L'ESPACE DU SUD AU FÉMININ

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L'ESPACE DU SUD AU FÉMININ

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INTRODUCTION

> I'd rather say that I feel the need of a land, of a sure terrain, of a sort of permanent landscape of the heart.
> Elizabeth Spencer, "A Southern Landscape" (52)

Ce livre est une invitation à réexaminer le Sud comme territoire des femmes, un territoire mouvant, changeant, que les auteures de cette vaste région écrivent, construisent, représentent et interprètent chacune à leur manière et, ce faisant, s'approprient et transmettent aux générations suivantes. Le Sud est à la fois, comme l'explique Danièle Pitavy-Souques, un « espace géographique, historique, culturel et mythique » (25). Ce Sud, c'est celui des États-Unis d'Amérique, dont les limites diffèrent pour les géographes, les statisticiens et les historiens. Il renvoie à une confédération d'états qui a quitté l'Union en 1860-61 et perdu la guerre de Sécession en 1865. C'est une région vue par les Américains eux-mêmes comme une contrée à part, ce que W. J. Cash résume ainsi : « There exists among us by ordinary – both North and South – a profound conviction that the South is another land, sharply differentiated from the rest of the American nation […]. As to what its singularity may consist in, there is, of course, much conflict of opinion, and especially between Northerner and Southerner » (xlvii). Cette opposition Nord – Sud montre bien que, comme l'écrit Michel Bandry, les contours du Sud ont « tout à voir avec l'histoire. Le Sud est […] posé comme section unique face au reste, et l'on quitte le domaine du rationnel pour aborder celui du sentiment » (8). Entrent alors en scène les images et clichés immortalisés par le roman de Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (1936) et peut-être plus encore par l'adaptation filmique réalisée en 1939 par David O. Selznick. Pourtant le Sud est loin de pouvoir

être réduit à d'immenses plantations de coton au milieu desquelles trônent « the big house » avec sa galerie couverte et ses colonnes blanches, et à des belles en crinoline qui flirtent gaiement avec de galants gentlemen tandis qu'un bataillon d'esclaves dévoués accomplit les tâches subalternes.

Cash l'a bien compris, puisqu'il a intitulé son livre *The Mind of the South* : le Sud, c'est un état d'esprit, une manière de vivre, un lieu à part, et la littérature à laquelle la région a donné naissance en témoigne amplement. En 1986, dans l'introduction à un article donnant la parole à plusieurs écrivains du Sud, les éditeurs de *Harper's Magazine* insistaient sur le fait que parler du Sud a un sens bien particulier : « Whatever the origins, the fact remains that people used to know what you meant when you talked about "Southern writing." The celebrated writers of the South created a literature rooted in resignation and defeat and irony, a distinctive body of work with an enduring sense of community » (« A Stubborn Sense of Place » 35). Ce qu'il faut retenir ici, ce sont les notions de communauté et de création, auxquelles vient s'ajouter l'idée d'enracinement. Ces thèmes se retrouvent dans l'essai de Eudora Welty, « Place in Fiction », où elle insiste sur l'importance des lieux dans l'imaginaire. Après s'être interrogée sur le pouvoir mystérieux et magique qui lie chaque être à un endroit particulier – « Might not the magic lie partly, too, in the *name* of the place – since that is what *we* gave it ? » (119) – elle affirme : « Place absorbs our earlier notice and attention, it bestows on us our original awareness; and our critical powers spring up from the study of it and the growth of experience inside it » (128). Elizabeth Spencer a, elle aussi, mis l'accent sur l'importance du lieu comme point d'ancrage dans un espace-temps précis : « I think each place has its own spirit and its own spiritual force, based maybe on things that have happened there, or on the architecture, art, language, all sorts of accumulated life » (Préher 9).

On le voit à travers ces citations, le terme « place » est préféré à « space », plus abstrait et suggérant un vaste territoire aux limites floues. En effet, « place » renvoie à un lieu géographique délimité dans lequel une communauté s'est fixée et qu'elle a imprégné de caractéristiques bien spécifiques (économiques, mais aussi culturelles et sociales) qui lui ont donné sa personnalité. Puisque ce lieu est représentatif de la dite communauté, il devient une part centrale de son identité. Il n'est donc pas surprenant que l'expression « sense of place », maintes fois reprise par tous ceux qui ont tenté de définir l'âme du Sud et de ses habitants, ne connote pas

seulement un sentiment d'appartenance à un lieu qui ne serait qu'une simple variation géographique de ce qui constitue la nation américaine, mais aussi la conscience d'une différence qualitative, c'est-à-dire de ce qui distingue le Sud du reste du pays. Traditions, coutumes, spécialités culinaires, accents, rythmes de la langue, idiolectes, sont autant de traces de la « qualité » du Sud. La tâche de l'écrivain consiste à transcrire celle-ci sur la page. Or, pour faire apparaître le lieu, il ne suffit pas d'en décrire les coins et recoins. Il faut être un véritable magicien et faire parler le Sud, inscrire la voix de la région dans l'écriture, raconter les histoires qui lui sont propres.

Car les gens du Sud sont un peuple de raconteurs, avec un timbre qui n'appartient qu'à eux. Nombreux sont les auteurs qui ont souligné cette dimension. Lee Smith, par exemple, pour expliquer ce qu'elle entend par « littérature du Sud », insiste sur l'aspect vernaculaire :

> About the only thing down here that is still the same, in fact, if you ask me, is the way Southerners will talk. On and on and on. I mean, whether you want them to or not. I mean, if you just ask a simple question such as "Where is the post office?" they will start in about one time their cousin was going to the post office and she got bit by a mad dog, or how the postmaster has not got enough help in there… (« A Stubborn Sense of Place » 38)

Cette anecdote trouve un écho dans une remarque que Eudora Welty a faite lors d'un entretien avec Peggy Prenshaw : « I think the Southerner is a talker by nature, but not only a talker – we are used to an audience. We are used to a listener and that does something to our narrative style, I think » (Prenshaw 94). Pour les gens du Sud, tout devient prétexte à raconter et, ce faisant, à écrire une histoire parallèle à la grande histoire ; l'idée n'est pas seulement de se concentrer sur des événements que les historiens jugeraient sans importance ou sur la vie de gens ordinaires, mais aussi de proposer une autre version de l'histoire du Sud, écrite de l'intérieur – ce qu'a fait notamment Lee Smith, dans *Oral History*. Et c'est peut-être là que se situe l'une des spécificités de l'écriture des femmes du Sud, comme le souligne Harriet Pollack dans son étude consacrée à Bobbie Ann Mason. Il semble en effet que celles-ci ne voient pas l'histoire comme « the chronicle of great deeds and greater battles, borders, treaties, and territories » mais plutôt comme « an account of lives lived on the margins of official history and culture – of lives silent in history because, by race, class, or gender, they lacked access to official power and event » (Pollack 96). Cela n'implique pas pour autant un gommage, voire un effacement, des événements historiques qui ont modelé le Sud. Au contraire, ceux-ci figurent souvent en

arrière-plan, donnant relief et contour à des épisodes et des vignettes plus contemporains. Autrement dit, les auteures du Sud explorent cette charnière entre deux espaces-temps, l'investissent, y installent leurs écrits pour mieux recentrer l'histoire.

Point n'est besoin de résider dans la région pour pouvoir la raconter ; il suffit d'y avoir ses racines. Certains auteurs ressentent même le besoin de prendre leurs distances afin de percevoir les caractéristiques du Sud avec plus d'acuité et partent s'installer ailleurs, parfois temporairement, parfois de façon permanente. Mais la très grande majorité de ces « expatriés » volontaires finit par retourner sur les lieux de l'origine, de la mémoire. Ce retour, qu'il soit ponctuel, périodique, ou définitif, s'avère le plus souvent un instant déclencheur qui réactive des souvenirs enfouis et permet à l'esprit créateur de s'épancher. L'écrivain peut alors rejouer des scènes de sa vie à la manière d'un Marcel Proust et en parsemer sa fiction. Bobbie Ann Mason, par exemple, a quitté son Kentucky natal pour le nord-est des États-Unis parce qu'elle voulait échapper à ce qu'elle appelle, dans un entretien paru dans la *Missouri Review* en 1997, « the limits of my surroundings ». Cet éloignement a été nécessaire à sa maturation en tant qu'écrivain, processus qui a pris plusieurs années et a finalement débouché sur la prise de conscience que son véritable matériau était dans le Sud : « it took me a number of years to get the right perspective on my material. I hadn't really recognized what I had to write about. I was looking outside ». Et de conclure : « I'm a writer from the South and I write out of a Southern culture, but I'm not immersed in the South. I think my exile in the North gave me a sense of detachment, a way of looking in two directions at once ».

Le poids du passé dans la littérature et dans la perspective des auteurs du Sud a fait l'objet de nombreuses remarques et analyses, et l'un des termes qui revient souvent à ce propos est l'adjectif « haunted ». Anne Goodwyn Jones et Susan V. Donaldson l'ont d'ailleurs utilisé dans leur ouvrage sur le Sud et le genre, *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*; elles expliquent leur approche de la façon suivante : « [t]here are […] too many elaborately sexed and gendered bodies haunting the pages of Southern texts not to pay heed to the region's preoccupation with manhood, womanhood, and their 'proper' boundaries » (17). L'espace du Sud est donc forcément genré et construit par celui ou celle qui en dépeint la réalité. Amy Hempel, qui a rassemblé les nouvelles publiées en 2010 dans *New Stories from the South*, a elle aussi cette conscience que le Sud est hanté :

dans son introduction, elle explique qu'elle a recherché des textes qui soient « distinctly Southern in character, stance or voice » (xi) et qui mettent en scène des personnages étant « importantly haunted » (xiv). Il est vrai que, comme le rappelle Milton Meltzer dans *The Landscape of Memory*, « What we are is the result of the past. The past shapes the present. The present is what we build upon to create the future. To forget about the past is to betray it, and therefore to spoil the present and the future » (90). Cette remarque résume tout à fait le dilemme auquel tout auteur du Sud est confronté : comment concilier passé, présent et avenir sans trahir l'un ni compromettre les deux autres ? Pour les femmes, la situation est encore plus délicate, car le poids du passé est intimement lié à leur genre : comment se défaire de l'image de la Belle tout en affirmant sa « sudité », concilier l'attachement à des valeurs du passé et le désir de nouveauté, échapper à la sphère privée pour partir à la conquête de la sphère publique ? En d'autres termes, elles doivent déterminer dans quel nouvel espace elles souhaitent évoluer : s'agit-il de conquérir un territoire appartenant aux hommes, de défricher un espace encore vierge pour se l'approprier, de construire une entité résolument nouvelle, de transformer l'existant – ou de faire tout cela à la fois ?

