 6 introduce the elements that are necessary for the melody to remain in tune: "what rights must be observed" (l. 39). Each paragraph is concerned with a different set of rules, first what is allowed and then what is forbidden, but each is orchestrated around the same leitmotiv, set by the repetition of the noun "right," which functions like a bass note that hammers the rhythm in. Gradually, a variation on the theme is introduced, as "right" turns into "rules" and then "laws" (l. 51). It is accompanied by a contrapuntal rhythm expressed in the introductory "and" (l. 45, l. 51, l. 55) heading three successive paragraphs. Thus each paragraph brings to the fore another element that adds to what has already been said and paves the way for what follows. This narrative organisation brings to mind the poems of Walt Whitman[5]; indeed, like Whitman, Steinbeck resorts to repetition "to rehabilitate the humblest scenes by surrounding them with a halo of infinity" (Asselineau 105). Paragraph 5, in particular, brings to mind the endless lists in Whitman's poetry: this long sentence, punctuated by semi-colons, makes it clear thanks to the stress on the word "right" and its

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5 See, for example, section 12 of "Starting from Paumanok" (Whitman 21).

meanings that the communal structure depends on the people's acknowledgment of what is allowed within the group and what is not.

Most of the verbs in these paragraphs are active and stress the agency of the migrants, their capacity to "learn" from experience (l. 39, l. 45), and their free will. The emphasis is also on their innate or intuitive knowledge of the way a community works: "although no one told them" (l. 45, ll. 51-52). The main lesson they draw from living together is that the establishment of boundaries, both tangible and intangible, is vital to their survival. In the first stages of the construction of the "worlds," "rights" regulate the relations between the people (ll. 40-44, ll. 46-48), but gradually they shift to "laws" dealing with the more concrete aspects of life—cleanliness for instance (ll. 52-53). This reflects the growing stability in the organisation of the camp, as do modals expressing obligation, capacity and permission: "must" (l. 46, l. 60), "could" (l. 49) and "might" (l. 61, l. 62); and the narrator concludes: "In the worlds, social conduct became fixed and rigid" (l. 59). Rigidity is not seen as a drawback but rather as a frame ensuring the people's safety: "a family acting in the rules knew it was safe in the rules" (ll. 66-67). This sentence also contains the barely veiled hint that breaching the rules must be expected, is in fact the corrolary of the establishment of rules themselves. Therefore the last step in the organisation of the community is the devising of "punishments" (l. 55). Respect is the cornerstone of societal life, for without it chaos ensues:

> And the families learned, although no one told them, what rights are monstrous and must be destroyed: the right to intrude upon privacy, the right to be noisy while the camp slept, the right of seduction or rape, the right of adultery and theft and murder. These rights were crushed, because the little worlds could not exist for even a night with such rights alive. (ll. 48-50)

The expression "the little worlds" here comes as a subtle echo of the initial comparison of the migrants to insects, as in evoking the hierarchy of the community it brings to mind the careful structure of the worlds of ants and bees. Precariousness seems to always loom in the background, as the verb "endanger" (l. 63) suggests, appearing almost at the very end of the penultimate paragraph, which begins and closes with the term "worlds" (l. 59, l. 63): should one individual fail to abide by the rules, the protecting circle of the community might be broken. While "building worlds" is stressed as a survival strategy early in the text, keeping these worlds whole turns out to be just as crucial. Both processes are part and parcel of the migrants' dream of the better world they hope to find at the end of the road.

The "little worlds" that are built every night in the camps are the only form of security the migrants experience as they move westward. In building them over and over again, the people rehearse a kind of creative process, each time improving the outcome, eventually coming so close to perfection that it will be seen as a threat by the authorities (*cf*. the "paradise" where the Joads settle in chapter 22). In other words, the search for place goes hand in hand with a kind of apprenticeship that gives meaning and depth to the migrants' lives. *The Grapes of Wrath* mirrors the pilgrimage described in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress: From this World to that Which is to Come*.[6] Like the pilgrims' journey, the migrants' takes on a truly initiatory dimension, with its lot of hardships and joys as they walk from one world to the next in their search for work and stability. Although what the future holds remains uncertain, new hopes emerge with each newborn child: each birth takes life a little further, extends "the time of man"[7] and helps the migrants endure, especially as it brings them closer to one another. The narrator points to the gregarious instinct of human beings as well as to their primeval need for order, made manifest in the organisation of the group as a social unit with its rules and laws. As the absence of names in the extract shows, he also stresses solidarity as a unifying principle and the key to survival, implicitly opposing it to American individualism, both in this passage and in the novel as a whole.

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6 See Lemardeley-Cunci 50-51 for more details on this comparison.

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THE SPECTACULAR IN *A MULTITUDE OF SINS*

The stories of *A Multitude of Sins* deal with unexceptional characters leading humdrum lives disturbed only by frustrating affairs in which they or their spouses are directly involved. With the exception of "Abyss," their crises and their adventures are mostly anticlimactic. Such fiction belongs to a class where most of the time "nothing happens" and where that "nothing" is related in minimalist fashion. All that hardly makes for spectacular material, usually "marked by or given to an impressive, large-scale display."[1]

The spectacular, though, is not always necessarily linked with the grandiose. It also has to do with reality envisioned as a spectacle in itself: characters may feel both removed from it (as spectators or even as voyeurs) and involved in it. At the level of the narration, the use of the text as a disclosure of its very textuality amounts to what Russian formalists called "the baring of the device": the narrator or the implied author uses fiction-making as fictional material. The text reflects itself and, as such, becomes a spectacle in and within itself. Metatextuality, however, is not the only major component of postmodernism, which is often informed by the notion of the sublime.[2] The latter may be seen as the paroxysmic impact of the spectacular

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1 "spectacular," *Webster's*.

2 In this respect, Lyotard defines the difference between modernist and postmodernist aesthetics:

> l'esthétique moderne est une esthétique du sublime, mais nostalgique ; elle permet que l'imprésentable soit allégué seulement comme un contenu absent, mais la forme continue à offrir au lecteur ou au regardeur, grâce à sa consistance reconnaissable, matière à consolation et à plaisir. Or ces sentiments ne forment pas le véritable sentiment sublime, qui est une combinaison intrinsèque de plaisir et de peine : le plaisir que la raison excède toute présentation, la douleur que l'imagination ou la sensibilité ne soient pas à la mesure du concept.

upon the individual; that is why, deeply rooted as it is in realism, *A Multitude of Sins* is also strongly influenced by the literary Z*eitgeist*.

The Outside World as a Spectacle

With the exception of "Reunion," all the stories reveal characters who, at least at one point, watch the world from behind a glass pane. This standpoint is at the core of the action in "Privacy," the brief short story opening *A Multitude of Sins* and constituting a programmatic introduction to the whole volume. The narrator is drawn to the windows of his comfortless apartment naturally, out of restlessness. The rough surroundings combine with the cold of winter to favor a withdrawal slightly akin to regression:

> Often I had a blanket or sometimes two around my shoulders, and I wore the coarse heavy socks I'd kept from when I was a boy.
>
> It was on such a cold night that—through the windows at the back of the flat, windows giving first onto an alley below, […] I saw, inside a long, yellow-lit apartment, the figure of a woman slowly undressing, from all appearances oblivious to the world outside the window glass. (*MS* 4)

Both characters stand behind windows, which isolates them from the outside world and from each other. "Because of the distance, [he] could not see her well or at all clearly" (*MS* 4); the woman is no longer a subject, for she has become a mere artistic image. The narrator sees her as an object of contemplation partaking of the statuesque and of the filmic:

> The yellow light in the room where she was seemed to blaze and made her skin bronze and shiny, and her movements, seen through the windows, appeared stylized and slightly unreal, like the movements of a silhouette or in an old motion picture. (*MS* 4-5)

The nature of his attraction, though, is not only aesthetic; it is obviously also voyeuristic, for the character is sexually frustrated:

> My wife, at that time, was working long hours and was always fatigued, and although sometimes we would come home a little drunk and make love in the dark bed under blankets, mostly she would fall straight into bed exhausted and be snoring before I could climb in beside her. (*MS* 4)

> Le postmoderne serait ce qui dans le moderne allègue l'imprésentable dans la présentation elle-même ; ce qui se refuse à la consolation des bonnes formes, au consensus d'un goût qui permettrait d'éprouver en commun la nostalgie de l'impossible ; ce qui s'enquiert de présentations nouvelles, non pas pour en jouir, mais pour mieux faire sentir qu'il y a de l'imprésentable. (30-31)

His secret night-time activity offers a scopophiliac outlet to his sexual frustration:

> I, though, alone in the frigid dark, […] with my wife sleeping, oblivious, […] I was rapt by this sight. […] I went to a drawer and found the pair of silver opera glasses which the theater director had left, […] and watched the woman […]. Undoubtedly I was aroused. (*MS* 5)

Opera glasses are essentially objects of the past; they immediately confer a touch of class on the user which relativizes his indecency. The narrator's ensuing description of the woman and of the movements she repeats night after night does not have much to do with pornography or even cheap eroticism; it verges on *ekphrasis*:

> Each night, and for a week following, the woman would appear at her window and slowly disrobe in her room […]. Once her clothes were shed away, exposing her bony shoulders and small breasts and thin legs and rib cage and modest, rounded stomach, the woman would for a while cast about the room in the bronze light, window to window, enacting what seemed to me kind of languid, ritual dance or a pattern of possibly theatrical movements […]. (*MS* 5-6)

The filmic quality of the scene is rendered through a succession of very short words which hardly ever have more than two syllables. Only a few exceptions, all pregnant with meaning, can be noted: "following," "exposing," "enacting," "ritual" and "theatrical" have to do with movement associated with artistic or ceremonial performance. They stand out as the expression of formality within a context which in itself is already highly formalized.

The whole sequence actually looks like a film—both as software (the unfolding action) and as hardware (the piece of plastic that bears the images at the rate of twenty-four per second). It also reproduces the cubicles/cells which contain each character and provides an apt image of the fragmented nature of *A Multitude of Sins* as a collection of separate stories. The filmic aspect (of this passage and several others) is not, however, strictly limited to the cinematographic, for the motif of the naked woman in front of her window is a well-known feature of what has now become classic American painting, notably in Hopper's works.[3] Just as in the narrator's description of

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3 See for instance:

- "A Woman in the Sun," 1961, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, available at <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/H/hopper/womn_sun.jpg.html> (January 2, 2009)
- "Morning Sun," 1952, Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, available at <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/H/hopper/morn_sun.jpg.html> (January 2, 2009)

the woman's room, it is virtually impossible to determine the specificity of the surroundings in Hopper's pictures, which are painted in a selective realism meant to render the essence of the place more than its concreteness.[4] Critics have underlined the interrelations between Hopper's style and the photographic, as well as the cinematographic; the following quotation discloses obvious analogies between Hopper's and Ford's aesthetic universes:

> In many of Hopper's paintings, one has the vague sense of viewing a film still—the stop-action quality of figures frozen in an act of little significance.
> Hopper participated in and contributed to a process that had long been the domain of photography—capturing a segment that suggests a larger story. One finds in many Hopper paintings an incomplete narrative, the feeling that critical details are absent. He once spoke of peering into harshly lit offices at night while riding the el train and glimpsing, for a fleeting moment, the activities therein. We have all experienced this sensation, the temptation to peer, unnoticed, into private worlds beyond the window frame and animate what we see with our own ruminations. (Venn 4, 19)

A Multitude of Sins, then, partakes of an American artistic vein that strives to reach beyond the limits of its medium. What the narrator gets out of watching the woman is actually nothing but frustration and disillusion: after fantasizing about her as a young woman, he realizes "she was old, after all" (*MS* 7). Since his illusion was to some extent also fueled by his visual culture (Hopper's influence in the United States is unavoidable), the failures he refers to repeatedly in the story without ever explaining their nature are also bred by the medium which conveys his experience.[5]

- "Morning in a City" (1944), College Museum of Art, Williamstown, MA, available at <http://thephoenix.com/Portland/Arts/39115-Visions-of-isolation/?rel=inf> (January 2, 2009)

- "Eleven a.m.," 1926, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, available at <http://thypott-art.com/painting/Edward_ Hopper/ hopper_eleven_am> (January 2, 2009)

4 "Night Windows" is a case in point: "Night Windows," 1928, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, available at <http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php? criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A2726&page_number=4&template_id=1&sort_order=1> (January 2, 2009)

5 The pleasure that characters derive from watching the spectacle of life from behind a window is always short-lived: such is the case for Nancy ("Charity"), whose state of well-being is immediately followed by thoughts that get more and more troubling, and that end up revealing her existential void: see *MS* 220-221, from "The man said nothing […]" down to "What did *he* know that she didn't?"

A spectacle mediated by a window or its equivalent, a windshield, discloses an incomplete sight, which the characters need to interpret in order to fill the information gaps; hence their tendency to fantasize. In "Quality Time," Wales, like the nameless narrator of "Privacy," builds up his own portrait of the woman he sees fall in the snow:

> Must be old, Wales thought, though it was dark and he couldn't see her face, only her fall–backwards. She wore a long gray man's coat and boots and a knitted cap pulled down. Or else, of course, she was drinking, he supposed, watching her through his salted windshield as he waited. She could be younger, too. Younger and drinking. (*MS* 9)

Although that spectacle is narrated in a predictably blank style, its physical impact on the character is considerable ("His heart began rocketing. Cold sweat rose on his neck" [*MS* 11]); his unsettlement is also denoted through the frequency of the noncommittal expression "Wales thought" (four times between pages 10 and 11). Hardly felicitous from a stylistic standpoint, this repetition creates in the reader a disturbing sensation which echoes something of the character's own confusion.

An Underlying Theatricality

Many aspects of the outside world have an artificial quality, which seems to define them as inherently spectacular and theatrical. In "Calling," New Orleans is shown as a place where social relationships are entirely based on appearance; the men who impress the narrator quite favorably merely put on a temporary show:

> They seem exotic, and your heart expands with the thought of a long friendship's commencement and your mundane life taking a new and better turn. So you do call, and you do see them. You go spec fishing[6] off Pointe a la Hache. You stage a dinner and meet their pretty wives. (*MS* 36)

That type of socializing has nothing to do with friendship, as the ritual performance of the "staged" dinners shows. Such relations prove short-lived and quickly reveal themselves in all their deceitful theatrical shallowness:

> —you see this man is far, far away from you […]. A smile could be playing on his face. He may just have said something charming or incisive or flatteringly personal to you. But

6 Note the ironical and humorous potentialities of the phrase: it refers to a fishing style that necessitates using a lure, but it also suggests that they fish "on spec," (*i.e.*, without any assurance of catching any fish), and implies that their fishing is done as a *spec*—tac[k]le.

> then the far, far away awareness dawns, and you know you're nothing to him and will probably never even see him again, never take the trouble. (*MS* 36)

The narrator's use of "you" tends to make his personal experience a universal one, by including his addressee—the reader. His conclusion then hits a sensitive chord when, in a final twist, he reveals that such a relational pattern is not limited to strangers but comprises the closest family members: "It's simple really. Though of course it's more complicated when the man in question is your father" (*MS* 37). In "Charity," Nancy's thoughts reveal that marriage is also to be considered in this light, as what matters to her in a critical moment is to show the world the ideal image of a married couple: "Too bad, she thought, the tourist bus couldn't come by when his arm was around her, a true married couple out for a summery walk on a sunny street" (*MS* 208).

It seems that the whole universe of *A Multitude of Sins* is conceived as a stage on which a mostly male audience enters and leaves the buildings all dressed up, wearing tuxedoes or, on a minor key, seersucker suits, as though they were going to the theater. The scenes they and we discover are quite often endowed with a dramatic atmosphere; "Reunion," where the narrator spots Mack Bolger at Grand Central, is a case in point. The majesty of the station is reminiscent of that of a cathedral, a palace or a theater set; the unusually clement weather adds to the feeling of unreality of the moment:

> When I saw Mack Bolger he was standing beside the bottom of the marble steps that bring travelers and passersby to and from the balcony of the main concourse in Grand Central. It was before Christmas last year, when the weather stayed so warm and watery the spirit seemed to go out of the season. (*MS* 67)

Mack Bolger does not appear so much as a human being made of flesh and blood as a mere fixture of the dramatic setting:

> [...] he was tanned, which caused his square face and prominent brow to appear heavy, almost artificially so, as though in a peculiar way the man I saw was not Mack Bolger but a good-looking effigy situated precisely there to attract my attention. (*MS* 68)

Mack Bolger is thus defined as an integral part of a human comedy staged in the "festive holiday-bedecked concourse of Grand Central" (*MS* 69).

Such a magic atmosphere has an irresistible, eerie influence on the narrator: "I was taken by a sudden and strange impulse—which was to walk straight across through the eddying sea of travelers and speak to him" (*MS* 69). That reaction turns out to be a mere theatrical happening, which *Webster's* defines as "an unconventional dramatic or artistically orchestrated

performance, often a series of discontinuous events involving audience participation":

> And not to impart anything, or set in motion any particular action (to clarify history, for instance, or make amends), but simply to create an event where before there was none. And not an unpleasant event, or a provocative one. Just a dimensionless, unreverberant moment, a contact, unimportant in every other respect. Life has few enough of these moments—the rest of it being so consumed by the predictable and the obligated. (*MS* 69)

Only meant to introduce variation in the surrounding routine, this confrontation is drama for its own sake, reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's "all art is quite useless" (xxiv). Yet, paradoxically, it is hardly distinguishable from the humdrum reality it is supposed to alleviate. The narrator's motivation is anti-climactic; it does not bring about any revelation. The artificial context must, however, be taken into account, as it suggests a whole different sphere of reality. Indeed, the men's previous encounter had much in common with the burlesque light comedy called "vaudeville" or "théâtre de boulevard" in French:

> [...] I got banged around in a minor way and sent off into the empty downtown streets on a warm, humid autumn Sunday afternoon, without the slightest idea of what to do, ending up waiting for hours at the St. Louis airport for a midnight flight back to New York. Apart from my dignity, I left behind and never saw again a brown silk Hermès scarf with tassels that my mother had given me for Christmas in 1971 […]. (*MS* 68-69)

It should be noted that the consequence of the comic fight is the breakup of the two lovers, whose next and last encounter takes place in "the theater district" (*MS* 69).