Il est certain que les femmes du Sud nées au XIX^{e} siècle – les pionnières – ont eu affaire à plus forte partie que celles du Nord, tant l'immobilisme et la résistance au changement de leur région était grands. Les mentalités ont certes évolué, mais le Sud reste encore de nos jours la région la plus conservatrice des États-Unis. Les contributions rassemblées dans ce volume (dont certaines ont d'abord été présentées sous forme de communications dans l'atelier « Le Sud féminin : à la conquête de l'espace » lors du congrès de l'AFEA de Besançon, en 2008) examinent le rapport des femmes à l'espace du Sud, qu'il soit littéral ou symbolique. Littéral tout d'abord : on pense ici aux « défricheuses », à celles qui se sont littéralement fait une place dans le Sud, ainsi qu'à des romancières comme Elizabeth Madox Roberts ou Ellen Glasgow, qui ont écrit des romans de la terre, dans lesquels l'espace est à la fois menaçant et celui des possibles, destructeur et constructeur, porteur de désespoir et d'espoir, d'anéantissement et de rédemption. Dans quelle mesure ces auteures féminisent-elles l'espace ? Dans quelle mesure leurs paysages doivent-ils être lus comme autant de métaphores de leur espace intérieur ou de celui de leurs personnages, comme autant de symboles d'enfermement ou de transgression ? Cette dialectique intérieur / extérieur, dedans / dehors, se retrouve dans la scission entre sphère privée et sphère publique, deux univers tenant tout autant du littéral que du symbolique. Que

se passe-t-il lorsque la femme quitte la domesticité et l'espace clos de la maison et s'arroge des prérogatives jusque-là l'apanage des seuls hommes ? On pense ici par exemple aux personnages féminins de Carson McCullers ou de Flannery O'Connor et aux déconvenues souvent cuisantes qui sont leur lot, leur « punition », serait-on presque tenté de dire, tant la tradition patriarcale continue à influencer le regard que pose la société sur celles qui osent transgresser les lois. En entreprenant de se définir par leurs actes ainsi que par leurs voix, non seulement elles quittent un espace (dé)limité concrètement et se démarquent des conventions, mais elles « projettent un *pays* où se dire et dire le monde qu'elles voient » (Pitavy-Souques 25). Elles accèdent à l'imagination, au langage, au symbolique, et dans le même temps dé-couvrent *(un-cover)* les « paysages du cœur », pour reprendre les mots d'Elizabeth Spencer. Les auteures sont là, plume en main, pour transcrire l'expérience et l'offrir à la lecture. Certes, ce processus n'est pas réservé exclusivement à une région et un genre donnés. Mais le passé chargé du Sud et de ses femmes donne une coloration spécifique aux écrits de ces dernières, qui affichent clairement leurs intentions : bâtir un espace d'expression et proposer diverses solutions comme bases d'une nouvelle donne et de nouveaux rapports humains, afin de rétablir la communication entre les différents espaces composites du Sud.

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"AN ATTEMPT TO FIGURE OUT WHY I'M ON THIS EARTH AND WHAT I'M SUPPOSED TO BE DOING WHILE HERE": AN INTERVIEW WITH LISA ALTHER

Tennessee-born Lisa Alther (1944–) started writing when she was sixteen (she published a short story in her school newspaper) and has had seven books in print so far. She divides her time between Vermont and her native state and is currently putting together a collection of short stories (*Stormy Weather and Other Stories*, which should come out in 2012). Her latest book, a historical trilogy entitled *Washed in the Blood*, has just been released. Memory and history are two important themes for her and it seems that after dealing with personal history she is now trying to understand how individuals fit in a broader picture. Even though she had a hard time placing her first novel, the success that she met made it easy for her to keep on writing and further explore the various borders that force people into roles. She is interested in depicting feminine issues and her novels often read like *bildungsromans*. In the following interview, Alther talks about her influences, her ideas on writing, and discusses her background.

Gérald Préher: How would you define yourself as a writer?

Lisa Alther: I feel like a Southern writer, along with several other categories. I get labeled a Southern writer, a woman writer, a feminist writer, a gay writer, an Appalachian writer, a New England writer. I'm happy to be included in any of those groups. But when I'm writing, I just write what I need to for my own internal reasons, without thinking about the agenda of any special-interest group. Often what I write about is my difficulty with establishing a firm identity and with fitting into any group at all, and that goes for me, too, as a writer. Since my mother was a New Yorker and my

father is a Virginian, I've always felt split in two psychically, which impedes my feeling wholeheartedly part of any one group.

Thanks for your detailed answer. It makes me think that you are like McCullers' Frankie Addams, looking for a club but knowing there isn't any that would really suit you.

I like the idea of myself being a McCullers character! I did identify with Frankie Addams when I first read *The Member of the Wedding* many years ago, her hunger to fit in and her inability to do so. I wonder if I would identify with her still? I need to read that book again and see. Carson McCullers' writing has always been very important to me, and "The Ballad of the Sad Café" is one of my favorite pieces of fiction ever. I've always included it when I've taught at colleges.

How did you come to writing?

I started writing for school newspapers in junior high, high school, and college. I wrote my first short story for the newspaper in high school. Then I wrote more stories for a creative writing class in college. After college I wrote many more stories and two novels, but couldn't get them published. After 14 years and 250 rejection slips, I finally published my first novel, *Kinflicks*, and made enough money to write full time, which I've been doing ever since – apart from a couple of years of college teaching.

Where do you get your inspiration from?

I seem to be compelled to write when I'm living through some situation I don't understand. Often it's myself I don't understand. I think I've usually written in order to try to figure out who I am.

When you start on a new project do you know exactly where you are going?

I usually do a lot of research, read related books, take notes, make outlines. Then I throw all that away and the real work begins. I often know

the opening scene and the closing one, but I don't know how to get from one to the other. So the act of writing a book becomes a process of discovery, which is what makes it interesting and compelling for me.

Is there a central theme you mean to explore in your fiction?

As I've already said, probably my own identity and the meaning of my own existence.

Apart from your first novel, you have written all your books in the third person. Is it a way for you to distance yourself from the situations you picture?

I wasn't aware of this, but I see that it's true. Often I switch from one person to another in the subsequent drafts of a book to see which sounds best. I don't know why I've almost always settled on third person, but your suggestion sounds right – that it gives me a more detached stance. One of the motives for writing fiction, for me, is to try to unravel situations I don't understand, and I would say that achieving some distance from them helps me in that process.

Is your background important to define the locations in your writings?

My settings are usually an imaginary version of some place I've lived in and/or loved, and they seem quite important to me in terms of understanding my characters. Usually I combine aspects of several real places to shape my fictional landscape (as I do with shaping characters). The details I develop often have some kind of metaphorical meaning for my story, as in the case of the Castle Tree in *Original Sins*. There was a real Castle Tree in my neighborhood when I was growing up, so I put it into *Original Sins* in a setting that was somewhat different from the actual setting. Practical considerations also enter into the shaping of the setting, such as which character is living where, etc. I guess it's my antique version of what people do now on Second Life on the Internet.

Is the past, and especially the Southern past, important for you as a writer?

I think time and the past are extremely important for most, if not all, Southern writers. We're all trying to make sense of our tragic and horrible history of slavery. In my own case I grew up believing myself to be Southern, yet came to realize that my mother and her family are Northerners. I also learned that most of my Southern ancestors fought against the South in the Civil War. So a lot of what I've written has been an attempt to discover the reality underneath the stereotypes with which I was raised.

Your characters do seem to look back but History does not matter much to them. They are searching for answers to the questions of the heart rather than the mind. How is the burden of the Southern past present(ed) in your works?

That's an interesting distinction you make about looking back into history as being a matter of the head, whereas one's identity in the present is a matter of the heart. I guess everything I've ever written has been an attempt to figure out why I'm on this earth and what I'm supposed to be doing while here. So History is of interest to me primarily insofar as it can give some clues to these questions by looking at how my ancestors did or didn't deal with them.

As a region, how important is the South in your fictional world?

The South has been and is of immense importance to me because it's where I spent my first 18 years. It shaped me in ways that I'm still learning about. My first two novels were set mostly in the South. But because my mother was a New Yorker and because I lived in Vermont for 30 years, my next two novels were set in New England. My fifth novel was an attempt to bring my two worlds, North and South, together.

When, in *Five Minutes in Heaven*, Jude arrives in New York and reunites with her old friend Sandy, a lot of comparisons are made between the South and the North. You seem to be saying that the South is the embodiment of what Emerson describes in *Nature*

whereas the city/the North first appears as an evil place. Why did you choose to dislocate Jude?

No, I don't think places are evil. I don't even think people are evil, though some behaviors strike me as evil. But there are significant differences between the North and the South, and I moved Jude from one to the other in order to examine those differences via the effect on her of the two different cultures.

What differences do you see between the North and the South?

My brother, who's a retired sociology professor at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, wrote a book based on public opinion surveys which indicated that Southerners tend to value religion, family, and community more than other Americans. They are also more prone to violence and more accepting of corporal punishment in schools and of the death penalty. It's the Red State-Blue State dichotomy that emerges most visibly during political campaigns. But of course you can't really generalize about any group of people because there's so much variety within any given group. Although Tennessee is a Red State, there are a lot of left-wing people there.

Place seems very important to define your characters' identities. I was wondering why in *Original Sins*, the only section that bears a title is the first.

Part One is the introduction to the novel. I think of it almost as the overture to a Broadway musical. It introduces the characters and themes. Since what the Castle Tree represents is essential to the novel, I wanted to emphasize this by using it as the name of Part One.

The Castle Tree is a symbol also in *Five Minutes in Heaven*. What do you associate with it? It seems to be more than a shelter or the location of childhood memories.

The thing about a symbol is that you can't really say what it means in so many words. If you could, you'd probably do that instead! What the Castle

Tree represents for my characters has something to do with the innocence and hopefulness and powers of imagination of young children.

In *Original Sins*, you go back on a number of Southern stereotypes. Did you mean to deal with the South's original sins to ridicule them somehow?

No, there's a difference between irony and ridicule. I feel ironic about aspects of the South but not contemptuous, which is what ridicule implies. I'm Southern myself, so I share in the foibles of my homeland.