Hotels in *A Multitude of Sins* provide an appropriate setting to the dramatic scenes that unfold. The fight in "Reunion" takes place at the Mayfair, and the aborted one in "Dominion" occurs at the Queen Elizabeth II in Montreal. The impersonality of hotels leaves the individual face to face with himself; that is why the atmosphere is closely related to the character's state of mind. In "Dominion," after Henry answers the insulting phone call, he sees the room in aesthetic terms that denote its symbolic value: "Here was merely a venue, a voiceless place with nothing consoling about it. […] Coming to Montreal had been peculiarly pointless—a vanity, and he was trapped in it" (*MS* 162). A "venue" is quite often the place of an artistic performance; the Latin origin of the term, *vanitas*, may bring to mind the "vanitas paintings" which flourished in the seventeenth century and represented the inevitability of death and the transience and vanity of earthly achievements and pleasures. A vanitas painting always carefully stages its

various components (such as skulls, burning candles, clocks, rotting fruit or flowers) to exhort the viewer to consider mortality and to repent. Henry is indeed led to ponder on his destiny along this line of thought; for instance, he reconsiders the relevance of his ambition. But, more interestingly, he seems to perceive in a flash the parallel between the scene and the vanitas painting of his life as he puts down the receiver: "[Madeleine] looked pale and was patting her cheeks softly, as if this was a way of establishing order inside her head. It was theatrical, he thought" (*MS* 162).

As a matter of fact, Madeleine is putting on an act: the insulting phone call is the start of her staged prank, in which an actor is to impersonate her frightening husband. What is more, just like Grand Central Station in "Reunion," the hotel has a lot in common with a theater: "The lobby otherwise offered a pleasant, inauthentic holiday-festive feel, with big gold-and-glass chandeliers and humming activity. It was like a stage lighted for a musical before the principals came on" (*MS* 167). Henry himself, when he was young, had looked like the actor Elliott Gould (*MS* 157-158), and his good sense enables him to see through the young man who plays the role of Madeleine's husband: "He was like a pretty little actor, Henry thought, clean-shaven and actorishly fit-looking" (*MS* 169). Even the airport at the end of the story takes on a theatrical quality, with the American family making a spectacle of itself:

> On the curb side, amid skycaps and passengers alighting and baggage carts nosed in at reckless angles, a family […] were having a moment of prayer, standing in a tight little circle, arms to shoulders, heads bowed. Clearly Americans, Henry realized. Only Americans would be so immodest about their belief, so sure a fast amen was just the thing to keep them safe—at once so careless and so prideful. Not the qualities to make a country great. (*MS* 179)

By telling Henry sarcastically, "'Then rejoin your fellow Americans'" (*MS* 180), Madeleine—who, as the story's playwright and stage director, is an expert in the field—invites Henry not only to return to his country, but also to take part in the American social theatrics.[7]

Most of the stories in *A Multitude of Sins* feature references to the world of the theater. In the very first page of "Privacy," we discover that the narrator's apartment used to be a theater:

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7 Theatrics is to be understood in the two meanings provided by *Webster's*:

1. (*used with a sing. v.*) the art of staging plays and other stage performances.

2. (*used with a pl. v.*) exaggerated, artificial, or histrionic mannerisms, actions, or words.

> A famous avant-garde theater director had lived in the room before and put on his jagged, nihilistic plays there, so that all the walls were painted black, and along one were still riser seats for his small disaffected audiences. Our bed—my wife's and mine—was in one dark corner where we'd arranged some of the tall, black-canvas scenery drops for our privacy. Though, of course, there was no one for us to need privacy from. (*MS* 3)

The irony of the situation is that the narrator feels he needs privacy, as if he could sense the presence and the gaze of the "small disaffected audiences," while he actually violates the privacy of a woman he contemplates with opera glasses. Since his actions are viewed by the reader, the latter takes the place of the absent audience. The whole context is of course strongly evocative of the Shakespearean pattern of the play within the play. This pattern also comes to the fore in "Calling," where Buck's father "[is] wearing a tuxedo with a pink shirt, a bright-red bow tie and a pink carnation" as well as "white-and-black spectator shoes" (*MS* 49) for the outing. The father is literally a spectator: not only is he dressed formally (as if for an evening at the theater), but he is also putting on an act for his son's benefit (doing what fathers are expected to) and behaving in such a way as to become a sort of clownish figure. The blind in which the characters hide is not meant only for watching the ducks; it is a set on which dramatic action takes place and some kind of essential revelation may occur.

The Shakespearean pattern of the play within the play emerges as one of the threads binding the stories together and underscores the artificiality of the situations in which the characters find themselves.[8] In harmony with its postmodern context, the organizing entity thus denoted makes a spectacle of itself. This suggests that if the diegetic spectacular may lead unknowing characters to the inexpressible experience of the sublime, metafiction could serve as a medium to attempt to convey that ineffable occurrence.

From the Spectacular to the Sublime

The Grand Canyon is one of America's—and probably one of the world's–most spectacular places. It is by far the most impressive setting among those mentioned in the collection, and its prominence is suggested by the fact that it is Frances and Howard's destination in the very last story of *A Multitude of*

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8 Even the duck blind finds its equivalent in the shelter of "Crèche": see *MS* 53, 133.

Sins. Its immensity and majesty are overwhelming to most visitors, who usually find themselves at a loss for words when trying to translate their experience into speech. This reaction is typical of an encounter with the sublime, which transcends the aesthetic notion of the spectacular and leads to introspection.[9] To Frances, the Grand Canyon expresses the essence of America, as well as some of the spirit of her family:

> "As big as the Grand Canyon, isn't that what people say?" Frances had gone on dreamily. "My father used to say that. He was an immigrant. He thought the Grand Canyon meant something absolute. It meant everything important about America. I guess that's what it means to me." (*MS* 245)

Her great expectations are not frustrated at the sight of the Canyon, which is "a shock" (*MS* 272), following which she "seemed blissed" (*MS* 272). She fears that her ineffable feeling will not be shared by Howard, who will spoil the sacredness of the moment with inadequate words. Patricia Waugh insists that "The sublime transcends every faculty of sense, taunts us with a glimpse of inaccessible plenitude and leaves us with the impossible self-conscious wrestle with words in the hopeless struggle to embody it" (27). Hence Frances's harsh order to Howard: "'I don't want you to say a single thing'" (*MS* 272). Her refusal to hear any words at that crucial moment testifies to her perception of something beyond the spectacular tourist attraction. Such a behavior goes beyond contemplation, which aims at understanding a phenomenon that lies irremediably outside oneself. Hers is a transcendental attempt at attaining fusion with the wilderness. Though the young woman never showed any interest in the divine, Howard feels she "was probably having a religious experience" (*MS* 273). Her ensuing fall, then, is to be seen as the expression of a divine *tremendum* and as proof of the destructive power of what cannot be expressed through words.

The Grand Canyon expresses something of America mostly because its largely untouched condition offers a glimpse of the origin of the world. To believers, it is as close as one can get to the Garden of Eden. In "Charity," Tom's quest for what he considers an authentic place in Maine corresponds to the same subconscious concern for the recovery of a prelapsarian state. The views he discovers with Nancy are not as spectacular as the Grand Canyon but they still convey some mysterious power. Nancy, for instance,

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9 "The sublime is connected to the sphere of pure ideas as the beautiful is to the sphere of understanding." (Waugh 26)

is not particularly attracted to Maine but nevertheless feels a muted contact with its *tremendum*: "the Penobscot […] was so picturesque and clear and pristine as to be painful" (*MS* 204). The sublime is a reality that is impossible to grasp yet that one naturally needs to find words to express and make sense of. Any text attempting to articulate it is doomed to failure, although it may still prove successful at composing an alternative spectacle in itself.

We have seen that characters often watch the outside world through windows or windshields, thereby transforming reality into a spectacle they contemplate without getting involved. Sometimes, however, the watchers are watched in a striking reversal of roles. In "Charity," for instance, Nancy watches a store that reminds her of "a new opera house" (*MS* 181), a comparison suggesting that the comings and goings of the customers are similar to the entrances and exits of characters on stage; she thus plays the part of the audience. At the same time, her nakedness makes her into a spectacle, thus blurring the boundaries between voyeurism and exhibitionism: "The two bus drivers she believed could not see through the shadowy trees were both looking right at her. She didn't move. […] She didn't care if two creeps saw her naked; it was exactly the same as her seeing them clothed" (*MS* 182).[10]

The textual equivalent of specularity is metatextuality, which stages the text as a reflection of itself. When Faith, in "Crèche," endeavors to entertain her nieces (*MS* 122), she resolves to tell them a story and thus becomes an intradiegetic narrator whose tale will echo the one in which it is told (the short story itself); her audience will also be a reflection of the reader of "Crèche." The sleepiness and the lack of interest of the two girls are taken into account in the story-telling and Faith decides to spice up her originally true story and adapt it to the occasion. Only one of the two girls seems to be concentrating on the story. Behind them, "[...] on the bare white wall is a framed print of Bruegel's *Return of the Hunters*, which is, after all, Christmas-y" (*MS* 122). It is impossible to determine precisely who deems Bruegel's painting "Christmas-y": the third-person narrator is voicing either his opinion or Faith's. Be that as it may, the painting is so famous that most readers will instantly get a mental picture of the scene and see the analogy

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10 The specular nature of vision is to be found throughout the short story, as the Maine residents spy on their poorer neighbors as well as on the tourists who admire their houses: "summer people sat on long white porches and watched the impoverished world through expensive telescopes" (*MS* 200).

between the characters' situation (in the snowy mountains) and Bruegel's subjects.[11] Bruegel's painting does look "Christmas-y," mainly because of the snow, but on the whole its atmosphere is bleak and several elements—the dark colors associated with the hunters and the hovering crows, for example—do not bode well. In retrospect, the reader can establish a link between the painted scene and what happens to Faith up in the forest above the village when she meets the girls' father. *The Return of the Hunters*, then, adds another dimension to the metatextual nature of the scene. The reader must decipher yet another text, a semiotic one, which is most probably deeply buried in his memory.

Metatextuality reveals characters as characters, which means that the reader is regularly reminded of the fact that the story he is reading, despite its obvious realism, is an artistic construct. In "Dominion," for instance, Henry's appraisal of Madeleine is doubly metatextual, since he is a character who "reads" Madeleine so as to determine her "character" traits:

> Madeleine appeared different from how she actually was—a quality he always found strangely titillating, because it made her unreadable. Generally people looked how they were, he thought. Prim people looked prim, etc. Madeleine *looked* like her name implied, slightly old-fashioned, formal, settled, given to measuring her responses, to being at ease with herself and her character assessments. (*MS* 157)

Henry analyzes Madeleine's psychology as if he were a literary critic, guiding the reader's interpretation and offering an alternative reading. The story is shown as a complex aesthetic creation that should not be taken lightly: it is a spectacular piece of work.

The spectacular in *A Multitude of Sins* is only superficially found at the diegetic level. Given the subtlety of the style, one does not get purple patches as such; the implied author's virtuosity is revealed in unobtrusive fashion. The collection succeeds in combining minimalism with the playful spirit of the postmodern and its obsession with metatextuality. Hopper's influence can be felt throughout the volume and contributes to its distinctly American flavor, which transforms banal, lonely American sights and places into spectacular expressions of universal loneliness and alienation, which were

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11 Pieter Bruegel, "Return Of The Hunters," 1565, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, available at <http://www.istanbulsanatevi.com/sanat/ressam/resim.php?lang=tur?ref=arabulursun.net&id=77> (January 2, 2009)

already hinted at, several centuries back, in acknowledged masterpieces such as Bruegel's *Return of the Hunters*.

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"READ THE FINE PRINT": SINS AND SIGNS IN RICHARD FORD'S "ABYSS"

"Abyss," the sole story in the collection *A Multitude of Sins* that was never published before, is remarkable for several reasons. To begin with, it stands out in the table of contents, being separated by a typographical blank from the other titles. Secondly, because it is a novella and not a short story, it may convey a deeper, farther-reaching and more conclusive message than the other texts. Thirdly, it is the only story that ends with the explicit death of one of the protagonists.[1] The tone is also quite different from that of the other narratives, as the atmosphere gradually becomes spooky and eerie. Indeed, the story of a purely sexual and illicit affair turns into a mystic search and then evolves into a tense thriller. Such an intertwining creates a blurring effect, all the more so as a parodic dimension is added. In order to avoid destabilization and falling into the narrative abyss, the reader must be on the lookout for hints and clues, decipher signs and omens throughout the multifaceted story—in other words, "read the fine print," as Frances says (*MS* 235).

Almost all the stories are about one single sin, adultery, from which a multitude of other sins and dreadful consequences spring. Ford commented: "Under the house of adultery is all of the little failures that actually comprise it..." (Birnbaum). I will first show how a multitude of spiritual signs emerge in this novella on a multitude of sins, then focus on the motivations and hopelessness of Frances's impossible mystic search, before pointing out several analogies between the story and a thriller.

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1 The end of "Under the Radar" is sufficiently open for the reader to come to the conclusion that Stephen is run over by Marjorie.

A Multitude of Spiritual Signs

Commenting on "Abyss," Richard Ford said:

> I thought, This is the concluding chord. Insofar as all of the stories are about the ways that people delude and fail each other, this is the consequence. It's the story of ultimate consequence for all of the other events in the other stories. It's a falling into a kind of spiritual inanition. (Weich)[2]

The polysemy of the title is in keeping with the numerous possible meanings and interpretations of the novella and of the other stories in the collection. Literally speaking, the term refers to the Grand Canyon, "a big hole in the ground" (*MS* 281) into which Frances falls to her death. But it also reflects the abyssal moral gulf into which the other characters symbolically collapse, all of them plunging into sinful acts without being punished.[3] Frances's fall is the figurative echo of those of Jena, Wales, Johnny, Marjorie, Bobby and others, who fail in their desperate quest to fill in the existential and moral cracks within themselves through adultery.[4] Like "*CHRIS* [who] DIED FOR YOUR SINS" (*MS* 262), Frances represents an archetypal figure who unconsciously redeems not only her own sins but also those of all the characters. Just as several elements may be read as clues announcing her death,[5] this attempt at redemption is foreshadowed in the story by major spiritual allusions.

In the first few lines of the story, three words ("Phoenix," "Olive Garden" and "Mystic" [*MS* 225]) announce one of the major themes underlying the plot: sacredness. A sacred bird that ignites once it has reached the end of

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2 In an interview with Huey Guagliardo, when asked about the meaning of Helen Carmichael's view of spirituality as a "conviction about something good that you can't see" in the short story "Occidentals," Ford rather enigmatically answered that this invisible good thing was "survival" (Guagliardo 185). However, he did not specify whether he meant the soul's survival or man's resilience.

3 The only exception is Marjorie, who gets hit in the nose by her husband.

4 Francis Scott Fitzgerald wrote in *The Crack Up*: "'Suppose it was a crack in the Grand Canyon.—The crack is in me,' I said heroically" (qtd. in Tréguer and Henry 375). Fitzgerald may indeed have inspired Ford, who named his female protagonist Frances and the officer who drives Howard back to the bus station Fitzgerald.

5 For example, when Frances is driving, she is described as "peering ahead into the tunnel of light" *MS* 253); one may also quote Ed's ironical remark on the phone: "'Maybe I could just jump in'" (*MS* 249), or Frances's saying to Howard when trying to convince him to accompany her: "'Take the plunge'" (*MS* 242).

its life-cycle and arises from its ashes, reborn anew to live again, the phoenix embodies invincible strength, resurrection and eternity. Frances may unconsciously believe that in Phoenix she is about to start a new phase in her life which will lead her to a rebirth; but in order to be born again she must die first. The metaphysical dimension is also hinted at in a spooky episode that foretells the eerie atmosphere of the end. As she looks at Arizona's capital city, Frances has a vision:

> the face of Howard's wife, Mary, materialized out of the dark clouds like a picture in a developer's tray. The image was of a young, sweet-faced blonde like herself, whose oval face and small heart-shaped mouth bore a look of disappointment, her eyes large and doleful and unmistakably expressive of hurt. (*MS* 233-234)

This image of a blond saint, a *Mater Dolorosa* (as her Christian name suggests), points at Frances's guilt: she is the adulteress, a modern-day Maria-Magdalene who is responsible for Mary's sufferings, and she must die for having committed such a sin. At the same time, the fact that Frances projects herself onto Mary, whom she has never seen, suggests her own pain, reminiscent of Christ's sufferings on the cross. Frances is also compared to the female police officer Howard talks to after her death, "a young, stiff, short-necked blonde not so different in her appearance from Frances Bilandic" (*MS* 283). Though the comparison is established through Howard's eyes and may be ascribed to his difficulty to admit that Frances is dead, one may see there a hint at Frances's symbolic resurrection. The three female characters are the various facets of a kaleidoscope, different and complementary versions of femininity. An impression of continuity is thus created.

The Olive Garden in Mystic is the place where Frances and Howard meet to fulfill their carnal desires. It is obviously meant to evoke the Garden of Eden—in Hebrew, "Eden" means "delight," "pleasure." Both Frances and Howard are looking for physical pleasure, unaware that the joy ride will prove deceptive and lead to Frances's annihilation. Frances will find the way back to the prelapsarian Garden of Eden when approaching the Grand Canyon, "where everything was natural and clean and pristine" (*MS* 267). In the Bible, the Olive Garden is where Christ spends his last night before he is betrayed by Judas and crucified, and the place where His Passion begins. Frances's night in Mystic's Olive Garden is not her last, but it is the starting point for her passion/Passion—in the etymological sense of the word, that is to say intense suffering or agony. Although she is not nailed to the Cross, in her fall/Fall her body is horribly mutilated: her legs and arms "[...] were all

jumbled about her in a crazy way" and "one arm was intact but separated from her body" (*MS* 278). Her body is positioned "at the up-slope base of [an] ancient cedar" (*MS* 278),[6] a tree that symbolizes eternity. Moreover, during her trip through the desert, Frances is mesmerized by the ghost-like, frightening and elusive figures of the Indians she and Howard come across on the road, which brings to mind the demonic figures that the Hebrews met in the desert during their forty-year journey to Canaan. Frances hopes to find spiritual revelation on a geological site whose legendary appeal and aura are comparable to those of Mount Sinai.

It is in ill-named Mystic, a modern American Sodom and Gomorrah, that the idea of visiting the Grand Canyon takes shape in Frances's mind. As a real-estate agent,[7] she embodies a materialistic western society, but she is clearly searching for a sphere higher than the prosaic business surroundings in which she lives; hence her fantasizing the Grand Canyon as a mystic shrine. In this context, the expression "Weiboldt Mystic office" has an ironic, almost oxymoronic ring[8] and encapsulates the tension at work in her life. She is driven both by the overwhelming force of the American Dream and by a sudden need to reach spiritual heights, and believes that the contemplation of the grandiose panorama of the Grand Canyon, "the door to the underworld" (*MS* 255) according to the Indians, will help her achieve her aim. The question is whether some space is left for spirituality in a post-modern world saturated with consumer society products, signs and values. Frances's mystic quest seems to be both motivated and

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6 The cedar tree is "Asiatic-looking," a term that echoes the Japanese accent Frances was faking a moment before, with her reference to the "raging dragon" (*MS* 253) which, in the Bible, is a satanic avatar of the snake leading Adam and Eve to the Fall. The Asian motif thus comes full circle, if one recalls the unknown Chinese woman in the first story, "Privacy." In "Crèche," too, Faith is saved from rape by the sounds of Japanese voices.

7 Howard and Frances's professional realm has a symbolic significance and suggests that they have no sense of location: as Howard notes, "'[...] it's like a shark's life. Dedicated to constant moving'" (*MS* 270).

8 Several expressions emphasizing the difficulty of reconciling opposites can be found in the story. For instance, the prosaic reference to a "Formica tabletop" (*MS* 225) comes as a brutal anti-climax after "Phoenix," "the Olive Garden" and "Mystic." Similarly, the association of "Phoenix" with "sales conference" undermines the classic spiritual meaning of the mythological reference, the capitalistic dimension counterbalancing and even blotting out its sacredness.

hindered by dilemmas—the existential questions that plague her and the paradoxes of contemporary American society.

Mystic Search and Dilemmas

In today's America the sacred has been subverted by the consumer society. Ford illustrates this in "Abyss" with the example of the reflection pool inside the Phoenix shopping mall, into which "[p]eople had naturally thrown hundreds of pennies" (*MS* 241): people act out a form of religious ritual in a post-modern temple of consumerism, and thus the limit between the profane and the sacred is blurred. Other elements referring to the same idea punctuate the story, such as "a big cinema complex built to look like an Egyptian jukebox" (*MS* 245), and the motel where the couple stop for the night and whose rooms consist of "white stucco teepees with phony lodge poles showing through phony smoke holes" (*MS* 257). The "crummy little chapel" (*MS* 262) opposite the motel where Frances and Howard have wild, almost brutal sex highlights the tension between crude hedonism and spirituality, all the more so as the passage is saturated with symbolic contrasts between cheap plastic objects and garish luminous signs on the one hand and an alleged search for a higher life on the other. In the same fashion, the "spiritual grandeur and natural splendor" (*MS* 271) of the Grand Canyon is spoilt by rubbish, film boxes, cigarette packages and the smell of urine and, instead of being admired with the naked eye, is viewed through the lens of a telescope or a camera. The Western myth is defiled and perverted by the polluting presence of tourists, the shameless and intensive exploitation of natural resources, and the American urge to sell and consume. The annihilation of nature by modernity is represented by the deaths of animals: the jack-rabbits that litter the road seem to have fallen as so many sacrificial victims.[9] The wilderness and the innocence central to American mythology are fast disappearing.

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9 The rabbit that rushes under the car's wheels may be identified with Frances herself, as Howard remarks that "This rabbit's got problems (…). Overcoming man-made barriers. Circumventing unnatural hazards" (*MS* 245). This is exactly what Frances does, both symbolically, by committing adultery, and literally, by ignoring safety walls built by man along the edge of the Grand Canyon.

The text suggests that Frances has had enough of the kitsch society she lives in, as for instance when she answers Howard's sexual invitation ("'Let's go up to my room'") with an unexpected "'I want to see the Grand Canyon'" (*MS* 241). This stresses the contrast between Howard's earthly drives and Frances's spiritual quest: he fails to grasp the sublime, mystic character of the Grand Canyon, "the great empty hole" (*MS* 244) which he finds "plenty big" at best (*MS* 273), while she is concerned with her karma and the "healing energy" (*MS* 275) of the place. Frances may impersonate the American Dream—her professional skills are praised even by her hierarchy—, but her deep-down calling (becoming a physiotherapist) has not been fulfilled and her existential drift leads her to start a sexual affair which she soon realizes does not remedy all her personal frustrations.

Because her life is steeped in morbidity (her husband Ed suffers from an incurable disease and her former roommate, Meredith, died of brain cancer), Frances uses Vulgar Eros[10] as an antidote to Thanatos. Love is indeed conspicuously absent from her relation with Howard, whom she tells cynically: "'Not that I'm in love with you. I'm not'" (*MS* 237).[11] When on the road to the Grand Canyon the adulterers come across two Indians, Frances identifies them as "our ancient spirits" (*MS* 255) whereas down-to-earth Howard thinks they "might've been phantoms of fatigue" (*MS* 256). Not only does the vision trigger Frances's speech about what she wants Howard to do in case she dies, but it anticipates on her fate: like them, she will "[disappear] into thin air" (*MS* 256),[12] simply vanishing in front of Howard when she falls into the abyss. Significantly, she is described as "the little

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10 Pandemian (or Vulgar) Eros, as opposed to Uranian (or Heavenly) Eros, governs starkly licentious relationships. The distinction is introduced in Plato's *Symposium,* more precisely in the discussion of Aphrodite Ourania (Uranian Eros's mother) *vs*. Aphrodite Pandemos (Pandemian Eros' mother).

11 Frances's other cynical statement, "'I wouldn't fuck you if I didn't like you'" (*MS* 233), is also striking in its juxtaposition of the crude "fuck" with the mild "like."

12 Obviously, the Indian presence is supposed to embody spirituality, and yet, the fact that Frances confuses the Navajos with the Hopis ironically suggests her lack of any true cultural and spiritual knowledge. Just as nature is being destroyed by modernity, Indian cultural specificities are gradually annihilated. Indians are now associated with profit; they are no longer spiritual guides, but paid guides to the Grand Canyon, who sell trinkets to sight-seers, cheating on white people and in a way taking their revenge on them.

agent from Nowhereburg, Connecticut" (*MS* 258), and "Nowhereburg" is precisely where fate leads her.

The discrepancy between the carnal and the psychological sides of Frances and Howard's relationship becomes more and more blatant as the narrative unfolds. Their mutual magnetic attraction is replaced by growing distance: "A little band of nastiness which he definitely didn't appreciate had begun widening between them all the way up to Flagstaff" (*MS* 251). Only when Frances has disappeared and he calls her name does Howard realize that "Maybe they'd never used names" (*MS* 277). The widening gap between the two characters is emphasized by the ironic tone of the narrative voice and the alternation between Howard's and Frances's points of view. Each of them casts a harsh look on his/her partner. Frances reflects, for example: "He wasn't a con man, but he wasn't much better" (*MS* 241); "[...] he had personal qualities she was starting to be sick of" (*MS* 241); "[...] it didn't make Howard any more interesting [...]" (*MS* 249); or again, "[...] he looked ridiculous in his terry-cloth shorts [...]" (*MS* 250). Before reaching the motel, Frances even rejects his offer to make love, though sex has been their only successful means of communication up to then. Their last sexual intercourse is particularly brutal and not quite fulfilling for Frances, and tolls the death knell of their relationship. As for Howard, he sees Frances as "a tough, sexy little package, but also a little package of trouble if you didn't exert strong force on her" (*MS* 238); on the road, as estrangement grows between them, he perceives her as "hateful" (*MS* 246), and concludes a bit later with the disparaging statement: "She looked like a little Polack—somebody who sold cheap houses to other Polacks and bought her clothes at Target" (*MS* 252).

The characters' handling (or rather *non*-handling) of words and the lack of true communication between them make the reader aware of the hopelessness of their affair. Their solipsism is also underlined.[13] Each of

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13 For Richard Ford, solipsism (from the Latin: *solus*, alone, and *ipse*, self), which consists in taking into account only one's own perception of the world and denying what is outside one's mind, is the cause of many serious human failures. Talking about his collection of novellas *Women with Men*, he commented:

> They are also about varying degrees, varying sorts of human solipsism. The thing that defeats affection in each of these stories is one person's inability really to look outside him or herself, so much so that the needs, the preferences, the well-

them lives in his/her own world: as they drive on after dinner in Flagstaff, they are "encased in silence" (*MS* 254). Frances even fails to define the nature of her relation to Howard: "There was probably a category in some textbook for what the two of them were doing, slipping around this way, but she wasn't ready to say what it was" (*MS* 233). Almost all their attempts at revealing something of their true selves either abort or fail; Frances, in particular, often resorts to role-playing in order to conceal any weakness, to the point that Howard reflects: "She was different every hour. You needed a program" (*MS* 265). Frances also puts on an act when calling her husband Ed from Flagstaff, "leaving out the crucial part of the story" (*MS* 250). The whole phone call—a confused, nonsensical dialogue—testifies to the couple's inability to communicate. Both are distracted by outside events and stop paying attention to what the other is saying: Ed seems more interested in "the Red Sox game" on TV (*MS* 249) than in their conversation, while Frances's attention is caught by what goes on in the police station, where officers are "steering [a] young, handcuffed black man into a wire cage […]. It was like an animal cage" (*MS* 249). She seems to feel spiritual kinship to the black man, the cage serving as the image of her own life.

Frances and Howard have reached a regressive state that brings them closer and closer to nature, as the brutality of their sexual intercourse shows. The return to a primeval state is made even clearer when, on the night before her death, Frances seems to turn into one of the animal spirits the Indians worship. The passage foreshadows Howard's physical position when looking for Frances's corpse, and also initiates a thriller-like atmosphere. During the night, brutal sex, death and the supernatural get mixed: Frances, like a werewolf in a horror film, awakens and gets on her hands and knees, having no idea where she is and who the man beside her is[14]: "'It was weird'," she tells Howard. "'I'm glad you didn't wake up. You'd have thought you were in the middle of an operation'" (*MS* 264). From then on the tale clearly leaves the realm of sex and turns into a frightening thriller-like story.

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being, the sanctity of others are, in effect, completely ignored or misunderstood, causing calamity. (Guagliardo 178)

14 Frances even tells Howard: "'I didn't think you *were* anybody. You could've been an animal. You could've changed shape'" (*MS* 264). The remark plunges the reader into the atmosphere of a fantastic tale about metempsychosis (the transmigration of souls into humans, animals or plants), but also ironically (in the first sentence especially) tells volumes about Frances's perception of Howard—he isn't "anybody" for her.

Blending Genres

It is difficult to define the genre "Abyss" belongs to: as Ford himself puts it, "it's low comedy, almost slapstick in its way, except that it doesn't end in low comedy" (Goldberg). Sometimes, indeed, the narrative borders on farce: Howard's wife refers to their lovemaking as "*the side show*" (*MS* 235); Frances feels that he considers her to be "some carnival act" (*MS* 266); Howard thinks of intercourse with Frances as an "epic session" (*MS* 236)—expressions which reinforce the mechanical, nonsensical character of interpersonal relationships in the story.[15] Like characters in a vaudeville, the adulterous couple try to cover their tracks: in Mystic they register at the Howard Johnson's as Mr. and Mrs. Garfield (*MS* 225), in Phoenix they spend the evening apart, with different crowds—Frances with a group of "high-spirited lesbian agents" and Howard with "some dreary, churchy Mainers" (*MS* 232)—, and take all kinds of precautions that seem rather preposterous. Even the scene where Frances falls into the abyss lacks drama at first, for it highlights Howard's surprise and incredulity (he expects Frances to "spring up" (*MS* 277) like a jack-in-the-box). The almost comic dimension of the episode also stems from Frances's unexpected and incongruous last words, "'Oh my'" (*MS* 276), which sound anticlimactic in view of what actually happens. The reader, who somehow senses that Frances has fallen to her death, is thus poised between comedy and tragedy. Besides, the parody of the Western genre, with servers "dressed like desperadoes with guns and fake moustaches" (*MS* 240) and fake teepees made of stucco (*MS* 257), participates in the wry humor of the story.

However, as the narrative unfolds, the light-hearted ambience of the adulterous affair takes on another dimension, with the final part of the novella taking on the features of a thriller.[16] Eroticism and a sense of danger are

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15 See also the passage where Frances talks about the improvements made possible by "technology" in matters of masculine sexual problems: "'He went on the pill? Or the pump, right?' Frances made a little up-down pumping motion with her thumb, up-down, up-down, and a little "eee-eee-eee-eee" squeaky sound. 'That works out better for older people, I guess'" (*MS* 228).

16 A thriller is "a tense, exciting, tautly plotted and sometimes sensational type of novel (occasionally short story)" with an emphasis on suspense and mystery; "the crime novel, the police procedural, the *roman policier*, […], some ghost and horror stories" belong to the genre, and "sex and violence may often play a considerable part in such a narrative" (Cuddon 971).

blended right from the beginning: the black waitress who winks lewdly at Howard from behind a porthole window gives him the impression that they are being watched (*MS* 230-231). Frances and Howard's lovemaking is characterized by a certain violence (their last intercourse in particular), the two characters giving free rein to their "furious passions" (*MS* 225), both physically and verbally. Frances's voice "electrifie[s]" Howard (*MS* 237): it can "blow the top off him" (*MS* 236) during their "steamy meetings" (*MS* 236). The words depicting their physical attraction and embraces are tinged with brutality and violence, even with a kind of threat: "sex infiltrated their soft-spoken conversation like a dense, rich but *explosive* secret" (*MS* 226, my emphasis). The adjective sounds like an ominous foreshadowing of the visit to the Grand Canyon, about which Howard exclaims: "'It'll be a blast'" (*MS* 271).[17] Their animal drives are also pointed out: the first time they meet, Frances feels that they are drawn by "a large, instinctual carnal attraction–the kind, she thought, animals probably felt all the time" (*MS* 226).[18] The sense of impending danger is conveyed through the couple's anxiety about the disclosure of their affair, but they do not suspect that their liaison will end with death; they prove unable to "read the fine print" (*MS* 235, 266).

Several elements contribute to the building up of the tension that reaches its peak with Frances's fall. For instance, on two occasions Howard links Frances's husband, Ed, with Lon Chaney, Jr.,[19] an association which rings a frightening bell. Indeed, Lon Chaney, Jr., played in horror films and starred in all four of the classic monster movies *The Wolf Man* (1941), *The Ghost of Frankenstein* (1942), *The Mummy's Tomb* (1942) and *Son of Dracula* (1943). When Howard leaves the motel room, he realizes that the surroundings affect him because they are the embodiment of his vision of a ruined life:

> [...] no doubt just as you were in the process of ruining [your life], how you felt at the exact moment of ruining it was probably precisely how this fucked-up landscape looked! Dry, empty, bright, chilly, alien, and difficult to breathe in. So that all around here was

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17 Howard also believes, mistakenly, that the Grand Canyon is where "'they blew up the atom bomb'" (*MS* 243).

18 Military terms are also used, such as "assault" and "command" (*MS* 235, 236).

19 "The expression 'block of wood' and the wounded, weathered face of the old movie actor Lon Chaney, Jr., had become linked to Ed [...]" (*MS* 254); "He imagined Ed sitting in a dark room, a bitter, disheveled man (more or less the man he'd imagined having a fistfight with—Lon Chaney, Jr.)." (*MS* 285)

> actually hell, he thought [...]. Just being out here, Howard thought, was enough to spook you [...]. (*MS* 262-263)

But it is really the depiction of the evolution of the two characters' thoughts and feelings that enables the narrator to heighten suspense. Frances, for instance, moves from worry for her safety to downright exasperation with Howard. The strategy she composedly imagines to get rid of him gives way to a downright aggressivity that she has difficulty restraining, as a comparison of these two extracts shows:

> She might even be harming herself by associating with this man. Possibly he posed a threat, staring at his huge toenail. What could he be thinking? Something sinister. She'd excuse herself to use the rest room the minute they were out of the car, then get away from him. Call the police and say he was stalking her. (*MS* 269)
> She looked at him and felt herself actually grimace. She needed to get away from this man. She felt willing to push him right out the door onto the road, using her foot. (*MS* 270)

One might even expect Howard to be killed by Frances,[20] especially in the light of the lines that conclude the last section in which Frances is the focalizer: "[...] in an hour he'd be history, and she could enjoy the ride back to Phoenix alone. None of this would take long" (*MS* 271).

Yet it is Frances, not Howard, who dies.[21] After her fall, Howard's anguish rises gradually: he first calls out Frances's name, then looks around, failing to grasp the significance of her disappearance; his thoughts are reported in short sentences which contrast with the longer ones describing his behavior. The discrepancy between the inside and the outside, between his mounting panic and the surrounding quiet ("All seemed perfectly pleasant" [*MS* 277]) reinforces his loneliness: "He was alone here, unobserved" (*MS* 277). The climactic point of the narrative, when the plot turns into a thriller, brutally comes when Howard, now on the other side of the safety wall, looks down into the abyss and is seized by vertigo. The abrupt change is rendered

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20 The possibility is there, especially if one remembers the open ending of "Under the Radar."