In your introduction to O'Connor's stories, you explain that she defined *A Good Man is Hard to Find* as "nine stories about original sin" and you go on to say that "the sin is usually some form of vanity or self-love." What is it in your novel?

Original sin has always been a hard concept for me to swallow. I find it impossible to believe that a sweet little baby comes into this world already burdened with errors he or she knows nothing about. Rather, it seems to me that the culture in which a child grows up imposes sin on its children by teaching them to judge and rank others by physical characteristics such as skin color or gender. But that's probably saying the same thing I said about O'Connor's sense of original sin, since regarding oneself as superior to those with differing physical characteristics is a form of vanity or self-love – narcissism, really.

Irony then is what led you to have two of the characters in *Five Minutes in Heaven* dress up as characters from *Gone With the Wind*. But in the end, aren't all your Belles somehow gone bad, to use Betina Entzminger's expression?

That's amusing. Yes, my Belles have all gone to seed. Many Southern white girls used to grow up looking to Scarlett O'Hara as a role model. And then reality collides with romance!

How do you choose the title of your novels?

The title is always the hardest part for me, having to find something that will point to the main idea of the novel but that is also catchy. I search for a title after the book is written, making lists, getting my friends to make lists. Eventually something pops out that seems right.

Could you give me some of the tentative titles for the novels we have chosen to talk about?

The one that comes most readily to mind is the one I would have preferred for *Five Minutes in Heaven*, which is "Graveyard Love." My publisher thought it sounded too much like a murder mystery. Also, the AIDs epidemic was in full swing at that time, and they thought "Graveyard Love" sounded too depressing. For a long time I called *Kinflicks* "The Mandala Tattoo," which later became a chapter title. And I called *Original Sins* "The Castle Tree" for quite a while.

The chapters in *Kinflicks* are organized in a very specific way: odd-numbered chapters bear a title while even-numbered chapters bear a date. What was your goal?

The chapters with titles are flashbacks. Those with dates run chronologically in the present, featuring Ginny Babcock in Hullsport, tending her mother as she dies at the hospital.

This is very crafty and it brings to mind the stream-of-consciousness technique. In the context of Southern studies it is also in keeping with Faulkner's statement that the past never dies because it is never past. What is your take on that phrase?

Total agreement. The psyche is made up of all the impacts it has ever received, and any of those can be, and are, ignited at any time by unlikely stimuli – like the way in which Proust's madeleine triggers his memories of his early years at Combray. And of course we carry our ancestral past in our very genes, like Koestler's ghost in the machine.

In your introduction to O'Connor's stories, you point out the importance of the South in her fiction and you also mention her grotesque characters. I read something you wrote about McCullers, who is also known for her depictions of "freaks." Which writers had an influence on your writing?

My earliest influences were the great English women writers – Austen, Eliot, the Brontë sisters, Woolf, Lessing. Also the great Southern US women writers – O'Connor, McCullers, Porter, Welty. Later I came to love Colette, Stendhal, Proust, Mann, Powell. But the Southern writers spoke to me so forcefully because they were writing about a world that I knew first-hand and was trying to make sense of – a world drenched in a volatile mix of religion, sensuality, and violence. And their tone was also familiar to me – a sometimes raucous, sometimes grim, humor concerning the struggle of frail human beings to reconcile all these conflicting forces.

Your first novels, *Kinflicks* and *Original Sins*, both begin with bleak situations: *Kinflicks* opens with a section titled "The Art of Dying" and the first paragraph of *Original Sins* mentions the polio scare. In both cases, what might seem tragic is put aside and a kind of comic relief takes over. Could you tell me about the use of humor in your works?

A sense of humor is very important to me – in people and in writing. If you can laugh about something, it means you can detach from it and are, therefore, not a fanatic. Of course, some things aren't funny, and if you laugh at everything, you risk being a fool. So in my own writing I try to walk this tightrope between fool and fanatic. It seems to me life is fairly evenly split between comedy and tragedy. Sometimes one predominates, sometimes the other. So you have to work both into your fiction in order to be representative of reality (if that's your goal). Also, as Mary Poppins said, a little bit of sugar makes the medicine go down.

The action of your fifth novel, *Five Minutes in Heaven*, takes place in various locations, each one having a special meaning for the characters. The book also revisits the Jamesian theme of the innocents abroad as Jude goes to Paris. How important are geographic changes for you?

I've lived in several different places for varying periods of time – Tennessee, Boston, Cincinnati, New York City, Vermont, London, Paris. Growing up in a place that seemed parochial to me at the time, I guess I always thought that I would find sophistication and glamour elsewhere. But after a lifetime of seeking something different, I've come to the conclusion that people are pretty much the same all over. The only thing that changes from place to place, and from time to time, is the backdrop and the costumes, which aren't really very important.

The various trips that Jude makes throughout the novel go together with her acceptance of the person she really is. The "five minutes in heaven" of the title seem to refer to a deeply-rooted emotional space. What would you say is its function in the main plot?

As you probably know, "Five Minutes in Heaven" is a game American adolescents used to play in which the girls wrote their names on slips of paper. A boy would draw a slip, and he and that girl would go into a closet and make out for five minutes. I used that game as a metaphor for real-life romance. Passion usually fades away, and there you are – two people standing in a closet. In her different settings Jude keeps searching for a love that will endure, only to have it vanish. But at the end she seems to have located some core within herself that holds out the promise of permanence.

How do you choose the names of your characters? "Anna" (*Five Minutes in Heaven*) seems to me quite an interesting one, for like Dickens's "Pip Pirrip," it is a palindrome. And, in your character's case, it is revealing: she is the beginning and the end, somehow.

I keep changing the names of my characters as I write, until I find one that sticks. Sometimes I don't know why. Other times I plan it intentionally. For instance, in *Bedrock* the two main characters are Elke and Clea –

rearrangements of the same sounds and letters. I meant to hint that while they are two separate people, each also represents an aspect of a single psyche. Manic and depressive, if you will! As they interact, they influence one another, Clea becoming a more serious person and Elke becoming more light-hearted.

***Five Minutes in Heaven* is very Southern in that it recounts Jude's past and goes way back in time. Each section is devoted to a female character that has played an important role in Jude's life and the last part is really about her as a person. Her mother is present throughout but you chose not to have a whole section about her. How did you decide what to include and what to leave out?**

That book is really a meditation on loss, and the ways in which an early loss can determine your path through life. Jude was so young when her mother died that she has very few concrete memories of her, more a vague sense of yearning for an unattainable love. As an adult, she tries to heal that wound with new people. But she merely reinforces the pattern of loss by unwittingly picking unavailable or self-destructive people. I didn't include very much about the mother because she was mostly an abstraction to Jude and the story was told from Jude's point of view.

As I re-read *Five Minutes in Heaven*, I can see how McCullers might have influenced your writing: Jude is motherless and her relationship with her nanny, Clementine, at the beginning of the novel, is reminiscent of the situation in *The Member of Wedding*. Did you write the novel as a kind of tribute to McCullers or are the similarities just pure coincidence?

That's interesting, those similarities that I never noticed. No, it wasn't a conscious tribute. But I steeped myself in McCullers and O'Connor at an early age, so I'm not surprised that their influences would surface in my own work. However, that situation of white children being cared for by African-American maids wasn't uncommon in the South in the mid-twentieth century.

I came to your fiction after reading your 1980 introduction to the Women's Press edition of Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find: Stories*. I find your works very entertaining because, very much like O'Connor's, they are serious and light at the same time. Your characters are moving along margins and, when they reach the center, they find themselves attracted back to the margins again.

I think you're probably right that whenever I'm approaching the center I get drawn back out to the margins. In order to belong to a group, you have to agree that their enemies are yours. And since Southerners often regard Yankees as their enemies, and since my mother is a Yankee and I'm half Yankee, it's hard for me to swallow the entire Southern agenda.

In *Five Minutes in Heaven*, it seems that you use O'Connor's theory of the "shock of recognition" when you present Molly's death. Jude needs to experience that kind of shock to move on with her life. In what ways would you say O'Connor influenced you?

I liked the way O'Connor dealt with deadly serious issues in a grimly humorous fashion. I don't know if her writing influenced me to try to do the same thing, or if her writing appealed to me in the first place because I already possessed that proclivity. Actually my mother was very much like that – a profoundly spiritual woman with a cynical sense of the ridiculous.

In your introduction to O'Connor's *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, you compare her to a visual artist. I think that you could also be described as such. How important are your characters' surroundings and how do those surroundings help you set the action?

Thank you for that assessment. I do try to paint my scenes with words. I can see a scene in my head, and I do my best to recreate it for the reader, putting in enough details to give the general idea, but leaving out enough so that the reader can fill in the gaps and participate in the story. At various times in my life I've painted watercolors, which is a similar process for me.

The novel *Other Women* is not set in the South, but place is also important. It is very often limited to Caroline's Subaru – you seem to

enjoy mentioning the brand here and there –, which somehow mirrors the confinement she suffers from. How did you pick the location for the novel?

That's an interesting observation about Caroline's Subaru. It wasn't conscious, but I see that it's true. In *Other Women* I wanted to write about the therapy process. I felt that people in the North go to therapists to try to answer the questions that people in the South take to their preachers and ministers – questions about the ultimate meaning of life and death, and the ways in which one should behave while on this earth. So I had to set the story in the North. At the time, I was living near Lake Champlain in Vermont, and that lake became a central symbol for the story, so I invented a similar lake. But I put it in New Hampshire, hoping that friends who make cameo appearances in the novel might not recognize themselves!

The novel's characters are reminiscent of those in Walker Percy's fiction who suffer from the modern malaise. Even the structure, with one section focusing on Caroline and the next on Hannah, takes the reader back to Percy's *The Second Coming*, whose first chapters alternate between Allie and Will. Could you tell me about your experience with Percy's books?

I hadn't read *The Second Coming* when I wrote *Other Women*. In fact, I just recently read it. I can see the similarities you're referring to. But I haven't read his other books since college, so reading this one has made me want to go back and read the others. I remember admiring them in college, but I suspect they will have a deeper meaning for me now that I've got so much more experience under my belt.

What are you working on at the moment?

I've written a trilogy of historical novels about East Tennessee, where I grew up, and where I now live most of the time, after my 30 years in Vermont. I'm still fine-tuning it while I wait for my next idea. I've had several that haven't taken off, so I'm still waiting.

Do you plan to collect your short stories?