21 Whether her fall is accidental or not is debatable. Does she really fail to see the warning signs? Does she unexpectedly lose her balance? The instructions she gives Howard in case she dies, her existential uneasiness ("How desperate was she?" [*MS* 270]), together with what she tells herself after having had sex at the motel ("*She* had orchestrated things then, not him" [*MS* 260]), seem to indicate suicide. But each reader must decide for him/herself. Ford said in an interview, "The idea of authorship is that you authorize the reader's responses as much as you can" (Kanner).

through an anaphora, “And it was at this instant […]. And it was now [...]” (*MS* 277), and through the emphasis on distance: “[...] a straight drop down. [...] down, far down, far, far down [...]. But far. Two hundred feet, at least, [...] its straight drop [...] the long, long drop to the bottom” (*MS* 277-278). The text also highlights the angular aspect of the cliff: “[...] a sudden rough edge […] the jagged edge [...] angled out […] before breaking off […] at an angle” (*MS* 277-278). Dust, dirt, stone, rock—the almost exclusively mineral apocalyptic universe forces Howard into a regressive position: he gets “down on his knees and his fists” (*MS* 278) and squats, in an echo of Frances’s attitude when she gazed into his face the night before. The fact that he sees her face first, “staring up at him, her eyes seemingly open” (*MS* 278), and the dislocation of her body[22] contribute to the horror of a discovery that the reader and Howard make simultaneously. The protagonist’s primeval instinct of survival comes to the fore after his mind registers the meaning of the scene below. He realizes that he has lost all notion of the passing of time (“Time did not pass slowly or quickly” [*MS* 278]), that he is in an awkward situation and therefore “needed to move, now” (*MS* 279). Questions, dashes, brackets, italics, a clipped style, sentences reduced to one word (*MS* 278-282) express Howard’s confusion.

Interestingly, the reader is left to decide for himself what spurs Howard to action: concern for Frances, for himself, for his wife, guilt? Howard certainly feels cornered: “[...] there was no way out of this now” (*MS* 282), but why does he imagine he may be accused of murder? Howard’s obsession with the camera, which contains compromising photographs and bears his fingerprints (“[...] he had touched it. [...] the camera needed to be removed. [...] They would see him holding Frances’s camera” [*MS* 280-281]) suggests an analogy with a whodunit. Howard himself thinks along these lines: “Now being the significant time [...]; *now* was the ‘critical period’ that, in a thorough police investigation, had to be accounted for [...]” (*MS* 280). However, the narrator’s comment between dashes, “he knew this from TV” (*MS* 280), is clearly ironical, and except for the mystery of Frances’s rented car having evaporated into thin air, suspense rapidly comes to an end. The investigating officers “[settle] on the concept of an accident” (*MS* 284) before the afternoon

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22 In “Quality Time,” the narrative voice refers to two fragmented bodies: that of the woman who is hit by a car and becomes “a collection of assorted remnants” (*MS* 11), and that of a photographer who was “shot to pieces covering a skirmish in East Africa” (*MS* 11).

is over, and their actions are summed up in a few sentences (*MS* 285). It all somehow ends with an anticlimax, as if Frances's death did not matter: all Howard can think of when considering his trip back to Phoenix is that "He had the drinks coupons if there was a wait" (*MS* 286).

The spiritual allusions of this story pose the question of the message Ford wished to convey. Does Frances die because she wanted to transgress rules to the very end? Does she get carried away by the trance-like state she is in, standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon, and decide to take her own life? This last suggestion seems improbable, for Ford has explained that "even though [his characters'] condition in life is not a condition of continual exaltation and euphoria […] they are not defeated by it to the point of having to commit suicide" (Arbeit in Préher and Zaugg 293). For Ford, what matters is that characters (and readers) gain a new awareness of the chain of causes and consequences, like Howard, who comes to the conclusion that "What you did definitely changed things" (*MS* 287). It seems a bit far-fetched to consider that Ford passes a moral judgement on adulterers, even if one must admit that Frances and Howard do get punished for their sin. What he appears to be saying, however, is that "a multitude of sins" can bring nothing but disorder, ruin, and annihilation. One should therefore "Pay closer attention to what [one is] doing or bad things will result" (Guagliardo 178).[23] Only by being aware of "the sanctity of others" (Guagliardo 178) can one reach "secular redemption" and, "through the agency of affection, intimacy, closeness, complicity, feel like our time on earth is not wasted" (Guagliardo 183).

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23 Ford also said:

> My notion about what I guess you could call an ontology of fiction is about (it is, anyway, when I write it) what we do as a consequence to dramatic acts. Much of our lives is spent dealing with the consequences of our own and others' important acts; trying to make things that have happened against our will and against all logic, seem normal, survivable. And so, for me, at least right now, it has seemed that what stories can be about is how people put their lives in order after rather dramatic, sometimes violent, percussive events. (Stuckey-French 110)

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SEX, MORALITY, AND ADULTERY OLD AND NEW IN RICHARD FORD'S "ABYSS"

If one were obliged to select just one story from *A Multitude of Sins* that would best encapsulate the concerns of the entire collection, one could do worse than choose "Abyss." In reading only "Abyss," one would learn much about the emotional and moral climate of the book, and much, too, about the motivation and intentions of its author. We cannot, of course, elevate one story to the status of supreme meaning, but it *is* the case that "Abyss" has a particular distinction in *A Multitude of Sins*: it is the only one to trace the unfolding of an affair from beginning to end, from the initial attraction to the immediate aftermath of its calamitous conclusion, an exercise of teleological storytelling, the main concern of which is to produce a cautionary tale. Richard Ford, indeed, seems to have used "Abyss" to recapitulate and reinforce the premise that guided the writing of the entire collection, namely that acts have consequences, and that, in the domain of relations between men and women, such consequences are of the greatest moral import.

It is not usual to hear writers assert that they strive to write moral fiction. They might well accept that literature can hardly avoid being moral, but they might shy away from insisting, as Richard Ford does, that a moral vision is vital in fiction. In an interview, Ford observed that whenever he decides a novel he is reading is not very good, "it's because this sense of moral vision is not foremost in the story" (Guagliardo 192). And it is particularly in the intimate relations between men and women that Ford seeks to elaborate and enact a moral vision in his fiction. In choosing to examine so microscopically the fault-lines of this fundamental relationship, in choosing to consider the condition of the love that is supposed to bring and hold men and women together, and in choosing, finally, to expose the human failings that betray affection and mutual commitment, Ford enters a world where a moral vision is at work, at least implicitly. As he puts it himself: "those things that people

do with each other—betrayals and failures, failures to be sincere, to be faithful, to be sensitive to each other—that's ground-level morality. That's where the boot hits the ground when it comes to understanding what goes on with us" (Ross 12). In *A Multitude of Sins* and in an earlier collection, *Women with Men*, Ford carries out his literary moral experiments, examining how men and women fail each other and themselves, and presenting to the reader the consequences of such failures.

Ford's concern with morality, betrayal and failure finds very deliberate expression in *A Multitude of Sins*, beginning, of course, with the book's title. Ford, who says that he is "without a religion" (Duffy 357), has admitted in an interview that he was conscious, in choosing this title and in writing the stories he wrote, of equating failure with sin—though he does not define what he means by sin. The nearest he gets to doing so is when he says that he "wanted to try to elevate the way we fail each other to that level to make it morally consequent" (Birnbaum). If we look to the stories themselves for articulations of Ford's notion of sin, we find a multitude of failures—characters who do not adequately know themselves, who fail to see the effects of their behaviour on themselves and others, who lose sight of what is important in their lives, who take themselves and others for granted, who confuse moral identity with the vanity of self-image, and who rationalize their betrayals into something much less important than they are, into something that is not, to use Ford's language, "morally consequent." These, then, seem to constitute the author's notion of sin, even if such articulations lack the fiery and fearsome prohibitions attached to the biblical notion of sin as a transgression of divine law.

Mention of the Bible and sin leads us back to "Abyss," as Ford draws significantly upon biblical resonances in his novella. That is where we find the most unambiguous association of infidelity with sin, through the recurring use of the notion of adultery. Although the term "adultery" is less readily employed now in Western societies than it was by earlier generations, and is therefore less a conceptual moral reference-point in sexual affairs, we are nonetheless confronted with the moral reverberations of the term in Ford's novella. The term is explicitly employed and reflected upon by Frances to describe her relationship with Howard, although, as we will see, she does so in a way that invests the concept with meanings quite different from the constraining biblical understanding of the term. Adultery, of course, entails sex—though the reverse is not necessarily true. Although both Howard and

Frances do commit adultery through their sexual relations, I would like to keep sex and adultery apart, not only because they are not synonymous, but because they open up distinct paths of exploration of the story's thematic and moral concerns. So I will proceed now by considering, first, some of the ways in which sex functions in "Abyss."

Richard Ford has acknowledged that the main characters in *Women with Men* "are not admirable—even to me" (Guagliardo 202). One could extend the compliment to most, if not all, of the protagonists in *A Multitude of Sins*, in particular to Frances Bilandic and Howard Cameron in "Abyss." When asked what he wished to achieve with this novella that was perhaps different from what he wanted to explore in the other stories of the collection, Ford replied: "I wanted to be able to say what the consequences of these acts are" (Duffy 356). And it is here that the function of sex in the story comes into play: it is, almost systematically, through their sexual relationship that Ford's characters are rendered dislikeable and unsympathetic, and it is, to an important extent, upon the *nature* of their sexual relationship that he constructs the moral dimension of his narrative. Howard and Frances's relationship begins because of sex; it continues uniquely because of sex; and it begins to break down when sex can no longer sustain it. It is almost—taking into account what Ford has said about very deliberately wanting to write a story depicting consequences—as if he worked backwards from consequences to acts in his structuring of "Abyss." He seems to have found in a particular treatment of sex a means of depicting behaviour that is morally deserving of the harsh consequences awaiting the characters at the end of his cautionary tale.

In the story's early passages we might understand the conceited and insincere behaviour of the protagonists as nothing more than the effect of the perilous mating game they must play when they discover their mutual attraction, a display of posing and performance that might dissipate when they are sure of each other's affection. Subsequently, however, there is but the merest flicker of affection and mutual respect between the characters, and love is not even a possibility. What there *is*, and *all* there is, is sexual attraction. But Ford goes well beyond constructing the relationship upon simple sexual attraction: he attributes to Howard and Frances, as early as the second paragraph, what Frances considers to be a "large, instinctual carnal attraction" (*MS* 226). She experiences this magnetism as animal-like in its primitive intensity, an animal motif that will recur in the story, underlining

the highly aggressive physical sexual appetite that propels Frances and Howard towards each other's bodies. The coordinates of their relationship, therefore, are established right at the outset of the story: this is to be a contact in which the body will be the unique site of exchange between the characters, where the moral self or personhood of the other will be virtually an irrelevance, and where the clear understanding will exist that the body of one is placed at the disposal of the other. At one point Frances reflects that Howard simply "let her *employ* him," meaning sexually. She has, she considers, "invented" Howard sexually, has "turned him into someone she had a use for" (*MS* 260). Their relationship, then, is nourished, not by a desire that arises from a fusion of emotional, aesthetic, moral and physical attracttion, but by an insatiable craving to copulate, a terrain mapped out—unusually for Ford—by a crude sexual language of physical exertions and primitive instincts. Howard conceives of their couplings uniquely in terms of "screwing" and "fucking," and is drunk with the demands of Frances's "flat-out, full-bore sexual appetite" (*MS* 236) which fill his mind with images of orgasm and explosion.

Through this sexual relationship Ford begins to explore moral implications and consequences, two of which I would like to comment upon, namely identity and the notion of the full moral being of a person, as opposed simply to the sexual body. It is precisely Howard's sexual experiences with Frances that brings about a transformation in his sense of self. Here, one may very usefully draw upon the writings of philosopher Charles Taylor and upon his distinction between moral identity and self-image. To the question, "Who am I?" Taylor offers this response:

> What […] [answers] this question for us is an understanding of what is of crucial importance to us. To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand. (27)

In other words, it is a matter of taking a stand for or against something in a situation where one is confronted with a choice. In "Abyss" Howard is too intoxicated by his sex with Frances to reflect to any great extent on good and bad, right and wrong, or on the potential moral repercussions of such choices. He has substituted his identity as loyal husband and married man—what Taylor would call his moral identity—with the conceits of self-image: that is to say, the orientation towards the good has been replaced in

Howard by the conceits of self-regard, where people are preoccupied, as Taylor asserts, with "[striving] to appear in a good light in the eyes of those they come in contact with as well as in their own" (33). It is this latter sense of self-image, the way in which one sees oneself, that is relevant to Howard. He now conceives of himself differently, flattering himself in the knowledge that Frances makes him feel that "among all men there *was* no one like Howard Cameron": only he can satisfy he insatiable appetite, because he possessed "the need, the vigor, the ingenuity—plus the equipment to do things properly" (*MS* 236). Howard glories in this new self-image and compares himself with those "other men [who] couldn't cut the mustard" (*MS* 234), in other words, men who are unable to satisfy sexually demanding women.

This transformation of self in Howard is provoked uniquely by his sex with Frances, one dimension of which, in his case, is a self-distancing from what he previously held to be important. Howard is aware of the value of his wife and his marriage, and considers that his marriage might, as he puts it, "be one of those rarities" (*MS* 238) in life (like his parents' marriage) that worked out even "halfway well" (*MS* 237). Both characters, indeed, need to protect themselves from incipient guilt, Howard by reassuring himself that Frances and he know "what they [are] doing" (*MS* 238) and that their affair is not serious, and Frances by insisting on the essential goodness, in other words moral goodness, of both Howard and herself: "True, he was ready to cheat on his wife back in Pawcatuck; but he also seemed like a decent family man with a strong sense of right and wrong, and no real wish to do anybody harm. She felt the same" (*MS* 233). One may perceive in Frances's articulation of their moral awareness the echoes of Taylor's formulation of identity as an orientation in moral space, within which one is obliged to choose between "what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not" (Taylor 28). Howard and Frances need at once to acknowledge the moral issues and to counter them, if they are to preserve their self-images as moral beings, and if they are to continue to enjoy the sexual pleasures their affair procures them.

Let me turn now to what seems to me to be another of the significant ways that Richard Ford uses sex in "Abyss" to invest the story with a sense of moral vision. The narrative, in structural, temporal and spatial terms, is divided into two phases: first, that of carnal attraction, early sexual discovery and pleasure, and, second, the transposition by the characters of their sexual relationship to their company's Phoenix sales conference. If the first phase

recounts the early sexual excitement of their affair, the second narrates the quick decline into bickering and then mutual loathing as the thrill of sexual conquest and excitement begins to fade. In this second phase they begin to see beyond the body of the other and to discover instead the person in all his/her moods, habits and even physical features, as well as his/her moral being. Their pounding sexual urges had, until then, concealed the person, restricting the being of the other to a purely instrumental, means-to-an-end role of sexual apparatus. The car trip to the Grand Canyon, however, confines them together for long periods as full human beings, where there can be little recourse to the distractions and concealments of sex. The rare sympathetic thought is lost now in silent mutual recrimination as Howard and Frances begin to deal with the first inconvenient consequences of the choices they have made. The narrative perspective switches back and forth between the two, in a dynamic of reproach and regret that propels the imprisoned characters beyond the point where their affair could have a positive outcome, an evolution captured in the metaphor of the car journey into the desert.

Their disaffection and mutual irritation emerge in the petty fault-finding that characterizes their changing views of their partner, most notably in spiteful thoughts each has about the other's physical appearance. Ironically, the body, so exalted when their sexual attraction was at its height, is very quickly disparaged when that attraction is no longer adequate to conceal their differences, and when all they have to offer is their moral being. Their view of where the other person "stands," to use Taylor's formulation of the link between identity and moral orientation, serves to discredit their sexual relationship in their respective views. Frances finds she dislikes a kind of opportunistic and cynical passivity in Howard, considers he would do things "she would never do" (*MS* 240) and that he is little better than "a con man" (*MS* 241), while Howard finds that Frances has become "hateful" to him (*MS* 246), and has turned into "a different person" (*MS* 247)—which, by revealing her full moral being, she has, just as Howard has done. Their full moral persons have now had the opportunity to come into being, and from then on aggravate and ultimately alienate the other.

The characters themselves understand the distinction between the two orders they have inhabited together: first, that of sexual exchange and, now, that of moral exchange. When sexual gratification can no longer conceal the full moral being, it is significant that they both yearn for the moral order from

which they have cut themselves off. This now-irretrievable world *is* a moral one, represented for both of them, to different degrees, by their private and professional lives back home. This loss is felt most acutely during and after the two characters' lying phone calls to their spouses. As Frances speaks to her husband, she is burdened with regret at having forgotten about him during the trip and at the moral abyss she is sinking into: "That absolutely wasn't how life should be, she thought. Life should be all on the up-and-up. She wished she was here alone and there weren't any lies. How good that would feel" (*MS* 250). Where Howard is concerned, his lying to his wife is a betrayal of something that, he now realizes, he values deeply. He knows that he is married to "the right person" and "why being married was so good": the institution of marriage "took you to deeper depths, and you felt serious things you wouldn't otherwise feel" (*MS* 251).

The failure of Howard and Frances to function together as persons, as full moral beings, is exposed through the contrast with their sexual relationship, a failure captured elsewhere in the text. For example, their responses to the desert and the Grand Canyon are utterly opposed; they have recourse to a private code of Japanese-accented English to overcome their lack of genuine communication and exchange; and, as Howard recalls after Frances's death, they have possibly never addressed each other by their names, an omission that bespeaks a failure to acknowledge the personhood of the other.