I'm just now in the process of pulling together a group of them – ten stories and one novella, all published elsewhere except for maybe one.

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1. ESPACE ET GENRES

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THE FEMALE GROTESQUE: OPENING UP / MAPPING OUT A NEW SPACE IN THE SOUTHERN IMAGINATION

> … an Armenian friend of mine, an artist, told me that his dreams all happened in the same place. When he went to bed he'd imagined himself on a sled going down a steep hill; at the foot of the hill was a little town and by the time he reached it he was asleep and his dreams happened right here. He didn't know why or how.
>
> Eudora Welty (Prenshaw 100-101)

At the beginning of W. E. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, Southerner Ben Cameron casts only one glance at Elsie Stoneman's photograph and finds "the ideal of his dreams." The camera lens focuses on the picture, providing another frame for the medallion. Such a scene emblematizes the position of femininity, *framed*, precisely, by the male gaze, and therefore by codes of behavior and canons of beauty. In the American South, womanhood is articulated as "ladyhood"; a woman is to be admired from a distance, she is an icon to be worshipped, a prop to be exhibited or hidden away, in a reifying process that the cameo metaphorizes to perfection. Moreover, the image of the medallion signifies the restricted space of the feminine and its well-defined borders in a world ordered by race and gender.

Southern society is characterized by notions of place and boundaries; gendered roles define gendered spaces: the male "outside" space of History (in particular the Civil War) is opposed to the "inner" female space of the household (or specific rooms within that home).[1] Roles are assigned

1 The kitchen, in particular, is not only a gendered space but a racialized one as well. See, for example, my article "Kitchen Talk with Miss Jane," *Plus sur Gaines*, dir., Françoise Clary (Neuilly : Éditions Atlande, 2006), 51-61.

within particular places and dictate female spaces, both as representations and as spheres of activity.[2] The collective imagination is informed by these images, which take on an iconic dimension as they encode canonical definitions of beauty and decorum. To the constricted material and cultural space corresponds a restricted imaginative space.

One way to challenge a role is to challenge its representation in the societal imagination. Some Southern female writers have achieved that by using what Eudora Welty called a "device" to revisit the conventional representations and definitions of womanhood: the grotesque. Because women inhabit Southern societal space through their bodies, the grotesque affects its representation. Redefining the shape of the body in fiction involves redefining a new space for the feminine in society by proposing an alternative mental landscape for the imagination. Moreover, the grotesque, with its distortions and exaggerations, performs transgression through its aesthetic impact. It proposes a radical departure from traditional cultural scripts. Such a process results in defining a new identity – in this case a new female and Southern identity. Among these Southern female writers, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers and Eudora Welty stand out: not only did they construct a particular literary space while reinventing the borders of the Southern imagination,[3] but they also created a new kind of female character whose grotesqueness built alternative canons and images while mapping out new roles for Southern femininity.

This paper purports to present how the grotesque is used by these three writers and how it charters a creative space for the female imagination and identity. The grotesque generates a new language to articulate Southernness and invests the space of the Southern unconscious. The term "female grotesque" will be used to refer both to the grotesque as used by female writers and to the grotesque affecting the representation of the female body, especially through the figure of the giant or the female gargantua.

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2 See Mary Titus's article "The Dining-Room Door Swings Both Ways: Food, Race, and Domestic Space in the Nineteenth-Century South," in Jones and Donaldson 243-256. Titus writes: "Attention to the dining-room as the heart of the home accompanied the ideology of female domesticity" (244-245).

3 In "The Laugh of the Medusa" (translated by Keith and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 875-893), Hélène Cixous claims that to retrieve the bodily dimension of womanhood is to recover an identity.

The Grotesque: Femininity Re-imagined

Minrose Gwin, in her article "Nonfelicitous Space and Survivor Discourse: Reading the Incest Story in Southern Women's Fiction," attempts to "trace the convergences of material, textual, and cultural spaces in Southern women's contemporary fiction about father-daughter incest." She defines material space as "actual physical structures, landscapes, geographies, spatial locations that are represented within a text"; the textual spaces are "the intangible configurations, the openings and closures constructed by and within language, narrative, and silence," and cultural space, "with its permutations of the dynamic and incessant workings of ideology, layers all narratives." She adds: "As Susan Stanford Friedman points out, cultural space comprises 'the political resonances that traverse a text'. These are the 'stories, in other words, that reproduce, subvert, and otherwise engage with the dominant and marginalized cultural scripts of the social order'." As Gwin hopes to show, "region is an important component of cultural space" (416).

One element that Gwin and Friedman do not point out is that cultural space has an extension: the imagination. The grotesque used by some Southern female writers constructs a new domain for cultural space through the transgressive work it enacts in the Southern consciousness. The place of women in Southern society is one of its structuring elements, of course. The grotesque, through the configurations it creates, the openings its images generate and the silences (aporias) it triggers (in our responses to the carnivalesque charivaris it stages), outlines certain textual spaces that charter alternative cultural spaces. The economy of the grotesque performs groundbreaking work to conquer new territories on the moving line of the frontier of the imagination. For example, in addressing the violence and domination underlying Southern society, the grotesque opens a space where they can be voiced and talked about.

Patricia Yaeger and Sarah Gleeson-White, along with Mary Russo in her thought-provoking book *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, have pioneered the recent work on the grotesque politically, not just aesthetically or stylistically. In her essay "Beyond the Hummingbird: Southern Women Writers and the Southern Gargantua," Yaeger explains: "I want to describe the political aspect of the grotesque in Southern women's fiction since it is my conviction that this fiction has a politics" (287). She sees the figure of the female Southern gargantua as rebelling against what

she calls the "miniaturization and fragility" usually associated with Southern women's bodies. Its gigantism embodies female empowerment against "the specter of female powerlessness under patriarchy," to use Minrose Gwin's expression (420). Grotesque bodies are, in Ann Goodwyn Jones and Susan Donaldson's words, "emblems both of the region's incarcerating ideologies of race, class, and gender and of the inevitable disruption and eventual dissolution of those ideologies" (13).[4]

The body indeed holds a particular significance in Southern societies. In their introduction to their seminal collective work, Jones and Donaldson make the following comment:

> Surely no bodies ever appeared more haunted by society [than in the American South] […]. The stories of Southern bodies have been structured in large part by the interlocking logics of dichotomy – masculine and feminine, white and black, master and slave, planter and "white trash," Cavalier and Yankee – that have characterized the dominant public written discourse of the South. […] hierarchical and dichotomous gender constructions took a prominent place in antebellum proslavery ideology. (1-2)

However, they also point out that "If gender prescriptions can be felt as fact, […] they can also be used as resistance" (2).

Moreover, if some Southern women writers insist so much on the notion of "place," it is because Southern society is all about place: finding it, knowing it, keeping it, or sometimes transgressing it.[5] Through their fiction, they try to expand the boundaries of the Southern imagination by opening up an alternative representational space: they re-present womanhood – in effect proposing a new identity along with a new component – and create another language spelled out through vocabulary and sets of images that are organized around the female body. The grotesque mode constitutes one way to address, in Michael De Gruccio's phrase,[6] the "behavioral and ideological acrobatics" required of women. The female grotesques created by O'Connor, McCullers and Welty explore canons of femininity by re-presenting other female bodies and types of behavior. Finally, with the

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4 Mary Russo explains, "As bodily metaphor, the grotesque cave tends to look like […] the cavernous anatomical female body" (1).

5 W. E. B. DuBois's expression "the color line" is symptomatic of this Southern obsession.

6 An expression he uses in his review of *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation*, Lori Glover (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). Review published on H-CivWar, November 2008, "Manhood and the Coming of the American Civil War." H-Net Review.

grotesque, Southern women writers question the making of gender and resort to what Gwin calls a "politics of transgressiveness" (422). To use the grotesque entails telling the story of a reversal of power – a narrative which stages the retrieval and assertion of female power through the symbolic size of the fictional female body.

Encountering Female Grotesques

The grotesque is the tool chosen by O'Connor, McCullers and Welty to both articulate and redefine this very particular (peculiar) place called the South. In their fiction, the body occupies a lot of space and, literally, takes its place.[7]

Flannery O'Connor may be the most important theoretician of the grotesque. She devoted a full essay to it ("Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction") and made numerous remarks about it in her non-fictional writings. She established a strong connection between her use of the grotesque and her regional background. For example, she explained: "Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one" (*MM* 44). O'Connor developed a full-fledged expression of the genre because it was a way for her "[to make] alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life" (*MM* 40). Her choice of the grotesque is rooted in her acute awareness of the South as a space where good and evil coexist as meaningful entities. She felt emboldened to raise her fellow Southerners' attention by resorting to a strategy that would shake them out of their apathy and which she expressed in the following way in "The Fiction Writer and his Country": "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (*MM* 34). She wanted to create "awe and terror to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance. I have to make him feel, viscerally if no other way, that something is going on here" (Magee 105).

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7 See my article "Le Gargantua sudiste (féminin) : Poétique d'un grotesque politique," *L'Écriture du corps dans la littérature féminine de langue anglaise*, dirs., Claire Bazin et Marie-Claude Perrin-Chenour (Nanterre : Presses Université Paris X-Nanterre, 2007) 311-326.

In addition, O'Connor's fiction introduces a space of conflict where the bizarre unfolds, opening up new spaces for the Southern imagination. Her female grotesques, for example, resonate with other Southern gargantuas; the shock they create originates in the alternative visions proposed by the grotesque. O'Connor's portrayals have often been labeled cruel. But their creativity and the fact that they are removed from fixed, ready-made roles invite the reader to think anew about women; "la femme dans tous ses états" could be the subtitle of O'Connor's work, as it undermines the conventional iconography around Southern women. The comic aspect proposes a carnivalesque revision of societal scripts. On O'Connor's planet, women are taken off their pedestal and away from their shrines: they sweat, they become angry or manipulative, they cry – they are alive! The characters are associated with excess or hyperbole and flash the exuberance of repressed identities gone wild: vegetables, flowers, animals mingle with human traits to generate crazy combinations which release a new form of womanhood through the subversive representational process.