Sex in this story entails adultery, a term bearing the prohibitive weight of millennia, and so imposing in its stigmatising force. But in early 21st-century fiction, in the mind of one of Richard Ford's characters, adultery loses its moral stain and is turned into an experience with transformative powers. Reflecting on a particularly aggressive motel-room sexual encounter with Howard, Frances seeks to reclaim that experience from its status as animal-like copulation by re-conceiving it in terms of her notion of adultery, which she had articulated a little earlier as follows:

> Life was sometimes a matter of ridding yourself of this or that urge, after which the rest got easier.
>
> And adultery […] was the act that *rid*, *erased*, even erased itself once the performance was over. Sometimes, she imagined, it must erase more than itself. And sometimes, surely, it erased everything around it. It was a remedy for ills you couldn't get cured any other way. (*MS* 258-259)

Now that Frances has begun to regret her affair with Howard, it becomes important for her to salvage this continuing sexual relationship, to transform it into something she can feel good about and use to her advantage. She re-contextualizes the aggressive motel-room sexual act, conferring a new meaning on it thanks to terms that explicitly recall her notion of adultery. Her sex with Howard, she now reflects, is all about Howard letting "her *employ* him […] become the implement for what she wanted fixed, emptied, ended, ridded—whatever" (*MS* 260). It is reconfigured into a willed act of controlled release, self-forgetting, self-transformation and self-renewal. Out of the disintegration of her relationship with Howard she manufactures a victory of sorts; her adultery has become embedded in the dynamics of a greater project, stitched into an evolving self-narrative of reawakening.

The foundation stone for this self-narrative of renewal is Frances's reaction to the desert: where Howard's response is literal and practical, hers is mystical and spiritual. The desert paves the way for the anticipation and final beholding of the Grand Canyon. In this anticipation Frances senses "a spirit" being released in her that "she'd never realized was there," and contrasts her elation with the "dragging, grinding minutiae" (*MS* 267) of her quotidian existence of work, housekeeping and social entanglement. As she draws nearer the Grand Canyon she has already entered a different mode of being and sensation, sensing a profound liberation of force and spirit taking place in her. She understands this attraction to the power of the Grand Canyon as a form of mystical call, an awakening of a dormant spiritual potential. And when she finally takes in the vista that opens up before her eyes she perceives a landscape "full of healing energy" (*MS* 275), although she is otherwise so affected by her experience that she is reduced to enthralled silence.

How might we connect this spiritual awakening to Frances's notion of adultery? The text allows two corroborations of the proposition that Frances's contact with the Grand Canyon can itself be conceived as a form of adultery—adultery, that is, according to her understanding of this act, as a means of self-cleansing and renewal. First, the language she uses is very similar: where literal adultery rids and erases, is a cure and a remedy, the metaphorical adultery with the Grand Canyon "set[s] loose […] a spirit" (*MS* 267), "extinguishes all bad thoughts" (*MS* 275), and heals with its energy. In both cases, the terms refer to purging, purification and the renewal of being. Second, Frances's reaction to the Grand Canyon—her

taking-in of its immensity and energy—is explicitly linked by Howard to their aggressive motel-room sexual act—their adultery—of the previous evening: while Howard watches what he refers to as Frances's "religious experience" (*MS* 273, 274) as she gazes at the Grand Canyon, he recalls how "she'd fixed her eyes on his face when she took him in" during their sex the previous evening and wonders whether "she was looking at the canyon the same way now" (*MS* 275). We are thus invited to see Frances's final act—her spiritual opening-up to the Grand Canyon—as a figurative, purifying act of adultery, one that transports her to the threshold of self-renewal.

However, Frances's new narrative of the meaning of adultery takes place within a much older one, the fearsome old story of prohibition and taboo, as well as within the context of a book entitled *A Multitude of Sins*, the stories of which deal with infidelity and its consequences. It is these wider contexts which deliver the ultimate verdict on Frances's adultery, dictate the consequences imposed by Ford on his characters, and return us to the biblical resonances of the story. Frances's fall into the abyss of the Grand Canyon recalls the original, biblical Fall, just as the rat and snake scene she witnesses recalls Eve's temptation by a serpent in Genesis. Frances clearly identifies with the role of the rat, leaving the role of the snake to Howard.[1] Howard, of course, is also the one who tempted Frances into betrayal. In addition, Adam and Eve are made aware that the punishment for eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil is to "die the death,"[2] which is indeed the fate reserved for the characters in "Abyss," literally for Frances and metaphorically for Howard. Howard reflects, in the final lines of the story, that life itself "seemed to be disappearing from around him. Being erased" (*MS* 288), the latter term clearly, if with cruel irony, linking his punishment to his adultery with Frances.

Fittingly and consistently, the ending of the story resonates with the morality of the biblical narratives of transgression and punishment. In the last paragraphs of the final story of a collection called *A Multitude of Sins*, a

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1 As if to confirm the respective attribution of roles in the rat and snake scene, Howard is associated with the snake yet again as he moves to peer into the abyss of the Grand Canyon after Frances's fall: "But after only four cautious steps (a snake seemed possible here) he found himself at a sudden rough edge and a straight drop down" (*MS* 277).

2 Genesis 2:17.

title drawn from the New Testament, it is nonetheless the Old Testament injunction against adultery that makes itself heard: "But he that is an adulterer, for the folly of his heart shall destroy his own soul: He gathereth to himself shame and dishonour, and his reproach shall not be blotted out."[3] It is in considering these thoughts about adultery and the echoes of the Old Testament that Richard Ford's comments about what he wished to achieve with "Abyss" resound so forcefully:

> I wanted to be able to say that the things that you do in your life matter, and that you can live your life in such a way that you can get completely and forever lost. […] You can *not* recover. For me, without a religion, without a sense of foreboding, without a sense of promise about a future, it leaves one wanting for a sense of consequence to one's acts. That's one of the things that religion does for you, it promises a consequence to your behaviour. So I had to make up a sense of consequence, which would say to a readership, "You know, if you do things that are bad enough, you're not going to get out of it." In this view, art becomes the religion. (Duffy 357)

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3 Proverbs 6:32-33.

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IMPOSSIBLE RECONCILIATIONS IN RICHARD FORD'S "REUNION"

In his book *Seuils*, Gérard Genette studies the status and function of the titles of literary works and explains: "[S]i le texte est un objet de lecture, le titre, comme d'ailleurs le nom de l'auteur, est un objet de circulation – ou, si l'on préfère, un sujet de conversation" (73). Richard Ford's title "Reunion" appears to be an almost inexhaustible topic of discussion and will serve as an Ariadne's thread into the short story. Genette adds: "Un titre, dit Eco en une formule qui doit sonner encore mieux en italien, doit embrouiller les idées, non les embrigader" (83). The paradoxical dimension of Ford's title points to his attempt at mystification. My purpose, here, will be to break free from the author's interpretative guidance in order to unravel his deceitful textual weaving.

The term "reunion" entails the voluntary gathering of separated yet formerly united individuals and is often used to refer to a social occasion, such as a family or school reunion. As such, it cannot be further removed from the central event of the story: the improbable meeting between a man (the autodiegetic narrator, Johnny) and his former lover's husband (Mack Bolger). It is not only a meeting between two individuals that everything separates—or rather whose only point of connection, a woman (Beth Bolger), is also what antagonizes them—, but also an encounter which common propriety would condemn. The positively-connoted term "reunion" refers to a not only awkward but somewhat subversive act whose potential perversity seems to be the direct continuation of the narrator's prior attitude: he takes pains to inform us, in a very ambivalent and devious way, that his love affair with Beth "[...] caused as many people *as possible* unhappiness,

embarrassment, and heartache, […] became disappointing and ignoble and finally almost disastrous to those same people" (*MS* 68).[1]

It is thus difficult to link the story's title to its content. Using the term "reconciliation" as a variant of "reunion" because it allows for more abstract developments—bringing together contradictory ideas or facts, making them "compatible or consistent"[2]—, I will contend that this impossible reconciliation ultimately proves to be, beyond the diegetic episode itself, the defining mode of the short story, torn between omnipresent contradictory forces. Whereas the term "reunion" expresses a movement toward another point, a tightening effect of convergence, a centripetal drive, the short story seems to be first and foremost the locus of centrifugal forces, be it at the level of the diegesis, of the discourse, and finally of the text itself as a literary entity. These three levels will provide the axes of my analysis.

The Diegesis: Impossible Reunions

Just like Bernanos, who used to say of his novel *La Joie*: "On y trouve de tout, sauf de la joie" (qtd. in Genette 79), one would be tempted to say of Ford's short story: "On y trouve de tout, sauf des retrouvailles." The antithetical juxtaposition of the narrator's comment: "[…] Mack had been frantic *to hold matters together* [in the wake of his wife's adultery]" (*MS* 69-70) with Mack's own words a few pages later: "'I moved out in September. I have a new job. I'm living alone. Beth's not here. She's in Paris where she's miserable—or rather I hope she is. We're getting divorced'" (*MS* 74), aptly sums up the inexorable logic of distanciation and rupture that predominates in the collection in general, and in "Reunion" in particular. It also shows that the antiphrastic dimension of Ford's title concerns, beyond the improbable encounter which constitutes the core of the story, all relationships: even those who were formally united fail to be reunited. This is the case of Beth and her husband, whose ultimate parting—expressed by Mack in a paratactic style and halting rhythm that formally underline the irremediable breaking up of all ties between him and his wife—was anticipated in the narrator's speech by the alternation of contradictory words miming the diverging forces pulling the couple apart and threatening their fragile arrangement:

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1 Unless otherwise specified, all italics in the quotations are mine.

2 *The American Heritage Dictionary*.

> […] a standstill was achieved whereby they *both* stayed in their suburban house, kept *separate* schedules, saw new and different friends, had *occasional* dinners *together*, went to the opera, *occasionally* even slept *together* […]. I'd assumed at that time that Beth was meeting *someone else* that evening […]. (*MS* 70)

"That evening" refers to the moment of reunion in a New York bar between Johnny and Beth a year after her husband put a violent end to their affair. Recounting this meeting, to which the story's title might also be understood to refer indirectly, the narrator stresses the idea of distance:

> I also *did not see* Beth Bolger again, *except for* one *sorrowful*[3] and *bitter* drink we had together in the theater district last spring, a *nervous*, *uncomfortable* meeting we somehow *felt obligated to have*, and following which *I walked away down* Forty-seventh Street […] *while Beth went along* to see *The Iceman Cometh*, which was playing then. (*MS* 69)

The closeness suggested by the almost superfluous precision "[a] drink we had *together*" is questioned by the multiplication of negative elements, down to the title of the play, an apt reminder of the coldness that has come over their relationship, and is ultimately deconstructed by their physical movement away from each other. The narrator then underlines the absence of any eye contact between the two former lovers ("[Beth stared] not at me but at the glass rim where the pink liquid nearly exceeded its vitreous limits" [*MS* 70], "Beth looked quickly away […]" [*MS* 71]) before reaching this laconic conclusion, set into relief by specific paragraphing: "But that was all. I've already said our meeting wasn't a satisfying one" (*MS* 71). "But that was all" even more radically negates the reunion between the two lovers, turning this potentially important moment into a non-event, as is also suggested by the fact that the encounter takes place in "the theater district."

The narrator seems to do the exact opposite with Mack Bolger, forcing a meeting—if not a true reunion—where there should not have been any, "[creating] an event where before there was none" (*MS* 69). And yet, many echoes between the two encounters seem to turn Beth and Johnny's into a vignette of Johnny and Mack's, which occupies center stage. One may note

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3 One may note the presence of a derivative adjective where the shorter "sad" could have applied, a stylistic choice twice confirmed by the narrator's use of the derivative adjectives "woeful" (*MS* 69) and "joyless" (*MS* 70) two paragraphs later. Whereas this choice, in its inflationary dimension, may appear as a way to emphasize the feeling evoked, it nevertheless stands in contradiction with the narrator's self-imposed limitation: "[…] to tell more would not be quite worth the words" (*MS* 69). See the second part of this paper about the inconsistencies of the narrator's discourse.

the same recurring sense of embarrassment and bitterness, the same absence of eye contact,[4] the same tangible, spatial expression of separation: "Then Mack simply stepped away from me […]. And I walked on toward Billy's then […]" (*MS* 76). The whole encounter is underlain by an opposition between centripetal and centrifugal forces. To begin with, various elements suggest that the meeting is the result of an irresistible force of attraction. It seems to be taken for granted because it is introduced in an *in medias res* beginning and appears in a time subordinate clause ("When I saw Mack Bolger he was standing […]" [*MS* 67]),[5] which presupposes the obviousness of the information provided. This is confirmed by the description of Mack's returned gaze four pages later: "Mack Bolger's pale gray eyes caught me coming toward him well before I expected them to" (*MS* 71). Some sort of intuitive connection seems to be established: the two protagonists seem to be captive of each other's gaze, locked by a link that cannot be undone ("Mack's gaze fixed on me, then left me, scanned the crowd uncomfortably, then found me again as I approached"[6] [*MS* 72]), as was already hinted at by the use of a chiasmic structure on the very first page of the short story: "*When I saw Mack Bolger* he was *standing* beside the bottom of the marble steps […]. […] Others though, simply *stood*, as *Mack Bolger* was *when I saw* him […]" (*MS* 67). The whole story will tell us about the undoing of this tie, but what is interesting is the way the text anticipates this later development in the incipit by foregrounding the presence of a centrifugal drive: "When I saw Mack Bolger he was standing beside the bottom of the marble steps that bring travellers and passersby *to* and *from* the balcony of the main

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4 Mack is repeatedly described as scanning the crowd, awaiting his daughter but also clearly avoiding looking at Mack: "His eyes cast out again across the vaulted hall […]. His eyes did not flicker toward me" (*MS* 72), or "He looked away, out over the crowd of moving heads and faces […]. Without really looking at me again he said, 'I'll have a hard time introducing you to my daughter.' […] 'Nothing's happened here,' Mack said unexpectedly to me, though he was staring at his daughter" (*MS* 75).

5 What is at stake is the time of the encounter but not the encounter itself, which is therefore presented as a given fact. The effect would have been very different had the narrator opened his tale with, for instance, "One day, I saw Mack Bolger…"

6 The following lines also contribute to making the encounter appear self-evident: "His large tanned face took on an expression of stony unsurprise, as if he'd known I was somewhere in the terminal and a form of communication had already begun between us" (*MS* 72).

concourse in Grand Central" (*MS* 67). The prepositions "to" and "from"[7] cancel in advance the would-be centripetal movement of this encounter taking place, tellingly, on the main *concourse* (Latin *com-*, together + *currere*, to run)[8] of Grand *Central* Station.[9] The narrative repeatedly reminds the reader of the background centrifugal movement which symbolically threatens the encounter, pulling at it as it were: "[…] the great station was athrong with citizens on their way somewhere […]" (*MS* 67), "the eddying[10] sea of travelers" (*MS* 69), "[...] Christmas shoppers […] were moving in all directions" (*MS* 72), "People were swirling noisily around us" (*MS* 75).

The recurring centrifugal pull seems to thwart the possibility of the encounter, which ends up literally dissolving at the end. First, the narrator puts forth the following suggestion: "Perhaps, I thought, […] I'd, for an instant, lost consciousness, and this was not Mack Bolger at all, and I was dreaming everything" (*MS* 75), a suggestion which crystallizes the theatrical, thus unreal dimension of the whole scene. Then Mack Bolger himself undertakes to negate the encounter:

> "Nothing's happened here," Mack said unexpectedly to me. […]
> […]
> "Nothing's happened today," Mack Bolger said. "Don't go away thinking anything happened here. Between you and me, I mean. *Nothing* happened." (*MS* 75)

As underlined by Florian Tréguer, the italics do not only mime intonation, *i.e.* Mack's emphatic inflexion, they change the meaning of the sentence:

> […] cette insistance graphique a pour fin de renforcer ici le *rien* comme sujet de la prédication. Non pas « il ne s'est rien passé » mais, plus exactement, « rien s'est passé ». Autrement dit, l'événement du rien a eu lieu. L'insignifiance même s'est produite. D'un mot, Mack annule cet échange avec son interlocuteur, néantise le fait même de leur rencontre et renvoie le narrateur à l'insignifiance de sa démarche et à la *nullité* de son acte. (278)

The conclusion ("And I walked on toward Billy's then, toward the new arrangement I'd made that would take me into the evening. […] I knew I would not

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7 To which we may perhaps add the adverbial particle "by" (here expressing a spatial gap) of the compound noun "passersby," which directly precedes them.

8 *The American Heritage Dictionary*.

9 The ellipsis of the word "Station" enables the narrator to end his opening sentence on the symbolical word "Central."

10 An eddy: "A current, as of water or air, moving contrary to the direction of the main current, esp. in a circular motion." (*The American Heritage Dictionary*)

see [Mack] again" [*MS* 76]) retrospectively makes of its central episode a parenthetical, hence peripheral event. To quote Tréguer again:

> La clôture narrative remplit […] une double fonction : celle de reconnaître l'échec de l'expérience et celle de fermer formellement la parenthèse de ce non-événement, en le rétablissant dans ses justes dimensions. Le narrateur reprend son chemin et la poursuite de sa quête initiale, à savoir le rendez-vous au Billy's, annoncé dès les premières lignes. Ce rendez-vous fait office de récit-cadre, enclavant l'insert de ces retrouvailles manquées […]. Un bouclage en bonne et due forme qui a pour vertu de ravaler implicitement le non-événement au rang d'incident, de redéfinir aussi sa portée comme définitivement négligeable […]. (285)

Conversely, the meeting presented as secondary (a mere "arrangement"), whose fictional existence lies outside the boundaries of the text, ultimately proves to be the only true reunion of the eponymous story, along with Mack Bolger's own reunion with his daughter, dispensed with in a few words.[11]

In subjecting the diegetic content to systematically antagonistic forces, the narrative eventually hollows out a void. In this respect, the narrator's evocation of the city of St. Louis takes on a metatextual dimension:

> […] our affair had taken place in the city of St. Louis, that largely overlookable red-brick abstraction that is neither West nor Middlewest, neither South nor North; the city lost in the middle, as I think of it. […] It's a place, I suppose, the world can't get away from fast enough. (*MS* 68)[12]

"As I think of it," "I suppose"*…* One should not forget indeed that the version of the events we are given is that of an autodiegetic narrator, hence a highly subjective one, whose reliability cannot be taken for granted. It is thus important to submit the narrator's discourse to close scrutiny. I will show that it, too, is centrifugal in essence, constantly pulling in opposite directions and ultimately leaving the reader with two irreconcilable alternatives as regards the overall interpretation of the story.

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11 The only other true reunions of the story are those experienced by the "walk-ons," the crowd in the background: "[…] citizens [...] shouting good-byes and greetings, flagging their arms, embracing, gripping each other with pleasure" (*MS* 67).

12 Before its potentially metatextual reach, the first purpose of this passage is to redouble the sapping effect evoked above. Indeed, just before the extract quoted here, Johnny's affair with Beth (which took place in St. Louis) is suggested to be "fancifully unreal"; the unreality of the encounter between Johnny and Mack is embedded in the unreality of the love affair which alone sustains it.

The Discourse: Impossible Reconciliations

First, the narrative in its global conception appears to bear a paradoxical relationship to the episode it recounts. Evoking a straightforward encounter ("I was taken by a sudden and strange impulse—which was to walk straight across through the eddying sea of travelers and speak to him" [*MS* 69]) consisting in a fairly short and curt dialogue, the tale actually proves wordy, winding and dilatory, and thus deflates the sharpness of the central experience described. The shortcut of the incipit (the *in medias res* beginning discussed above) paradoxically inaugurates a meandering, slow-motion narrative. This can be felt, for instance, in the almost verbatim repetition of the opening sentence two pages further ("But when I saw Mack Bolger standing in the crowded, festive holiday-bedecked concourse of Grand Central […]" [*MS* 69]), a device which openly emphasizes the manipulation of the time of discourse. It is confirmed by the renewed two-page lapse preceding the unfolding of the main diegetic line; in "Mack Bolger's pale gray eyes caught me coming toward him well before I expected them to" (*MS* 71), the expression of unusual rapidity is directly contradicted by the belated appearance of the sentence in the text. The dilution of the time of discourse, a temporal centrifugal force, results from the multiplication of digressive developments, either descriptive pauses, commentarial intrusions or analeptic fragments. It is telling that the first analeptic digression should evoke the narrator's affair with Beth, of which he himself says, twice—thus redoubling the already paradoxical dimension of preterition: "What went on between Beth Bolger and me is hardly worth the words that would be required to explain it away" (*MS* 68) and "[…] to tell more would not be quite worth the words" (*MS* 69). In utter contradiction with himself, the narrator returns to the subject in the course of his story. The first chunk of dialogue which is transcribed is that which took place between him and Beth several months before, not between him and Mack: the truly important exchange targeted by the tale is thus displaced.

The last two quotations draw our attention to the narrator's general tendency to contradiction. This can be detected in trivial details: for instance he refers to Mack Bolger as a "middle-aged man" (*MS* 68) and then suggests: "He might've been forty—younger than I am […]" (*MS* 73); he also shifts, in the span of one page, from "[…] as though [...] the man I saw was not Mack Bolger" (*MS* 68) to "[Mack Bolger] look[ed] rather vacant-headed but clearly himself" (*MS* 69). Strikingly, the conclusive paragraph expresses yet another

change of mind: "I had, of course, been wrong about the linkage of moments, and about what was preliminary and what was primary" (*MS* 76). Although it cancels out the paradoxical dimension of the initial argument ("[...] as if this later time was all that really mattered, whereas the previous, briefly passionate, linked but now-distant moments were merely preliminary" [*MS* 73]), the rectification cannot really be said to restore any form of balance and stability, all the less so as the narrator's very last sentence thematizes the adversative connective *though* ("Though it is such a large city here […]" [*MS* 76]), an apt way to round off his intrinsically inconsistent stance. One may also note how the narrator introduces, only seven lines apart, two exactly opposite statements (refuting what he has just said *vs.* corroborating it) through the same conjunction *though*, itself a marker of contradiction, with the embedding device sharpening the centrifugal effect:

> "Sometimes, friendship's all we're after in these sorts of things," I said. *Though this*, I admit, *I did not really believe*.
> "Mack's like a dog, you know," Beth said […]. "I kick him, and he tries to bring me things. It's pathetic. […]"
> "I really don't like hearing this," I said stupidly, *though it was true.* "It sounds cruel." (*MS* 71)

What is most disturbing is that the diegetic core of the story—the meeting itself—should be submitted to the contradictions of the narrator's discourse. Thus, his early comment: "[...] all events that occur outside New York seem odd and fancifully unreal to New Yorkers" (*MS* 68), which clearly presupposes a reverse argument (all events happening in New York seem real), does not preclude his concluding on the potential unreality of the scene, as already mentioned. Besides, the explanation the narrator provides to account for his incongruous gesture proves antinomic when subjected to analysis:

> But when I saw Mack Bolger […], I was taken by a sudden and strange impulse—which was to walk straight across through the eddying sea of travelers and speak to him, just as one might speak to anyone you casually knew and had unexpectedly yet not unhappily encountered. And not to impart anything, or set in motion any particular action (to clarify history, for instance, or make amends), but simply to create an event where before there was none. And not an unpleasant event, or a provocative one. Just a dimensionless, unreverberant moment, a contact, unimportant in every other respect. (*MS* 69)

Let us first note how an "impulse" paradoxically gives way to a sophisticated intellectual evaluation, how the direct movement is the starting point of an extremely tortuous, almost ratiocinative evocation ("[…] just as […]. And not

to […], or […], but simply to […]. And not […], or […]. Just […]"), the words "just" or "simply" being systematically belied by linguistic inflation. In the same way, the adjectives that are meant to express plainness are either lengthy ("dimensionless," "unimportant") or/and highly elaborate ("unreverberant"), which proves self-contradictory. Furthermore, describing the willful creation of an event through a multiplication of negative forms ("not" or privative affixes) cannot but strike the reader as being radically aporetic. Finally, the central word "impulse" (Latin *impulsus*, past participle of *impellere*: *in*-, against + *pellere*, to drive)[13] is invalidated by the precision "not to set in motion," while its extremely personal dimension (stressed by the expression "I was taken by") finds itself cancelled by the narrator's immediate shift to the indefinite pronoun "one" (taken up by "you") and to non-finite forms (succession of infinitives).

The narrator's discourse thus regularly fails to hold, systematically pulling in opposite directions. The description of Mack Bolger's facial expression could also be understood as self-reflexive and meta-discursive, with the polysemy of the word "expression" encouraging this interpretation: "Mack's eyes moved gradually to me, and his impassive expression, which had seemed to signify one thing—resignation—began to signify something different. I knew this because a small cleft appeared on his chin" (*MS* 74).

The image of the cleft might also be used as a metaphor for the general interpretative problem set by the story "Reunion." What is the protagonist's true purpose in forcing this encounter on Mack Bolger, and what is his real goal, as a narrator, in recounting the event? He indirectly invites the reader not to take his words for granted when he writes: "Mack was not angry. He was, instead, a thing that anger had no part in, […] where the words you say are the only true words you *can* say. Myself, I did not think I'd ever felt that way. Always for me there had been a choice" (*MS* 74, Ford's italics). Pulling away from a narrator who is well aware of his choice of words—potentially untrue ones—, the reader is likely to reach two opposite conclusions. The first of these consists in seeing in the narrator's both diegetic and discursive gestures an attempt at revenge. Walking toward Mack Bolger and forcing him to an exchange is a way for the protagonist to revive the husband's suffering, bring his wife's adultery back to his mind and thus retaliate after having been beaten up by him. The gradation in the narrator's

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13 *The American Heritage Dictionary.*

evocation of the earlier confrontation ("I got banged around in a minor way" [*MS* 68], "[...] since we'd last confronted each other semi-violently in the Mayfair" [*MS* 69], "[...] in the Mayfair Hotel, when I'd taken an inept swing at him and he'd slammed me against a wall and hit me in the face with the back of his hand" [*MS* 71]) is a good index of his repressed bitterness, which finds an unconscious outlet during the second encounter. The narrative process he engages in clearly appears as a way to deal a counterblow. Being the sole master of his tale, the narrator is able to manipulate the facts as best suits him, and the reader easily perceives his repeated, if indirect or even hypocritical attacks against Mack. No reader can be expected to be taken in by such remarks: "Because it is the truth and serves to complicate Mack Bolger's unlikeable dilemma and to cast him in a more sympathetic light, I will say that […]" (*MS* 68); is there not here an insidious hypallage, "unlikeable" implicitly qualifying Mack himself rather than his dilemma? Most of the narrator's supposedly positive comments prove devious: "It was strange that anyone would call him a dog when he wasn't that at all. He was extremely admirable" (*MS* 74)—the final redundancy, in its strangeness, turns negative. Others appear more straightforwardly negative, like the two descriptions of the moisture in Mack's speech: "It was unfortunate, since it robbed him of a small measure of gravity" (*MS* 73), and "He still had the unfortunate dampness with his *s*'s" (*MS* 75).

That the final comments should concern Mack's speech is certainly no coincidence; throughout the encounter Mack Bolger has the upper hand on his interlocutor and leads the exchange,[14] and the narrator thus seems to strive, retrospectively, to deplete this advantage.[15] The narrative functions as a way to reverse facts and enable the narrator to regain the dignity he tells us he left behind in the fight (*MS* 69). Whereas during the encounter he suffered Mack Bolger's critical gaze ("[his] thick athlete's brow furrowed, as if he was studying a creature he didn't entirely understand, an anomaly of some kind, which perhaps I was" [*MS* 74]), it is then his turn to subject Mack to an analytical evaluation in which he oversets his own condescension: "So as I came into his presence, what I felt for him, unexpectedly, was sympathy"

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14 See Tréguer and Henry 282.

15 The whole tale may even be said to consist in the narrator's symbolic regaining of his voice, described as follows as regards the diegesis: "My voice isn't loud, so that the theatrically nasal male voice announcing the arrival from Poughkeepsie on track 34 seemed to have blotted it out" (*MS* 72).

(*MS* 72)—one cannot help hearing the word "pity" behind the more positive term "sympathy"—or "His big, tanned, handsome face looked imploring and exhausted" (*MS* 75).

From time to time, the narrator undertakes to rewrite the facts: Mack, a man "who seems to see everything from a height" (*MS* 67), is conspicuously positioned "beside the bottom of the marble steps" (*MS* 67); it is supposedly he who was "forced to confront" (*MS* 68) Beth and Johnny, in an obvious inversion of what probably happened; the narrator's being "sent off" (*MS* 68) turns into his "sudden departure" (*MS* 70), suggesting that it was his decision; and the play on the ambivalent referent of *you* in the following extract allows the narrator to don the role of the aggressor for a short while:

> And once more, in the Mayfair Hotel, when I'd taken an inept swing at him and he'd slammed me against a wall […]. Perhaps you don't forget people you knock around. That becomes their place in your life. I, myself, find it hard to recognize people when they're not where they belong, and Mack Bolger belonged in St. Louis. Of course, he was an exception. (*MS* 71-72)

But what is so obvious about Mack Bolger's being "an exception"? It seems that the narrator expresses something else beside bitterness and an attendant need for revenge, and that the evidence mentioned is also that of the encounter itself, an encounter which both defies any rational explanation and apparently results from some irresistible appeal. In other words, the narrative may well be hinting at some form of homosexual attraction between the two men, at least on the narrator's part.

Various elements in the text prove ambivalent, working towards a discreet network of homosexual allusions. One may first note the strikingly recurrent descriptions of Mack Bolger's appearance, which could point to some form of physical attraction on the narrator's part, all the more so as he moves from a precise account of his clothes and face—noting, oddly enough, his "almost feminine eyelashes" (*MS* 73)—to a more general appreciation of his physique: "his thick athlete's brow" (*MS* 74) or "his big, tanned, handsome face" (*MS* 75). More important is the insistent play on words or formulations that yield double entendre. Thus, the confrontation at the Mayfair hotel is expressed in terms of being "banged around," a slang word for "making love." A few lines further down, the narrator speaks of the Hermès scarf he left behind in a way which invites a different interpretation—though the hint is admittedly more questionable: "I'm glad [my mother] didn't have to know

about my losing it, and how it happened" (*MS* 69), since one would perhaps not speak very differently about losing one's (homosexual) virginity.[16] Homoerotic innuendoes can also be found in the passage which recounts how, one day, Beth talked to her husband on the phone while having sex with her lover. Beyond the explicit account of the scene as it took place, one may read another story: "Once we even engaged in a sexual act while she talked to him. I could hear his tiny, buzzing, fretful-sounding voice inside the receiver. But that was now gone. Everything Beth and I had done was gone" (*MS* 73). The narrator focuses on the sounds made by Mack, as though the latter were his true partner, and the regret he expresses seems to concern him first, as confirmed by the retrospective need to specify the referent of "that," *i.e.* "Everything Beth and I had done." Right afterwards, the narrator develops the idea that his affair with Beth was a mere "preliminary" to his meeting with Mack, a word whose sexual connotation necessarily entails equating the encounter with Mack with sexual intercourse.[17] Tellingly, the narrator had already found it necessary to specify a few pages before, "Our—Beth's and my—love affair" (*MS* 69) just after mentioning Mack Bolger in the previous sentence: the text thus draws the reader's attention to potential ambiguity. Furthermore, the narrator's use of similar formulations when he mentions his leaving Beth and Mack encourages the reader to superimpose the two characters in an almost subliminal way: Mack thus slips into the status of a lover. Relating his separation with Beth, the narrator says, "*I walked* away down Forty-seventh Street" (*MS* 69) and "I had gone *on*" (*MS* 71); in the expression he uses to refer to the end of his meeting with Mack, the verb and the preposition are joined: "And *I walked on* […]" [*MS* 76]). The superimposition is fully completed when, three pages apart, one reads: "*Mack is a tall*, handsome, well-put-together *man who* […]" (*MS* 67) and "*Beth is a tall*, sallow-faced, big-boned, ash blond *woman who* […]" (*MS* 70). The name of the bar Johnny is heading for is a male name ("Billy's"), and the narrator does not specify the gender of the "new friend" he is on his way to meet (*MS* 67). In this perspective, Mack's final words to Johnny take on added meaning: "'Don't go away thinking anything

16 The tassels of the Hermès silk scarf encourage the perception of a sexual innuendo (*cf.* Badonnel and Maisonnat 45).

17 Could the precision that the encounter takes place on the main *concourse* of the station be yet another hint? Here we might be prompting the text too far, yet this reading is not totally dismissible.

happened here. Between you and me, I mean. *Nothing* happened. I'm sorry I ever met you, that's all. Sorry I ever had to touch you. You make me feel ashamed'" (*MS* 75, Ford's italics).[18] In a way Mack voices something the text indirectly but insistently suggests: the narrator could well have dreamt everything.

Possibly an expression of both resentment and love—the two sides of the same coin—the narrator's discourse thus forces the reader into an impossible position. This in-betweenness is also favored by the inclusion of the story in collection. Indeed, reading "Reunion" as part of *A Multitude of Sins*, the reader cannot but be pulled away from a self-enclosed approach and be attracted by the other stories in the vicinity. To give but one example, does not the fact that "Reunion" immediately follows "Calling," which stages the only open homosexual relationship of the collection, influence the interpretation developed above? Accordingly, I will now turn to the story as a textual entity in order to analyze its relationship (centripetal or centrifugal) to other texts, those of the collection as well as John Cheever's homonymous story.

The Text: Complex Centrifugal Relationships

The cohesion and aesthetic integrity of a collection of stories are based on a combination of centripetal and centrifugal forces, each unit contributing to the meaning of the whole and vice versa. With its background motifs of adultery and overwhelming disconnectedness between human beings, "Reunion" definitely finds its place in *A Multitude of Sins*. A few punctual elements also establish clear links with other stories: the narrator is a man of words (a book editor), just like the narrator of "Privacy," who is a writer, or the protagonist of "Quality Time," a journalist; Beth, a bored wife and mother, is not unlike Jena in "Quality Time." Besides, the first words of the concluding paragraph ("And I walked on toward Billy's then […]" [*MS* 76]) exactly recall the excipit of "Privacy" (And I walked on then […]" [*MS* 7]), thus inviting a

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18 Mack's concluding words come as a contradiction of the first paragraph on page 72 (from "Mack's gaze fixed on me" to "But I didn't") in which the narrator has it that Mack is "resigned to [him]," *i.e.* to their homosexual attraction perhaps. This paragraph, as a whole, is a good example of the text's subtle double entendre and of the narrator's wishful thinking.

comparative reading. Finally, the encounter between Mack and the narrator anticipates the confrontation between Henry Rothman and Madeleine's fake husband in "Dominion." No doubt other echoes could be found.

Yet "Reunion" does not seem to fit in the collection quite as well as the other stories. This might be because, unlike them, it focuses on a relationship that is neither a marital, adulterous, nor a family relationship—it is not a relationship at all, in fact—, or because the setting is unlike any other in the collection.[19] To me, the difference is mostly a matter of narrative voice and control of sympathy. All the stories feature characters whose foibles and faults are obvious: insincerity, selfishness, weakness of purpose, self-delusion etc., shortcomings which may alienate the reader. Yet, because their flaws as ordinary individuals are meant to mirror the reader's, the latter gradually comes to identify with them and to show at least a measure of "charity," thus following the invitation contained in one of the stories' titles. It seems, however, but this is a personal impression, that "Reunion" fails to truly arouse the reader's sympathy. Whether it is because the anecdote recounted is highly improbable and incongruous, and is therefore far removed from the reader's immediate reality, or because the narrator's discourse partly proves an instrument of manipulation (an impression one never gets from the other stories, even the homodiegetic ones), it is extremely difficult to say. Yet it does seem difficult for the reader to fully project him/herself on the protagonist (and narrator). This impossible reconciliation, combined with the other differing characteristics of this tale, in turn prevents any real convergence with the other stories.