In *American Gargoyles*, Anthony Di Renzo explains that in 16th century Italy, the term 'grotesque' designated "strange murals unearthed at the Baths and Nero's House of Gold: whimsical kaleidoscopes of fantastic figures, neither vegetable, animal nor human, that provoked laughter" (1). The grotesque undermines categorizing and classifying, as its main characteristic is to conflate disparate elements.[8] It creates surprise and shock, and anchors terror in the midst of the comic. O'Connor's use of the multifaceted dimensions of the grotesque fits Di Renzo's analysis. She combines the characters' gigantism with elements unexpected in descriptions of human beings. For instance, in "The Life You Save May be Your Own," Mrs. Lucynell is both huge and compared to an object: she "was about the size of a cedar fence post" (*CS* 146); and in "A Circle in the Fire," Mrs. Prichard's arms are "folded on a shelf of stomach" (*CS* 175), an image suggesting both obesity and reification. Sometimes, the conflation involves inanimate objects, as when Hulga is compared to a "scarecrow" (*CS* 276), or even an edible item, as in the case of Mrs. Guizac who is "shaped like a peanut" (*CS* 195). All these images evoke ugliness and peculiarity, characteristics that are emphasized by the incongruity of the

8 Wolfgang KAYSER, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (Gloucester: MA, 1968), and Geoffrey Galt HARPHAM, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962).

pairing: in "Good Country People," Mrs. Freeman's facial expression is "steady and driving like the advance of a heavy truck" (*CS* 271), while in "A Stroke of Good Fortune," Ruby has "mulberry-colored hair stacked in sausage rolls around her head" which "[balances] like a big florid vegetable" (*CS* 95). The same kind of process is at work in "The River," where Mrs. Connin, followed by three boys and Sarah Mildred, "looked like the skeleton of an old boat with two pointed ends, sailing slowly on the edge of the highway" (*CS* 162). The most striking examples involve animals or natural features, as in "The Displaced Person," where Mrs. McIntyre's eyebrows are "thin and fierce as a spider's leg" (*CS* 222) and Mrs. Shortley's gaze has an animal/predatory quality: she stares "the way a buzzard glides and drops in the air until it alights on the carcass" (*CS* 197) and looks like "the giant wife of the countryside… [s]he stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand self-confidence of a mountain" (*CS* 194). Finally, the character of the hermaphrodite in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," for whom the conflation is based on a combination of male and female elements, emblematizes the anguish created by women's changing role: women becoming men, or being both. As Gleeson-White puts it, "O'Connor creates dissent in terms of bodily dissent" (53).

O'Connor wrote in a culture enamored with the beauty of the body, especially the female body – its perfection being an imperative. By using grotesque female bodies, she revisited canonical visions of femininity and subverted the conventional representational mold. In this way, her grotesque figures resemble medieval gargoyles; as Di Renzo suggests, "there is a profound connection between the gargoyles and monsters that peer down at us from medieval cathedrals and the comic creations of Flannery O'Connor. They are subversive works of art that undermine reductive orthodoxies – the former, the Catholic Scholasticism of the 12th and 13th centuries; the latter, the secular humanism of the 20th" (4). O'Connor explained that "[d]istortion is an instrument in this case; exaggeration has a purpose" (Magee 105); this could be summarized, in Di Renzo's words, as an attempt "to broaden radically, even painfully, our vision of the world to include all that we'd rather leave out" (8), including new places for women to be.

Like Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers theorized her use of the grotesque mode. For example, she explained in "The Flowering Dream:

Notes on Writing" (1959): "Spiritual isolation is the basis of most of my themes […]. Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning it or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about – people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love – their spiritual isolation" (*MH* 274). In an earlier essay, "The Russian Realists and Southern Literature" (1941), she had described the economy of the grotesque, in particular the way the grotesque plays on the incongruous and the paradoxical: "The technique briefly is this: a bold and outwardly juxtaposition of the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of a man with a materialistic detail" (252-253).[9] She underlined how rare this juxtaposition of farce and tragedy was, "except in the works of the Russians and the Southerners [where] they are superimposed one upon the other so that their effects are experienced simultaneously" (253).

McCullers focused on the creative potential of the grotesque in the literary imagination. Her most elaborate character in this respect is Miss Amelia in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, who is described as "a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man" (*BSC* 8). Her manners express the same excess: "Miss Amelia ate slowly and with the relish of a farm hand. She ate with both elbows on the table, bent over the plate, her knees spread wide apart and her feet braced on the rungs of the chair" (*BSC* 16-17). Later, she is described as someone who "was for ever trying out her strength, lifting up heavy objects, or poking her tough biceps with her finger" (*BSC* 55). She practices boxing everyday on her punching bag and becomes a "fine fighter – a little heavy on her feet, but knowing all manner of mean holds and squeezes to make up for this" (*BSC* 72). This unflattering, unexpected female portrait breaks the iconic representation offered in Griffith's medallion; it undermines the codes which, as Minnie Bruce Pratt puts it in her collection of essays *Rebellion*, "can be used to cage us and keep us from shouting for changes" (Pratt 21).

Miss Amelia's independent attitude transgresses established roles; her grotesque appearance mirrors her excessive behavior and opens up a space outside the limits imposed by traditional Southern identity. For

9 In this essay, she refers to the grotesque as "gothic," as it was current at the time to conflate the two terms.

example, her resorting to physical violence to subdue her husband is a grotesque reversal of the violence often used against women. Another interesting aspect is what she does to her husband's Klansman's robe: "that spring she cut up his Klansman's robe to cover her tobacco plants" (*BSC* 41) – an act which runs counter to the frequent image of women making the robes (and therefore supporting the Klan), as in Griffith's movie. In addition, her "refusal to submit to her husband after his return," in Charles Hannon's words, "contradict[s] both the promise and premise of postwar household consumerism displayed in other wartime fiction, and in the product advertisements and wartime announcements that appeared on the pages of the August 1943 *Harper's Bazaar* alongside Carson McCullers' 'The Ballad of the Sad Café'" (qtd. in Gleeson-White 51). Miss Amelia's unconventional postures, gestures and reactions thus force the readers out of their assumptions. The grotesqueries point to the unusual dimension of the character while creating new societal models.

Eudora Welty, like Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers, frequently framed discussions about her writing thanks to references to her background. She often indicated that she "tried to write from the interior of [her] own South" (Prenshaw 92). Her "sense of place" (as she called it) pervades her fiction and her statements about literary creation; she theorized her bond to her region in numerous essays, in particular in "Place in Fiction."[10] For her, "Time and place, the two bases of reference upon which the novel, in seeking to come to grips with human experience, must depend for its validity, operate together […]. Place, the accessible one, the inhabited one, has blessed identity – a proper name, a human history, a visible character […]. Unlike time, place has surface, which will take the imprint of man – his hand, his foot, his mind…" (*ES* 163).[11]

Welty connects the immensity of the land and the intensity of passions (see *ES* 55). She underlines the "healing power of place" (*ES* 131) and calls place "a third character" (*ES* 110).[12] She is particularly sensitive to the

10 Reprinted in *The Eye of the Story* (New York: Vintage International, 1990) 116-133.

11 Moreover, she points out the inner dimension of space symbolism and talks about "Faulkner's mental landscape" (*ES* 103).

12 The genesis of her famous short story "No place for you my love" reveals her deep connection to the South, as she explains in *The Eye of the Story* (110-115).

physical dimension – or "texture" (*ES* 128) – of space, a physicality that brushes off against women.[13] Moreover, she is very much aware of women's place, especially of the way they relate to the domestic space of the house, often endowed with a towering presence.[14] Before becoming a writer, Welty worked as a photographer, a practice which inspired her to devise other spaces – those created by her gaze and mediated by her camera lens. She appropriated the places she saw and captured them in her pictures as other spaces for her imagination to invest. Her project was "to see widely […] the nature of the place" (*ES* 349) and to produce "a record of fact, putting together some of the elements of one time and one place" (*ES* 351).[15]

I believe that her photographic work inspired her to use the grotesque mode in her fiction. She had indeed learned, among other things, to pay attention to certain features as the camera lens necessarily focused on some elements at the expense of others, providing a frame for her vision. She saw the grotesque as a "device" and presented it in the following way: "In those early stories [in *A Curtain of Green* and *The Wide Net*] I'm sure I needed the device of what you call the 'grotesque'. That is, I hoped to differentiate characters by their physical qualities as a way of showing what they were like inside – it seemed to me then the most direct way to do it" (Prenshaw 93). Her work (photographic and literary) particularly reveals her sensitivity to the body and the face. Her use of female grotesques guides her exploration of women's "stage" and their "circumstances," to use her own words. She plays on the hybrid aspect of the grotesque and its potential for incongruous combinations, and offers a carnivalesque image of the Southern belle. For example, in "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies," the women display animal features which undermine their "ladyhood": Mrs. Watts "groans" and Mrs. Carson's voice is as sad as "the soft noises in the

13 What she calls the "thick of [Faulkner's] background" (*ES* 45).

14 Ida McToy's description as a "wonderful eccentric" (*ES* 352) finds an echo in the depiction of her house, a device that is reminiscent of William Faukner's in his short story "A Rose for Emily."

15 Talking about one of the women she photographed, she noted: "the story of her life is in her face" (*ES* 354). Even if her tool was not a pen but a camera, she described it as "an eye, though – not quite mine, but a quicker and an unblinking one – and it couldn't see pain where it looked, or give any, though neither could it catch effervescence, color, transience, kindness, or what was not there. It was what I used, at any rate, and like any tool, it used me" (*ES* 353).

hen house at twilight" (*Col.S* 5). Other "unladylike" elements include Mrs. Watt's intention of shedding the emblem of her "ladyhood," her corset – "I declare, it's so hot, as soon as we get a few miles out of town I'm going to slip my corset down" (*Col.S* 9) –, and Lily's shoddy attire, "a traveling dress made out of part of Mrs. Watt's last summer's mourning" (*Col.S* 9); Lily's unkempt appearance finds an echo in her house, which "leaned steeply to one side, toward the railroad, and the front steps were gone" (*Col.S* 5).