If we are to believe Richard Ford, "Reunion" owes principally to the homonymous story written by John Cheever in 1962.[20] A close link binds the two, as Ford's choice of the same title openly suggests: "[John Cheever's story] was the direct inspiration to a story that I wrote which the *New Yorker*

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19 All the other stories are related to one another (or at least to one other story) in terms of setting. The action unfolds inside people's homes ("Privacy" and "Puppy"), outdoors ("Calling" and "Crèche"), and in reccurent fashion, in cars and hotels.

20 In this story, the narrator—Charlie—recalls meeting with his father, whom he has not seen for three years, in Grand Central Station in-between trains. The reunion proves a failure, as the father takes his son on a "tour" of nearby bars and restaurants in which he acts boisterously and arrogantly, and they end up being expelled from each of them. Charlie then leaves his father to catch his train, and the reader is told that the bitter episode turned out to be their last meeting.

published which I called "Reunion" just in homage to it" (Ford qtd. in Préher and Lamothe 302). The connection is supposedly so strong that Ford says he likes to read the two stories together before a conference audience, in an attempt "to bring attention to how one story can really influence another story" (qtd. in Préher and Lamothe 303). Gérald Préher and Élisabeth Lamothe have studied the many effects of convergence between the two stories (beyond the common setting of Grand Central Station) in an article entitled "Reuniting and Parting Ways"; I would like to underline some of the elements that keep them apart. Cheever's is an "economical"[21] story mostly made up of dialogues, whereas Ford's is long-winded and digressive and reduces the central dialogue to a few bare threads. Even the most obvious link between the two, Grand Central Station, is questionable, for John Cheever's story takes place mostly outside the station, with the two protagonists moving from one restaurant to the next: to Cheever's itinerant motif corresponds Richard Ford's extremely static scene. Most important, Cheever's story stages a true and moving, if failed, reunion between a father and his son, whereas Ford's hinges on a fake, almost farcical reunion between a man and the husband he cuckholded. The connection would seem greater between the planned father-son reunion and that of Mack Bolger and his daughter; yet the latter seems to be the exact reverse of the former, as Mack and his daughter's meeting truly appears as a radiant moment, one of the few instances where true love and unreserved connectedness seem to be expressed in the collection. At that point, the hypotextual reference turns ironical.

Yet, to any reader of the two stories, it is obvious that the Cheever hypotext actually pulls into another direction, *i.e.* "Calling," which is placed just before "Reunion" in the collection. Indeed, although fewer factual elements bind the two stories (no common setting or direct textual echoes), their central argument is the same: how a son (who later recalls the scene) comes to be bitterly disappointed by his father, whom he meets after a fairly long separation, and how the experience—the very last encounter between father and son in each case—clearly proves to be part of a maturation

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21 Ford uses this adjective in an interview with the *New Yorker* fiction editor Deborah Treisman: "[John Cheever's story] is so economical, and yet it has so much packed into itself." Gérald Préher and Élisabeth Lamothe explain that their article originated in this interview, available online at <http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/12/25/061225on_onlineonly04>.

process. In the last analysis, the Cheever hypotext might well be nothing but a "decoy" (a word central to "Calling") as regards Ford's own story "Reunion,"[22] yet another red herring to lead the reader astray, away from the true center of the tale, a center—as I have shown, and to quote Yeats—which "does not hold."

Richard Ford is a master at mystification, both when he writes literature and when he comments on his texts: his self-reflexive analyses, centripetal in their intent, often turn out to be attempts at diversion—in other words, to be centrifugal in their effect. Even in the following quotation, in which Ford openly acknowledges the specific difficulties he encountered when writing "Reunion," the inherent contradictions in his discourse stand out:

> That's an interesting story because I thought that this man who sees another man who's the husband of his former lover—that's entirely plausible—making them come together and actually having a rather etiolated conversation was not implausible, was stern and dramatic. That was the challenge for me. To do something that might not be entirely plausible, to see once you did it what the dramatic consequences might be. I didn't think it was a very easily believable story. (qtd. in Tréguer and Henry 279)

In the span of a few lines, via the median form of a litotes and despite the slight change in focus (from merely seeing to actually meeting one's former lover's husband), the author's discourse has turned over itself ("that's entirely plausible […] [it] was not implausible […] that might not be entirely plausible").

Ford's words, either in his fictional texts or his critical reflections, always force the reader into a position where he/she cannot adhere fully to what seems to be said on the surface and is left suspended between irreconcilable readings. This has been amply proven, I hope, by the above analysis of "Reunion," a tale which, one third into the volume, also alerts the reader to the fact that Ford's centrifugal writing works towards hollowing out a central void, a gaping hole standing for the abyss of impossible representation and impossible meaning. As such, it brings the reader back to the very core of *A Multitude of Sins*.

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22 John Cheever's story is also perhaps the lure which masks another possible, although ironical, hypotext to Ford's "Reunion": T. S. Eliot's play *The Family Reunion* : "[…] évoquant son adultère, [le narrateur] feint de s'émerveiller qu'il ait eu lieu dans la ville où est né T. S. Eliot, allusion pour le moins ironique si l'on se souvient qu'Eliot est l'auteur de la pièce… *The Family Reunion*" (Badonnel and Maisonnat 27).

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THE IMPOSSIBLE SCREEN, OR HOW TO FACE A DUBBED REALITY: RICHARD FORD'S *A MULTITUDE OF SINS*

> "I always did say that a man has to know how to play his cards in this world, and sometimes he'd better realize that the best game is solitaire."
>
> Matt Smith in Ann Beattie's *Love Always* (4)

Richard Ford started publishing fiction in the 1970s but achieved recognition in the 1980s with the publication of *The Sportswriter*, the first volume of his Bascombe trilogy, and *Rock Springs*, a collection of short stories mainly set in Montana. He belongs to a literary trend known as New Realism, whose purpose is to go back to the facts of life in order to make fiction closer to reality. That is why elements external to the plot are put aside in these stories. Commenting upon the notion of minimalism in literature, Christina Murphy explains: "In minimalist fiction, as practiced by Ann Beattie, Raymond Carver, and Frederick Barthelme, among others, there is a persistent focus upon cutting away [...] all that need not be there to 'tell' the story" (12). The characters do not have a past; they are trapped in a never-ending present, witnessing events that will alter their lives irreversibly. Like Carver, Ford enjoys describing scenes that might seem banal but are tremendously important in the lives of his characters.

Looking back on their first encounter, Ford acknowledged his admiration for Raymond Carver in a lengthy essay published in the *New Yorker*. He remembers hearing Carver read a story entitled "What is it?" and the effect it produced upon him: the narrative had the power to uncover certain aspects of life that are often hidden from view. Ford explains:

> *this* life, *these* otherwise unnoticeable people's suitability for literary expression seemed new. One also felt that a consequence of the story was seemingly to intensify life, even dignify it, and to locate in it shadowed corners and niches that needed revealing so that we readers could practice life better ourselves. (NY, Oct. 5, 1998, 72)

These words provide a useful insight into New Realism: not only is it meant to achieve verisimilitude but, at its best, it can also "intensify" reality so as to make it palpable. Even more important to Ford, who had only published one novel at the time of this crucial meeting, is the way Carver succeeded in describing life:

> *Life* was serious in those stories. And life, especially life with others, was all there was. […] his stories […] shared with the reader an understanding that life can sometimes make you want to bite the rim of your glass of Scotch, but shared it in a form whose first principle is to reconcile the very news it carries. (74)

Ford skillfully adapted and transposed Carver's style in his first collection of short fiction, *Rock Springs*, which focuses on working class people. With each successive collection (he has published one every decade since the 1980s), he has moved up the social ladder, so that his body of work provides portraits of people ranging from the lower- to the upper-middle classes in the United States. In his latest, *A Multitude of Sins*, the characters are mostly well-off lawyers, real estate agents and editors, and Ford follows even more closely in Carver's footprints as he describes human relationships, especially those of couples who are on the verge of splitting up. A stable union between two persons seems impossible: harmony no longer exists and the pictures of happy couples have faded. Ford's stories are "Like Life," to use the title of a short story by Lorrie Moore in which she analyzes the way popular culture has infiltrated life, substituting an imagined reality for it and depriving it of originality. For instance, the narrator in her story reflects that "What you described as real might be only a picture, something from *Life* magazine you were forced to live out, after the photography, in imitation" (*LL* 151). Ford's characters are faced with the same problem: reality has turned into an impossible screen. They all desire to see their actions, their feelings, their lives even, justified—or, as Walker Percy's Binx Bolling puts it in *The Moviegoer*, they need to have their reality "certified." The situations they have to cope with are similar to those experienced by characters such as Ann Beattie's in *Love Always*, a book we shall refer to in this essay. Everything people do is dictated by the media, by attractive pictures that lure them into traps they cannot get out of, by scenes that they imagine but cannot ever fully experience. As a result,

they find themselves shut inside virtual and actual closed spaces, speaking an artificial language, as if their voices had been dubbed, because the words they use have worn out.

In *A Multitude of Sins*, reality is far from being pictured as a pleasurable space allowing personal fullfilment. The first line of the opening story sets the tone: "This was at a time when my marriage was still happy" (*MS* 3). Like those in Ann Beattie's fiction, characters find it hard to keep relationships going. In *Love Always*, for instance, the narrator expresses a similar frustration: "The music was appropriate, although Hildon thought this particular version of the song was a downer: Barbra Streisand singing 'Happy Days'" (*LA* 3). A striking element in both texts is the play on the word "happy": for Ford's narrator, happiness is a thing of the past, something gone and replaced by what is generally called, in hackneyed fashion, "unhappiness," while for Beattie's Hildon it is associated with a song devoted to the joys of the old days. What Ford's narrator calls a "happy" marriage might not match everybody's definition, for he describes it as a "strange, exhilarating illusion" (*MS* 3) and draws a rather drab picture of his own marital relationship, in which lack of communication and displacement of interest seem to prevail. The phrase and the narrator's behavior make it clear that, for him, marriage involves make-believe and pretence: when his wife turns her back on him in bed, he looks out of the window to spy on his neighbor.

In *Love Always*, Matt Smith accurately sums up what matters for characters often encountered in contemporary fiction when he emphasizes: "*I* mean most to me" (*LA* 4). Indeed, self-centeredness stands out in both Beattie's novel and Ford's stories. Even though they would like to build successful relationships, the protagonists are so engrossed with themselves that they cannot connect either with others or with reality. This is what happens at the end of "Privacy," when the narrator bumps into the woman he has watched undressing several nights in a row. What he sees does not match the fiction his mind has designed, so he cannot bridge the gap between his voyeuristic behavior and reality: "I said nothing, did not even look at her again. I didn't want her to think my mind contained what it did and also what it did not" (*MS* 7). His attitude of denial is rendered through the numerous negations: of speech ("said nothing"), of vision ("did not even look"), of the other ("didn't want her to think") and of the self ("what it did not"). Also, the context of the chance meeting is noteworthy: it takes place in the

street, outside the woman's building, and the narrator notes that around him "[...] the light was failing" (*MS* 6). It is rather paradoxical that the truth about the woman's features ("She was old, after all" [*MS* 7]) should be exposed at dusk, not in full daylight.

The narrator is clearly disappointed, even though he accepts the reality this event brings him back to, as the repetition of the possessive determiner "my" indicates: "And I walked on then, […] simply passed on down the street toward my room and my own doors, my life entering, as it was at that moment, its first, long cycle of necessity" (*MS* 7). The fading relation with his spouse is apparent as, prior to seeing the subject of his past desires, the narrator had been approaching his wife's workplace ("I walked on to the university section, nearly to where my wife was at that hour working" [*MS* 6]) but then decided to turn back towards more familiar places:

> [...] I started back toward my street, my face hard with cold, my shoulders stiff, my gloveless hands frozen and red. As I turned a corner to take a quicker route back to my block, I found that I was unexpectedly passing before the building into which I had for days been spying" (*MS* 6).

The narrator's attraction to the unknown figure is reenacted here and it is telling that he should find himself, as if by chance, just outside the woman's building. Getting away from his wife equates to moving closer to the unknown lady, who, in the last paragraph of the story, stands between him and his wife. Ironically, the failed encounter pushes the narrator back into the life he meant to escape for, as the first line of the story implies, his marriage still has not come to an end at the time of the narrative. Ford's narrator is similar to Beattie's characters in *Love Always*, who act "to get through their days" (Murphy 110).

In "Quality Time," Wales's first reaction upon seeing "a woman fall down in the snow" (*MS* 9) is typical of the fruitful imagination displayed by the characters in the collection. Even though the scene takes place in the dark, which diminishes the possibility of seeing anything clearly, he keeps making suppositions and passing judgements on the woman: "Must be old, Wales thought, though it was dark and he couldn't see her face […]. Or else, of course, she was drinking [...]. She could be younger, too. Younger and drinking" (*MS* 9). The outside darkness undoubtedly mirrors Wales's state of mind and his uncertainty about his relationship with Jena: his derogatory comments on the stranger pave the way for the revelation of his sinful

liaison with a married woman. Although the narrator suggests that Wales is not misbehaving since the woman he is seeing is in an open relationship with her husband, his desire to keep their affair going does not seem right. This topic is soon discarded and the narration returns to the woman who has fallen: the whole scene resembles a movie played in slow motion.

According to Gore Vidal, "reality does not begin to *mean* until it has been made art of" (4). In the present case, the eye, in a very Emersonian way, is what makes Wales a true artist: he is the one who witnesses the scene, it is through his eyes that the scene becomes meaningful. The car that eventually hits the woman is as dark as the surroundings: it is "a dark van, resembling a small spaceship" (*MS* 10). The incongruous comparison introduces a humoristic tone that, in a way, removes part of the drama enacted before Wales's eyes. The woman travels from one moment to the next, from one space (life) to the next (death): it "[...] changed her in an instant from an old, young, possibly drunk, possibly sober woman in a gray man's coat, into a collection of assorted remnants on a frozen pavement" (*MS* 11). The episode can also be read as a contemporary version of the passage from life to death in Greek mythology: the street, with its flow of cars, represents the Styx, while the dark van is the vessel driven by an invisible Charon taking the woman to the underworld. As in the myth, the woman may not take anything with her for this last crossing: the "collection of assorted remnants" on the pavement seems to be the bodily envelope she has to leave behind—a mere husk, an empty shell. Everything Wales had imagined so far about the woman's identity becomes part of the realm of the possible, and his speculations (her age, whether she is drunk or not) no longer hold separately but are assembled in the same sentence, as if everything were put into question. Only one thing is unquestionable, from Wales's standpoint: the woman is dead. Significantly, this fact appears as the first word of the next paragraph, as if the narrator meant to point to the irreversibility of the situation: "Dead, Wales thought—not five feet from where he and his lane now began to pass smartly by, the light having gone green and horns having commenced behind" (*MS* 11). No matter what has happened, life must go on. The horns blaring behind Wales may, perhaps, also evoke the horns of some threatening animal pushing him forward whether he likes it or not.

The reader is led to recognize the significance any event can acquire and the repercussions it may have, even for a simple onlooker, thanks to

the accident with which the story opens. Wales reflects: "A moment ago she was lying in the snow. A moment before that everything had been fine" (*MS* 10). The repetition stresses the rapidity with which one's life may change forever, as well as Wales's realization of the fact, which is echoed by a physical reaction. Driving away from the scene, he feels suddenly unwell: "His heart began rocketing. Cold sweat rose on his neck in the warm car. He was suddenly jittery. *It's always bad to die when you don't want to*" (*MS* 11). The text brings out the opposition between the outside (snow, cold, death) and the inside (warm), and thus between danger and protection. Wales's comment on the woman's fate reveals his sudden awareness of his own fragility and accounts for the symptoms of fear he displays; in other words, the sentence in italics applies to him as much as it applies to the woman. Moreover, the season has specific virtues which are similar—if not identical—to those Marie Le Grix de la Salle points out about a number of Ann Beattie's short stories that also take place in winter: the whiteness typical of the season invades everything and makes it difficult for the characters to formulate their thoughts (178). Silence is imposed on Wales but he feels the need to tell the story again, to fit the moment into a chain of events (*MS* 12), and he ends up thinking that maybe the woman has survived: "Though what was left was simply a disordered feeling—familiar enough—as if something had needed to be established by declaring someone he didn't even know to be dead, but it hadn't been. Of course, it could just be anticipation" (*MS* 12). Suddenly, Wales seems to realize that he has cast himself in the role of a would-be visionary, an earthly God able to decide whether someone is dead or not, and he plays it down by resorting to a negation of reality.

The woman's death allows Wales to re-interpret some of his impulses and re-evaluate the past:

> Each of the five nights they'd been at The Drake, Jena had wanted to make love the moment he arrived, as if it was this act that confirmed them both, and everything else should get out of its way; their time was serious, urgent, fast-disappearing. He wanted that act now very much, felt aroused but also slightly unstrung. He had, after all, seen a death tonight. Death unstrung everyone. (*MS* 17)

Time no longer stands as empty but has become meaningful: love-making is life-affirming and thus validates the characters' existence, just as the death of an unknown woman makes the witness's life worthwhile. Wales keeps the story to himself as a kind of time-enhancer which he does not want to share, although he reflects: "Perhaps he would tell her about the

woman he'd seen killed on Ardmore" (*MS* 18). At the end of the story, we learn that he never did:

> Wales had expected to tell her about the woman he had seen killed, about the astonishment of that, to retell it—the slowing of time, the stateliness of events, the sensation that the worst could be avoided, the future improved by a more gradual unfolding. But he had no wish now to reveal the things he could be made to think, how his mind worked, or what he could feel in response to events. (*MS* 32)

The woman's accident has opened Wales's eyes and shown him the significance of time: he can now put his liaison in perspective and better see that it must come to an end. Even though the moment after lovemaking is imbued with a particular quality that may lead to revelations, it is also fleeting, like the instant that took the woman's life away from her. Wales comes to the conclusion that "It had nothing to do with revealing yourself" (*MS* 27). His affair with Jena comes to an end without any hard feelings, and when they part in the street it seems to him that nothing has occurred: "the sensation of events being completed" is all that matters (*MS* 33).