The gigantism of Welty's female figures is both real and metaphoric. In "A Memory," for instance, excess stands out in two ways: through the gigantic body of one character and the gigantic energy of another. When the first one appears, she is deprived of the usual attributes of Southern womanhood; she is almost naked, "in a bathing suit which had no relation to the shape of her body" (*Col.S* 78): it is as if the concealed body came back with a vengeance, imposing its nudity and animality. Her legs resemble "shadowed bulwarks, uneven and deserted" and her laughter sounds like "a slow, repetitious sound" (*Col.S* 78): the female body is exposed in its irregularity and disharmony. Its naturalness speaks against the artificiality of the construction of the body as perfect and harmonious.[16] The second female character deconstructs the other dimension of what could be called the "white female mystique"; her behavior appears outrageous: "The girl in green then came running toward the bench as though she would destroy it, and with a fierceness which took my [the narrator's] breath away, she dragged herself through the air and jumped over the bench" (*Col.S* 79). The horror triggered by the grotesque vision is staged in the story through the narrator's reaction; her repulsion figures the repression underlying coded female behavior: "I felt a peak of horror […]. I lay there, feeling victimized by the sight of the unfinished bulwark where they had piled and shaped the wet sand around their bodies, which changed the appearance of the beach like the ravages of a storm" (*Col.S* 79). The image of the storm encapsulates the shocking, even cruel, impact of the grotesque on the imagination and its creations. As Yaeger puts it, "this cruelty has a function: it tears at the social fabric and leaves it in shreds" (293). Welty's fiction thus proposes new parameters for the space of Southern fiction and expands the paradigms of female identity in the process.

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16 In addition, through her gigantism, "the woman overflows the bounds of acceptable identity to challenge restrictive images of petite and gracious womanhood, written into a history of terror and (self)-denial," as Gleeson-White underlines (50).

Whither Southern Identity?

The grotesque stands for the disjuncted, the twisted, the out of place or out of joint; it expresses the radical female alienation, the "madwoman in the attic" paradigm proposed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and the revisionary process that women writers must engage with in the "battle for self-creation" (49): "Her [the female writer's] revisionary struggle […] often becomes a struggle for what Adrienne Rich has called 'Revision' – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Gilbert & Gubar 49).[17] And to these two elements I would add, using Rich's word, the act of mapping another "atlas" for the imagination. At the same time, the use of the grotesque by Southern female writers speaks for what Gilbert and Gubar call the "anxiety about the impropriety of female invention," which, along with other elements, "mark[s] the woman writer's struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate[s] her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterparts" (50) who have also used the grotesque mode as a tool of dissent. The originality of these women writers resides in their creation of the female grotesque as a distinct literary voice (one might think here of Cixous and her *écriture feminine*); such is their contribution to the Southern imagination. The grotesque does not only have an aesthetic component but a political impact as well, since stylistic representation is turned into cultural re-presentation. It initiates a call to think creatively about the identity of the protagonists through the newly-defined spaces of the imagination, and produces cultural difference in a society where withdrawing to self-enclosed spaces is more often than not a component of the fabric of the cultural Southern narrative.

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SUBVERTING THE PATRIARCHAL PARADIGM OF GENDER RELATIONS IN ELLEN GLASGOW'S GOTHIC SHORT STORIES

> [The Angel in the House] died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality.
>
> Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women"

> One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –
> One need not be a House –
> The Brain has corridors – surpassing
> Material place –
>
> Emily Dickinson

Not long after Dorothy Richardson began publishing her twelve-volume novel *Pilgrimage* and Virginia Woolf started her literary career with *The Voyage Out* (1915), Ellen Glasgow published her feminist short stories within the conventions of the female gothic. Despite the fact that her feminist inclinations are felt in her earlier works, ghost stories offered Glasgow a chance to "critique mainstream male culture, values, and tradition" (Carpenter and Kolmar 1), mainly because, as Anne Williams has it, the gothic "does not merely protest the conditions and assumptions of patriarchal culture, it unconsciously and spontaneously rewrites them" (138).[1] In two of Glasgow's ghost stories, "The Shadowy Third" (1916) and "The Past" (1920), women's attempts at discovering and embracing female bonding become a strategy to subvert the patriarchal paradigm of gendered

1 That is the reason why the female gothic is subversive. Indeed, "[t]he self portrayed there offers a more fully human version of a self-gendered female; it offers an alternative to the 'universal' pattern of the Oedipal structure, the myth that psychoanalysis has privileged as the creator of speaking subjects" (Williams 138-139).

relations.[2] Using feminist literary criticism, combined with theories on space and psychoanalytic theories on language acquisition and subject formation in the interpretation of gothic fiction, I will show how Glasgow used the conventions of the female gothic to demonstrate how women might connect with one another, even across the threshold of life and death, in order to challenge the toxic nature of "normative" patriarchal gender relations. Her heroines create new feminine, and quite possibly even feminist, identities within the space of the gothic household.

Both stories are narrated by sensitive young women – a nurse in "The Shadowy Third," a secretary in "The Past" – who bond with their female charges. Together, they transform stories of oppression into stories of support, a change that is facilitated by the ghosts who appear and "derive from the past passions, past deeds, past crimes of the family identified with this [Gothic] structure" (Williams 45); male destructive power over female life is on the wane through their agency. The narrators immediately sense the atmosphere of female imprisonment, either physical or emotional, which poisons the households (the husband uses the homosocial world against his wife – what once used to be her domain and "sphere" becomes her cell).[3] Mental illness, helplessness and a sense of entrapment in the house – staples of the female gothic – reflect a debilitating relationship with villainous men who at worst tyrannize and at best neglect their wives. Glasgow successfully transfers the horror typically associated with entities of the *unheimlich* to masculine characters who represent the power of patriarchy to silence women.

As a representative of the law of society, the domineering male defines the order of the patriarchal family and of society. In gothic fiction, the patriarchal family as an organizing structure – which is "at once epitome and microcosm of the Symbolic system as a whole" – is visible "in the architecture of the haunted castle or house, in the experience of horror or terror, […] in the dynamic of the 'male' signifier and the 'female' signified" (Williams 87). The position of other family members (either signifiers or

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2 All references are to *The Collected Stories of Ellen Glasgow*. "The Shadowy Third" and "The Past" will be marked parenthetically in the text as (S) and (P) respectively.

3 "The Past" begins with the narrator's ominous comment: "I had no sooner entered the house than I knew something was wrong. Though I had never been in so splendid a place before – it was one of those big houses just off Fifth Avenue – I had a suspicion from the first that the magnificence covered a secret disturbance" (P 119).

signifieds) is determined by their gender: the structurally dominant position is ascribed to men whereas women are in opposition as "the Other"[4]; men see women as defective because they are not males – a paradigm gothic features emphasize. In order to regulate the flow of power, patriarchs have turned to symbolic determinants of power such as authority, logic/reason, and language. These constitute what Jacques Lacan identifies as the Name of the Father.[5] The Law of the Father, which according to Williams "is ubiquitous, overdetermined in this [Gothic] structure" (47), is connected with the formation of individual subjectivity, as during the symbolic stage of its development human existence is located within or without the community (and by implication inside or outside the space of the household). In patriarchal economy, gender-space division does not allow spatial reversal – there is no room for "man's occupation of the interior or the woman's occupation of the exterior" (Wigley 334); woman's confinement to the household in gothic convention is thus a "logical" result of the patriarchal Symbolic.

In patriarchal society, the figure of the father represents the law and is dependent on the recognition of its subjects. As Lacan explained, "[i]t is in the name of the father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law" (74).[6] In preventing women from entering the symbolic order, men repress their autonomous growth and locate females on the

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4 In her study of Lacan's work, Lemaire gives a summary of Lacan's ideas, one of them being the role of the man: "Society and its structures are always present in the form of the family institution and the father, the representative of the law of society into which he will introduce the child by forbidding dual union with the mother […]. By identifying with the father, the child receives a name and a place in the family constellation; restored to himself, he discovers that he is to be made in and by a world of Culture, language and civilization" (92).

5 Lacan speaks of the Law as the embodiment of the Name-of-the-Father. Because the two French words, *non* and *nom*, are connected with the symbolic order, the Lacanian term The Name of the Father can be used interchangeably with The Law of the Father.

6 Lemaire summarizes Lacan's stance on The Law of the Father: "If, then, the father is recognized by the mother both as a man and as the representative of the Law, the subject will have access to the 'Name-of-the-Father' or 'paternal metaphor' (Name-of-the-Father, the signifier of the paternal function or installation of the father in the place of the Other, the symbolic order), which gives the symbolic law of the family its basis" (83).

periphery of both language (women are silenced) and society (isolated in the house). In this sense, any gothic edifice "may be read as a complex metaphor for the structures of cultural power […] and for the gender arrangements such institutions both found and mirror" (Williams 47). Wigley's comments on the intersection of space and gender in renaissance literature provide a useful backdrop for analyzing the patriarchal paradigm of gender relations:

> The design of 'private houses' contains an overt reference to architecture's complicity in the exercise of patriarchal authority by defining a particular intersection between a spatial order and a system of surveillance which turns on the question of gender. Women are to be confined deep within a sequence of spaces at the greatest distance from the outside world while men are to be exposed to that outside. The house is literally understood as a mechanism for the domestication of […] women. (Wigley 332)

Woman's enclosure in the space of her husband's household excludes her from the patriarchal Symbolic. Interestingly, "[j]ust as a house necessarily creates enclosures, so sexual difference and hierarchy […] wall in and wall out the 'others' they acknowledge in defining themselves – whether designated 'the female,' the dark, the dream world, or 'the unspeakable'" (Williams 175). Therefore, patrilineal heritage needs a woman to define itself: the feminine is silent, passive, morally pure, selfless, intuitive and emotional, whereas the masculine connotes reason, authority, and language.

Both charm and professional status as a great surgeon characterize Roland Maradick, the main male character in "The Shadowy Third," so that the narrator concludes that he was "born to be a hero to women" (S 53). The qualities of the epic hero – such as honor, valor, chivalry and loyalty, to which his name alludes – stand in marked contrast to the image of the patriarch that feminists have hailed as the oppressive Other. The narrator asserts Dr. Maradick's heroic and godly image when she acknowledges, "the man was more than a hero to me, he was […] almost a god" (S 57). As if subconsciously ascribing some divine or magical power to the surgeon's irresistible influence on women (S 57), the narrator goes on worshipping her hero: "I suppose it was my 'destiny' to be caught in the web of Roland Maradick's personality" (S 54). However, beneath the charming exterior lie the authority and reason of a man with such an established professional reputation that society does not challenge the motivations behind his decisions. Speculation about his reasons for entering matrimony, which might reveal his cold logic and his skill at manipulation, is always quickly

dismissed. His charisma and reputation likewise prevent the spreading of rumors connecting him with his stepdaughter's death (if Mrs. Maradick dies, the vast fortune she inherited upon her daughter's demise will go to him).

Dr. Maradick wields such complete power over the fair sex that women either adore or fear him; there is no middle ground. Nurse Randolph, the narrator, "could tell by the look of terror in [Mrs. Maradick's] face whenever his step passed down the hall that her very soul shivered at his approach" (S 65). This alone should make the nurse reconsider the foundations of her adoration for, and trust in, her employer. However, so intoxicated is she with his charm and authority that she initially sees her patient's "fear of Doctor Maradick [as] [no]thing but a fancy" (S 66) and tends to put her fits of terror down to "unaccountable prejudices" or "a mere whim or aversion" (S 66). The turning point comes when Dr. Maradick resolves to commit his wife to a mental asylum, whose enclosed space, according to the gothic formula, conveys repression and frustration and connotes the finality of the imprisonment in the gothic castle. Dr. Brandon, an alienist educated in Germany who "treat[s] every emotion as a pathological manifestation" (S 62), supports Dr. Maradick's decision to institutionalize his wife. Both doctors, as exponents of the medical profession, are utterly devoid of "the sympathy that, historically, women often found missing in male physicians in the nineteenth century" (Newberry 152).[7] As proponents of rationality and logic, the doctors cannot properly diagnose the female patient's mental/emotional state and they consequently commit her to an asylum, thus proving once again their unarguable authority over female life.[8]

As the head of the family, the man controls the distribution of power, which is transmitted in the access to language. The ability to institute order

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7 A substantial number of nineteenth-century women writers did create "male physicians as idealized projections of the way men ought to be, whether as father figures, potential husbands, or, quite simply, friends" (Newberry 151-152).

8 Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is perhaps the best-known American gothic story presenting the motif of mental oppression in marriage, with the heroine's imprisonment in a nursery by an authoritative husband/physician who misdiagnosed her 'illness.' Doctors whose rationality prevents them from understanding female maladies repeatedly find their way into Glasgow's stories: Dr. Drayton, a nerve specialist, is unable to help Mrs. Beckwith in "Dare's Gift," and an array of doctors cannot cure Mrs. Vanderbridge's nervous ailment in "The Past."

over chaos lies within the capabilities of language[9]; indeed, by reproducing reality, language organizes its elements.[10] Consequently, to possess language is to have the monopolistic right to observe and shape reality. In order to indoctrinate society with a vision of reality that privileges their position, patriarchs have to 'own' a language that perpetuates woman's marginality. They appropriate the power of language and reason to convey binary oppositions constituting the patriarchal order (such as male/female, reality/appearance, presence/lack).[11] As language and society affect each other, women become excluded from any decision about either.

The acquisition of language offers entrance into the symbolic stage of development. Located outside language, women are stripped of the power to represent their selfhood. Once it dawns on Mrs. Maradick that her husband has married her for her money, she is terrified for she knows that her newly discovered "truth" will never have the upper hand over his authority and surface charm. In other words, she understands that language has power over reality and that the patriarch is in the position of ultimate power; that is why her "whisper of suppressed intensity" (S 59) signifies her resignation to her marginalized position in matrimony. All she can do is moan "inarticulately, as if the horror of her thoughts were too great to pass into speech" (S 60). As Pamela Matthews puts it, "Mrs. Maradick's voicelessness indicates her inability to control her own environment against the superior power of her husband" (121). The surrender and extinction of a woman's identity in marriage precipitates the patriarchal exclusion of her subjectivity from the sociolinguistic community.

Lacan's theory that language is "the precondition for the act of becoming aware of oneself as a distinct entity" (Lemaire 54) seems to find confirmation

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9 Lemaire, following Chomsky, maintains that language alone "allows the order of the world to be instituted, and then allows acts of reflexion and of consciousness upon the world and upon sense impressions to be carried out. Language […] serves above all as an organ of thought, consciousness and reflection" (51).

10 Lacan believes that "language re-produces reality. As there is no thought without language *(langage)*, knowledge of the world, of others and of self is determined by language *(langage)*" (Lemaire 52-53).

11 Lemaire explains the human need to see the world in binary oppositions as follows: "because consciousness of self is only possible if it is felt in contrast to the Thou which actualizes the concept of non-me. It is the I-Thou dialectic, defining the subjects by their mutual opposition, which founds subjectivity" (53).

in "The Shadowy Third." Roland Maradick controls language and therefore the distribution of truth. During her first conversation with him, Nurse Randolph is intimidated by his coercive though seemingly benevolent voice and by his command of the situation, and can only murmur in response to his questions. After their talk is over, she realizes that he has used "a few carefully chosen words about his wife's illness" and that "he had really told me nothing" (S 57).[12] The nurse's respect of her employer's words shows that she recognizes in him the Law of the Father. Interestingly, Dr. Maradick's powerful command of language and, by extension, of the *status quo* in his house is intensified by the space where the conversation takes place. In order to remind the nurse of her professional alliances, he summons her to his study, the room that "is the true center of the house. This new space marks the internal limit to the woman's authority in the house" (Wigley 348). However, in spite of the doctor's attempts at intimidating his employee with "the splendour of [his] presence" (S 63) and the threat of entrapment in the intellectual and rational space of his study (he blocks her "retreat" by closing the door), Miss Randolph begins to find reserves of courage to challenge his medical diagnosis.

In order to counter the patriarchal paradigm of power relations, women have to create a self-supporting world of their own.[13] The appearance of the ghost – in this case Mrs. Maradick's daughter – slowly but gradually strengthens the bond between living women. On her first day of work, Miss Randolph sees the child, unaware that she is an entity of the other domain. She notices her uncanny characteristics: Dorothea's eyes are full "of profound experience, of bitter knowledge" (S 56) [14] and she has an "enigmatical and

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12 Matthews observes that Dr. Maradick's "authority [lies] in his words and in his recognition that he does not have to 'really' say anything to wield it" (120).

13 The limitations of female freedom and integrity lead to the development of compassionate female bonding, which answers women's emotional and intellectual needs Carroll Smith-Rosenberg explains, "While closeness, freedom of emotional expression, and uninhibited physical contact characterized women's relationships with each other, the opposite was frequently true of male-female relationships" (1978: 350).

14 When the nurse admits to having seen the child, the face of the grief-stricken mother glows with happiness, but she begs Miss Randolph not to mention it to the doctor as she is aware of the horrific repercussions it would have. Indeed, when she later reveals her ability to see the ghost, the nurse experiences the devastating impact of the power of male reason and language. By sharing the secret awareness of abusive

vaguely wondering expression" (S 59). Not apprehending yet that the ghost is insurance against the annihilation of the matrilineal heritage, Miss Randolph partially accepts the patriarchal dialectic of reason and believes that her patient might be mentally unstable and thus hallucinating.

Shifting attitudes towards the patient and the ghostly child mark Miss Randolph's gender alliances in the patriarchal household. The nurse's sympathies initially lie on both sides of the power struggle. On the one hand, she accepts patriarchal representations of the "truth" about Mrs. Maradick's health and life. On the other hand, her female instinct makes her sympathize with her patient and allows her to sense that there is "nothing hysterical or violent about [Mrs. Maradick's] mania – or hallucination" (S 59). Eventually, the nurse has to take sides and choose between believing the male version of reality and listening to her inner voice, her female intuition. The moment Dr. Brandon comes to take his patient to a mental asylum, she is certain that she has to pledge allegiance to the terrorized wife (S 67). Following her instinctual compassion, the nurse rejects the power of reason: "I was conscious of an inner struggle, as if opposing angels warred somewhere in the depths of my being. When at last I made my decision, I was acting less from *reason*, I knew, than in obedience to the pressure of some *secret current of thought*" (S 64, emphasis added). It is sympathy and understanding that enable the nurse "to penetrate the web of material fact and see the spiritual form of the child" and to behold the mother and her ghostly daughter locked in such a passionate embrace "that their forms seemed to mingle in the gloom that enveloped them" (S 67).

Williams's analysis of ghosts in the context of the Symbolic has direct relevance to Dorothea's role. A gothic manifestation of the supernatural, the little girl is also a manifestation of a "pattern of anxiety about the Symbolic: […] such phenomena suggest the fragility of our usual systems of making sense of the world" (Williams 70).[15] The ghost thus confirms that spiritual and intuitive ways of knowing are inaccessible to those who regard female identity condescendingly. Even though her patient's ordeals seem to

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power of patriarchy, Miss Randolph has access to knowledge of the female world, which, in turn, opens the door to female solidarity.

15 In an earlier passage, Williams explains: "the familial Gothic trappings of darkness, the supernatural, the haunted castle, and so on, all express, in their various ways, the tension between the Symbolic and the inexpressible other – 'the female,' and 'maternal,' the 'Semiotic'" (66).

accelerate the nurse's growth toward confidence in female bonding, at this stage Miss Randolph is still too weak to embrace her femininity through courageous opposition to the males, whose "eyes of flesh" (S 68) – metaphors for exclusive reliance on intellect and reason – prevent them from seeing the apparition.[16] She does find the courage to challenge the medical diagnosis of Mrs. Maradick's (in)sanity (S 64), but she cannot oppose and fight masculine logic yet, as her female intuition is still wanting.

Mrs. Maradick's death comes as no surprise if one considers the mental oppression she has undergone in the house and the asylum.[17] Still under the influence of her relationship with her patient, the nurse believes that she has "died simply of the terror of life" (S 68) [18] – the terror of life with her husband, one would like to add. However, deprived of contact with the feminine world and absorbed by the authority of the masculine, Miss Randolph loses touch with her matrilineal heritage and stops seeing the ghost. She even begins to rationalize the events and believes the apparition to have been "an optical illusion" (S 68). Once the passage of time silences her awareness of the female heritage and its nurturing dimension, the nurse succumbs to male reason and logic:

> It does not take long for a phantom to fade from the memory – especially when one leads the active and methodical life I was forced into that winter. Perhaps […] the doctors may have been right, after all, and the poor lady may have actually been out of her mind. With this view of the past, my judgment of Doctor Maradick insensibly altered. It ended, I think, in my acquitting him altogether. (S 68-69)

Deprived of the supportive power of female bonding, she can no longer accept non-rational experiences or challenge received notions of gender dualisms.

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16 Bearing in mind the mystique surrounding Dr. Maradick, Miss Peterson's (the day nurse) unwavering loyalty to patriarchs should not come as a surprise. She is "armored and encased in her professional manner" (S 66) and has shaped her own character to resemble masculine reason and logic. Of course, this happens at the expense of her feminine empathy, intuition and sympathy towards the female patient in her care. She too sees the world through "eyes of flesh."

17 Mrs. Maradick's imprisonment in her room upstairs parallels that of the heroine in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." This entrapment in the far regions of the household, either in the attic or the cellar, is characteristic of gothic convention (Williams 43-48).