For all his questioning about "revealing [one]self," at the end of his short-lived affair with Jena Wales does not seem to have reached any answer, apart from: "It was not, perhaps, *so* easy to reveal yourself" (*MS* 32). Although he was momentarily poised on the brink of change, with a vista of possibilities open in front of him, he prefers to let experience sink to the bottom of consciousness, of memory, and there to undergo a remodelling—in line with his belief that "You imagined the past, you didn't remember it" (*MS* 20). He is thus satisfied with the "almost perfect" (*MS* 33), with a delusion that dubs the real events to such an extent that it ends up replacing them. Similarly, Sallie's husband, in "Puppy," is content with approximations; he prefers to "ignore what doesn't fit" even though, as his wife says, "it wouldn't be the same"—an argument he half agrees with but also counters: "'No,' I said. 'It wouldn't have been exactly the same. But almost'" (*MS* 82). Few are the characters in *A Multitude of Sins* who do not seek refuge in a kind of parallel world in order to deny that, as Sallie puts it, "'[...] altering one small part changes everything'" (*MS* 81). Almost all of them oppose the disturbing events that constitute reality with the pretence that the surface of their lives remains smooth, unruffled, untouched. Their attitude thus prevents them from connecting not only with the world around them but also, and that is what all the stories in *A Multitude of Sins* are about, with one another.

Faced with ground-shaking revelations, the characters are forced to acknowledge the existence of what lies beneath the surface, to "read the fine script" as Frances says in "Abyss" (*MS* 235), or, to use an image related to the movie world, to read the subtitles at the bottom of the screen. All of a sudden, it is as if the captions no longer match the words the actors are uttering, or as if the soundtrack of the movie is no longer synchronized with the actors' lips or even faces. What is funny in *Singin' in the Rain*, when Don Lockwood and his pal Cosmo Brown show a bemused Kathy Selden the easiness of dubbing, is for Ford's characters no laughing matter. Indeed, when they realize that reality is different from what they thought it to be, they undergo a period of shock and disbelief before they take in the full measure of the consequences of their discoveries. Some, like Howard in "Abyss," face it and make a decision that alters their lives forever; others—the majority—let the moment of recognition pass or deliberately turn their backs on it, seeking refuge and solace in deeper self-delusion.

In "Under the Radar," Steven goes through a terrifying experience on the way to a dinner party, when his wife tells him that she has had an affair with their host. Her confession ("statement" might be a better term, for she does not seem to feel any guilt) has two consequences. The first one is a distortion of time as Steven perceives it; and since he is the focalizer, this distortion is rendered in the short story itself through different devices. Time dilates and contracts alternately; the narrator provides detailed information about the characters at regular intervals and otherwise almost disappears to allow the reader access to Steven's thoughts. Action is delayed so that time seems almost suspended: for instance, Steven's reaction to Marjorie's revelation does not occur until the end of the first third of the story—that is to say the bottom of the fourth page.[1] The impression that time stretches is also linked to the concentration of silence: indeed, the story is, singularly, almost devoid of dialogue. Even Marjorie's avowal of infidelity, notwithstanding its crucial importance, is in reported speech. The second consequence of his wife's revelation is the "loss for words" Steven experiences, a situation that immediately leads him to imagine the worst:

> he began to fear that he perhaps *could* not say another word; that something [...] was at that moment causing him to detach from reality and to slide away from the present, and in fact to begin to lose his mind and go crazy to the extent that he was in jeopardy of beginning to gibber like a chimp, or just to slowly slump sideways against the upholstered

1 For more on the subject of time, see Tréguer and Henry 334-336.

> door and not speak for a long, long time—months—and then only with the aid of drugs be able merely to speak in simple utterances that would seem cryptic, so that eventually he would have to be looked after by his mother's family in Damariscotta. A terrible thought. (*MS* 144)

Steven thus watches his whole future life projected on the screen of his imagination: one picture leads to another and the scenario seems to put itself together of its own accord, without Steven being able to interfere. Silence, or rather the absence of speech due to the physical incapacity to articulate, underlined by the italics for the modal "could," is seen as the arch-enemy and language as eminently necessary: essential—vital, actually. Steven finds himself in a situation similar to that explored by Walker Percy in his novel *Lancelot*: neither Percy's eponymous character nor Steven can face the taboo surrounding the subject of infidelity and express their pain. Yet, as Ford's text makes clear, only language can ward off insanity (hinted at in the reference to "the upholstered door" and the need for drugs); only language guarantees man's human status and differentiates him from an animal. The spectre of aphasia Steven sees looming ahead triggers anguish at the prospect of reverting to some primitive state that would cause him to "gibber like a chimp"[2] and, worse, to lose speech altogether, for this would cut him off from the world around him. Percy travels along the same lines, putting into pratice in *Lancelot*, as in other novels, what he develops in his essay "The Mystery of Language": "Language, symbolization, is the stuff of which our knowledge and awareness of the world are made, the medium through which we see the world" (151). Lancelot manages to reestablish a connection with the world through language after he has had recourse to violence and killed those who have deceived him. Murder gives him a sense of power, but it is really the silence following his act that makes things click into place: "[a]ll was light and air and color and movement but not a sound. I was moved. That is to say, for the first time in thirty years I was moved off the dead center of my life" (*L* 246). He has realized that only telling his story could enable him to define his identity and envisage the future.

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2 Whenever comparisons with monkeys are used, they convey a sense of fear, even of threat. For instance, in "Calling" the narrator likens the expression on Renard Junior's face to that of a monkey ("[he] smiled in a way that pushed his heavy lips forward in a cruel, simian way" [*MS* 58]), and in "Quality Time" Jena's pictures remind Wales of "the Bacons in the Tate. The apes in agony" (*MS* 24).

Ford repeatedly returns to the redemptive power of language, in interviews as well as in his fiction. Talking about *Wildlife* he once said, "If loneliness is the disease, then the story is the cure" (qtd. in Walker 113). This statement applies to Steven's case (though the "story" is in this case limited to a phrase), for here again language is pictured as the supreme isolation-defying, life-saving, liberating instrument[3]: "And so [...] to save his life and sanity—he abruptly said a word, any word that he could say [...]" (*MS* 144). The emphasis on "any" reveals the extent to which communication between the couple fails: not only is Steven unable to produce language (speech, words), but meaning seems to have become, for him, utterly trivial. This is paradoxical because part of his fear of losing speech originates in his anxiety that he might no longer be understood and could be left "able merely to speak in simple utterances that would seem cryptic." Ironically, this is what actually happens: "And for some reason the word—phrase, really—that he uttered was 'ground clutter'" (*MS* 144). Indeed, "ground clutter" is a "simple utterance" and is "cryptic" for Marjorie. Whether she does not understand her husband because she cannot perceive the relevance of the phrase or because she does not understand the phrase itself is unclear, but her question, "'Hm? [...] What was it?'" (*MS* 145), shows that meaning does matter. As for Steven, he is able to trace the origin of the phrase ("Something he'd heard on the TV weather report as they were dressing for dinner" [*MS* 144]) but the reason why he comes up with the expression remains "cryptic" to him—either because he is unable to perceive, or unwilling to explore, the link between the phrase and his predicament. To the reader, however, it is quite clear that it is rooted in Steven's subconscious and is directly related to the situation. The phrase is connected with the title of the short story, as ground clutter is a factor that affects radar performance and

3 Other characters comment on language. For example, Jena, in "Quality Time," ascribes her own urge to "say things with [her] painting" (*MS* 21) to her parents' speechlessness, as if she had to make up for their failing to "order the world in a responsible way" (*MS* 21) through language: "'[...] they didn't know there were all these things you needed to be able to say to make the world work'" (*MS* 20). Buck, in "Calling," concludes his story on the healing power of words: "Yet because I can tell this now, I believe that I have gone beyond it [*i.e.* the memory of the duck hunt], and on to a life better than one might've imagined for me" (*MS* 65). Frank Bascombe, in *Independence Day*, says, "My trust has always been that words can make most things better and there's nothing that can't be improved on. But words are required" (353).

causes false information to appear on radar pictures.[4] Also, in the context of Marjorie's revelation, it refers to the unnamed elements that prevented Steven from seeing what was coming—among other things, his "callowness tending to gullibility" (*MS* 142); his self-assuredness, grounded in his professional success; his feeling that he and his wife have "been lucky" (*MS* 141); and his belief that his less strong points are "backed by caution, ingenuity and a thoroughgoing, compact toughness" (*MS* 142).[5]

This short episode epitomizes the lack of any real exchange between the couple and the story again brings Percy's Lancelot to mind, in particular the last conversation he has with his wife (*L* 244-245). Language does not even fullfil a phatic function[6]: "ground clutter" is not meant to establish contact with the receiver but to keep Steven connected to the outside world. The phrase does, however, elicit an answer from Marjorie, in the form of a question followed by a short apologetic speech; she also turns to look at her husband for the first time (for when she tells him about her affair she does not look at him [*MS* 143]). All this may be construed as an attempt at communication on her part, but this impression is short-lived, for once she has finished talking, "She turned her face away and exhaled a small but detectable sigh in the car" (*MS* 145), as if signifying the hopelessness of the attempt. This seems to be confirmed by the next sentence, "It was then that

4 As the text makes clear with the mention of the TV weather report, ground clutter is a term used in meteorology. It refers to an unavoidable form of radar contamination due to the reflection of radar pulses by fixed objects (nearby hills, vegetation, buildings) which produce non-meteorological echoes that are then mistakenly plotted on radar pictures as precipitation. Ford himself explains: "'ground clutter' refers to what weather radar scopes see when they're trying to tell you what the weather is in your particular area; 'ground clutter' is when it shows you the buildings, when it shows the stuff on the ground, rather than the stuff in the air." (Moulinoux)

5 The short sentence "He was sharp" (*MS* 142), isolated as a kind of conclusion after this list of qualities, takes on an ironic ring: his sharpness seems to be limited to professional matters. Indeed, not only did Steven not have the slightest inkling that his wife was having/had had an affair, but his reaction on learning about it testifies more to the slowness of his wits than to their sharpness.

6 Jakobson identifies six functions (referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual and poetic), none of which is valid here: Steven's message—if one can even talk of a message—is not centered on the referent (the term 'ground clutter' is not uttered for its denotation, as the subject of conversation is not the weather report), nor on the sender (Steven himself), nor on the receiver (it is not performative: its purpose is not to trigger any particular behaviour), nor on language, nor on its own aesthetic form.

the headlights went off automatically" (*MS* 145). The emphatic structure introduces a link between the silence following Marjorie's sigh and the darkness caused by the lights going off: no sound, no light—complete shut-down of communication. The two characters resume their postures, each on their separate tracks: Marjorie is back to "facing forward" (*MS* 146) while the narrative returns to Steven's thoughts. The syntax also draws attention to the way events happening outside both echo and bring into relief what goes on inside the small, confined space of the car. The placing of the sentence, at the very end of a paragraph, gives it the ring of finality and prepares the reader for a dramatic climax in the plot; but instead the narrator again stalls the flow of the action by inserting a paragraph on Marjorie's lover and another on her past (both narrated from Steven's point of view), followed by the raccoon episode. Only then does the real climax of the story occur, when Steven hits his wife on the nose with the back of his hand. Interestingly, it is introduced, like the switching off of the headlights, by a cleft sentence: "It was then that he hit her" (*MS* 148).

Steven's gesture seems to be precipitated by the violent scene in which the raccoon is run over by a pick-up. The driver's deliberately brutal behavior, which appears all the more cruel as he gloats over his successful hit, cowboy-style ("'Yaaaa-haaaa-yipeeee!'" [*MS* 147]), releases some hidden spring in Steven, as if it made him subconsciously feel that he would be justified in performing some violent act himself. The effect of the shocking episode is akin to that of the utterance of "ground clutter," for it participates in the restoration of Steven's connection to reality: "Steven said nothing, though he felt less at a loss for words now. His eyes, indeed, felt relieved to fix on the still corpse of the raccoon" (*MS* 147). The first word he pronounces is "'No,'" in answer to his wife's question, "'Do we do something?'" (*MS* 147), and this is pointedly underlined by the narrator: "These were his first words—except for the words he took no responsibility for—since Marjorie had said what she'd importantly said [...]" (*MS* 148). Not only is his first word a negation, but the plural form ("these were his first words") when actually only one word is uttered, suggests that his "no" is more than an answer to Marjorie's query: it is also the subconscious expression of his refusal to acknowledge the truth and the reality of her infidelity, just as he has always denied the truth of what she has told him about her past:

> [...] part of Marjorie's character had always been to confess upsetting things that turned out, he believed, not to be true: being a hooker for a summer up in Saugatuck; topless dancing while she was an undergraduate; heroin experimentation; taking part in armed

> robberies with her high-school boyfriend in Goshen, Indiana, where she was from. (*MS* 146)

Steven's denial is immediately followed by the blow, as if language had to be replaced by something that is impervious to lies or half-truths. The blow itself thus seems to be the logical conclusion of his chain of thoughts, the ultimate remedy, and to be implicitly condemned as an all-too-easy way out. Indeed, the text highlights the way Steven loses control over his own body and his own will and lapses into violence: "He hit her before he knew he'd hit her, but not before he knew he wanted to" (*MS* 148).

The relief afforded by the blow is accompanied by a progressive return of articulate speech, which saves/prevents Steven from carrying out his intention to hit his wife a second time. However, the joint process of thought and articulation is still not quite operational for Steven repeats the second of his two questions—"'which is it?'" (*MS* 150)—three times, which lends it a mechanical quality and empties it of meaning. He seems to have reached a linguistic dead end ("He was stuck on these words" [*MS* 150]) that is emblematic of the stage he has reached in his relationship with Marjorie. She, by contrast, is able to catch the situation on the rebound and turn it to her advantage. She absorbs Steven's violence, as her very aggressive verbal outburst shows: "motherfucking" is repeated twice and she calls the pick-up driver and his passenger "pieces of shit and low forms of degraded humanity" (*MS* 151), implicitly comparing Steven with them. The displacement of violence reaches its climax at the very end of the story, for which two interpretations may be given—one of them being that she runs over her husband once he has stepped outside the car to see about the raccoon.

The reader then comes to understand that Steven has all along deluded himself as far as his wife's personality is concerned, and that he is unable to grasp all the implications of her revelation. In this respect, it is quite telling that he should ask himself the right question but should at the same time consider it to be a "detail": "The *right* details, though. The right details to ascertain from her were: *Are you sorry?* [...] and *What does this mean for the future?* These were the details that mattered" (*MS* 149). Before the raccoon episode, a paragraph in internal focalisation had shown that Steven was beginning to draw the obvious conclusion: "[...] he did realize that he didn't really know his wife at all" (*MS* 146). However, he never stopped to consider the causes of their estrangement and thus never realized that he had clothed his wife in garments of his own making without checking first

whether they fitted. For this reason, his "epiphany" is extremely short-lived. His vision of the world and of his wife has not, in fact, been altered, as the rest of the story demonstrates: he experiences no qualms for having hit her, quite the contrary,[7] shows no concern for her broken nose, even doubts that he broke it,[8] and refers to her with belittling expressions such as "unimportant little women like Marjorie" (*MS* 149).

Steven comes across as a conceited and self-centered man whose refusal to shoulder any responsibility is just one aspect of his refusal to look reality in the face, even when the hard facts cannot be waved aside. This is perhaps best epitomized by his reaction after the blow. Because Marjorie fails to cry as he keeps expecting her to, he doubts whether he has actually hit her: "She was not crying yet. And for that moment he felt not even sure he *had* smacked her—if it hadn't just been a thought he'd entertained [...]" (*MS* 149). All the hints and clues interspersed in the story are finally gathered and the reader realizes that the Reeves have never really been a couple, that there has never been any sense of togetherness between them. Steven has used his wife as a foil in order to set off his qualities and serve his self-promotion, never as a fully-fledged partner who embarked with him on a joint venture. Until she revealed her infidelity she was for him a blank screen onto which he projected his desires, his view of her, and his ideal, dreamed life. With her revelation, this image is superimposed on top of another, that of reality; distortion ensues, reality is dubbed and nothing can be "certified."

In "Under the Radar" as well as in the other stories gathered in *A Multitude of Sins*, Richard Ford puts into practice the elements he pointed out in his 1977 essay on Percy. Indeed, his writings, too, exemplify how

> […] Hollywood illusion, and a wealth of factitous information, [are] thrown at us from all sides; […] man more than ever, is in need of having his poor soul doctored and soothed before it blows sky-high; and that at the threshold of the next hundred years don't look so good. (Ford 1977, 564)

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7 "And the truth was he felt even more relieved, and didn't feel at all sorry for Marjorie [...]." (*MS* 148)

8 "He thought of her nose [...]. He didn't suppose it could be broken. Noses held up." (*MS* 149)
"Probably, he thought, the pain had gone away some. It hadn't been so bad." (*MS* 150)

The characters featured in Ford's stories seem to follow their course in a world that parallels reality and only seldom comes into close contact with it. They look at it from a distance, from behind some safe partition (such as a glass pane), and think that because they can see it they are in touch with it. They are also disconnected from reality because they try to live by the codes of a world that relies on the images provided by a specific cultural context and therefore end up putting on masks. Ford makes it clear that such a self-deluding attitude leads only to isolation and solipsism, and that in this context any attempt at communication is bound to fail. He emphasizes the frailty of language and shows that because the words people use to establish some connection with one another are both powerful and imprecise, they are the cause of disconnection, misunderstanding and pain. At the same time, however, language is the only means of redemption, the tool through which love can be passed on. Ultimately, the relation that the self establishes with images of what life looks like or should be like causes intersubjectivity (the interaction between people) to be replaced by what might be called intrasubjectivity, that is to say a desire to look inward to a fabricated space and not outward to the real world.

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