18 Williams names terror as one of the organizing principles of female gothic (104).

Gaston Bachelard's observations about topoanalysis – "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (8) – helps us to see the importance of Mrs. Maradick's attachment to her home in the formation of her identity. Since the early days of her marriage, Mrs. Maradick has been uncompromising about only one thing: despite her husband's wishes and her love for him, she has refused to leave the house on lower Fifth Avenue where she was born and to move uptown, mainly because she is a woman "of strong attachments to both persons and places" (S 55). In *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*, Anne Williams highlights the relation between the edifice and social structure in gothic conventions and explains that the structure, be it castle, mansion, or any other edifice, "embodies the principle of cultural order" (44) and by implication the Lacanian Law of the Father (46). The Maradicks' mansion constitutes an interesting twist. On the one hand, the house represents the Symbolic order of language and culture, following Williams's general contention that "its walls, towers, ramparts suggest external identity, the 'corridors of power,' consciousness, whereas its dungeons, attics, secret rooms, and dark hidden passages connote the culturally female, the sexual, the maternal, the unconscious" (44). Indeed, Mrs. Maradick's existence is controlled by the external identity of her husband, who entraps her in the space of the gothic household, "a public identity enfolding (and organizing) the private, the law enclosing, controlling, dark 'female' otherness" (Williams 44).

On the other hand, Glasgow modifies the function of the gothic household to connect domesticity with female solidarity. The domestic space, a site of gender oppression, constitutes a link between generations of women, and as such it allows the transmission of matrilineal heritage.[19] Mrs. Maradick's identity remains inscribed in the household after her death, as any gothic edifice is "a cultural artifact linked with the name of a particular family" (Williams 44). Her ancestral home is the last reminder of her existence. In order to utterly obliterate her sovereignty, Mr. Maradick intends to sell the house to make room for an apartment-house. The threat of discontinuation of the matrilineal heritage restores Miss Randolph's connection with the

19 In their discussion of women's attachment to their houses, Carpenter and Kolman mention E.D.E.N. Southworth's *The Haunted Homestead* (1860) and Amelie Rives's *The Ghost Garden* (1918). They claim that in ghost stories written by women "[h]ouses haunted by women provide a powerful image of the house as an embodiment of female tradition" (16).

feminine world. Once again, the timely appearance of Dorothea's ghost brings Miss Randolph closer to her female self and revives the severed bond between women.

The final scene of the short story reveals that the conflict between genders has to escalate for the story to move to its resolution. The doctor's engagement to an old flame who had jilted him on account of his inadequate financial status confirms the rumor that appropriation of his wife's property was the only reason for his marriage. Now wealthy and unhampered by nuptial ties, Mr. Maradick prepares himself for his second marriage (which brings to mind the gothic convention of the female being "mortal, expendable matter/*mater*" [Williams 43]). That is when the nurse joins with the ghostly double to demand retribution for the sins committed against the fair sex.[20] She sees a child's skipping-rope coiled on the stairs and, obeying her duty, switches on the light for her employer: "With a spring I […] reached the electric button, flooding the hall with light; but as I did so, while my arm was still outstretched behind me, I heard the humming voice change to a cry of surprise or terror, and the figure on the staircase tripped heavily and stumbled with groping hands into emptiness" (S 71). Like the voice she has been deprived of by patriarchy, the scream of warning dies in her throat, as if in defiance of the Law of the Father. As Matthews observes, "[t]he verbal power that could have saved him becomes instead an instrument of his death" (123). Through her final alliance with Mrs. Maradick, the nurse tries to stand up to the oppressor, the male Other, and in so doing they both (or possibly the three of them – counting the child ghost) subvert the assumptions behind the Law of the Father. Through identification, empathy, and understanding, these women undermine patriarchal visions of their lives and revive the silenced female tradition. The rejection of a rational explanation of her employer's death (the nurse believes it was the result of "an invisible judgment" [S 72]) constitutes a form of restorative catharsis for Miss Randolph and marks her final identification with the female world.

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20 I am inclined to share Marcelle Thiébaux's belief that Miss Randolph actively participates in Dr. Maradick's death: "She saw the rope an instant before he tripped; she wanted to reach the light switch, to warn him, she says, although the sudden flooding of the light might have startled him into losing his balance. The mingling of the ghost's will with the narrator's own gives this tale a rich psychic dimension" (185).

Although the presentation of the male's impact on the female's existence and that of the ghost's subversion of male tyranny in "The Past" are drastically different from those in "The Shadowy Third," there is no escaping a comparison, even if the descriptions of the male as "the Other" and of the ghost as the double are less clear-cut. This time, the ghost is Roger Vanderbridge's first wife, who accompanies him and his second wife during dinners. Neither of them admits to seeing the ghost to the other. Among the staff members, only the secretary (Miss Wrenn, the narrator) and the black servants can see the apparition. Except for the initial 'Prince Charming' image, Mr. Vanderbridge is presented in stark opposition to Dr. Maradick.[21] The eerie atmosphere in the house cannot be ascribed to the terror due to the power of male authority or dominance. Indeed, Mr. Vanderbridge's reasoning faculties are mentioned only once, when the narrator admits she "imagined [him] to be a methodical man" (P 135), as is his ontological power over reality, visible in his command of language, which is connected to his wife's "nervous quiver of [the] mouth" (P 120) and "nervous chatter" (P 126). Mrs. Vanderbridge's hysterical jabbering is not only a smokescreen to divert attention from her feelings of pain, discontent and anxiety,[22] it also indicates her acceptance of female irrationality. Women were socially conditioned to be emotional, sensitive and intuitional, and hysterical behavior was considered to be "an intensification of woman's traditional passivity and dependence, […] fragility, emotionality" (Smith-Rosenberg 1985: 207). Mrs. Vanderbridge's incoherent speech stands in opposition to the hegemonic discourse of male reason and relegates her to a subservient position.

Miss Wrenn's instinctual allying with Mrs. Vanderbridge, who seems to be in distress, leads her to "hate" the head of the family before meeting him (P 124). To her surprise, Roger Vanderbridge has none of the characteristics of the villain. On the contrary, "there wasn't anything vicious or violent in his nature"; his "was the noblest face I have ever seen," and "[f]rom the way he

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21 Like Dr. Maradick's, Mr. Vanderbridge's charm overpowers all the women around him. His wife bitterly admits that "Isn't that a face any woman might fall in love with, a face any woman – living or dead – would not be willing to give up?" (P 122)

22 Mrs. Vanderbridge's hysterical speech illustrates Williams's contention that in gothic "speakers may become 'incoherent,' the 'nonsense' they utter derived not only from violations of the linguistic rules but also from the speaker's own breakdown in madness or hysteria" (69).

looked at his wife I could tell that there was no lack of love or tenderness on his side any more than there was on hers" (P 124). However, the situation at the dinner table unveils another side to Mr. Vanderbridge. As he falls into a reverie, the ghost of his first wife materializes. Enclosed in abstraction, sadness and guilt, he becomes apathetic and unresponsive to his present wife's fear: "The past was with him so constantly – he was so steeped in the memories of it – that the present was scarcely more than a dream to him" (P 134). The ghost seems to be maliciously feeding on his anxiety: "The phantom had been victorious so far, and he was like a man recovering from the effects of a narcotic. He was only half awake, only half alive to the events through which he lived and the people who surrounded him" (P 134). Mr. Vanderbridge's "detached and spiritualized" (P 137) condition causes his withdrawal from participation in reality, and his passive indifference inflicts mental suffering on his current wife. This in itself constitutes a transgression of a patriarch's duty to exercise due care for his dependents. The problem is not his unawareness of the vampirization of his second wife by the ghost of the first; it is that negligence and lack of attention to his wife's needs are less demanding for him than confronting the past. Thus, while his brooding cannot be unequivocally subsumed under the category of intentional evil, it is also a far cry from involuntary action. In his discussion of the "antiquarian ghost story" as practiced by Le Fanu and M. R. James, Sullivan suggests that idleness or weakness provokes apparitional evil. Glasgow effectively illustrates this claim in "The Past." An ineffectual, weak man may be as guilty of gender trouble as tyrannical patriarchs.

As in "The Shadowy Third," the resolution of the marital impasse lies in a regenerative relationship between women, whose transformative power in this case surfaces due to the ghost's androgynous behavioral patterns. Unlike Mrs. Maradick, Mrs. Vanderbridge has two contrasting female doubles: Miss Wrenn, who offers her much-needed support, and the first Mrs. Vanderbridge, who paradoxically allows her to redefine her female identity and create a new, more satisfying status quo in the household. Mrs. Vanderbridge's ghostly counterpart escapes easy categorization, as it is at the same time her double and her opposite. Through this dual function Glasgow reveals the complicated nature of women, which was often debased by men in life and fiction. On the one hand, sharing the same house and husband locates the first Mrs. Vanderbridge in the domain of the double; on the other, realizing that the ghost haunts not the house but the male, the

servants refer to the ghostly double as "the Other One." As an androgynous identity that reconfigures the gender categories which are deeply inscribed in the dichotomy masculine/feminine and male/female,[23] the ghost changes gender alliances and becomes "the Other." The first Mrs. Vanderbridge was characterized by features traditionally deemed masculine and antithetical to the feminine ideal: her stubbornness, assertiveness, feistiness and jealousy placed her on the male side of the gender continuum as either an androgyne or the monstrous outgrowth of a woman.[24] Her transcendence of woman's prescribed personal identity brings to mind Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject: the other which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). This definition neatly applies to the late Mrs. Vanderbridge's androgynous propensities, which challenge received notions of gender dualism within the patriarchal order. The phantom is the Other to both sexes – it is abject to men because it is feminine,[25] and to women because it appropriates masculine tactics and behavioral patterns. Matthews also sees the Other One's appropriation of the masculine in her relationships to other women, which "depend on competition, on jealousy, on possessiveness, on territoriality" (133). The apparition's animosity or "resentful spite" towards her successor (P 126) clearly excludes her from the enriching potential of belonging to the female spiritual community.

The Other One's gaze is further proof of her transcending categories of masculine and feminine demeanor. Not only does she direct a "look of animosity and bitterness" (P 138) at the mistress of the house, she also appropriates the "male" predatory gaze. By blending the normative duality of the female and male categories, the phantom metamorphoses from the female double into a Lacanian Other. Because voyeurism is socially

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23 Relevant discussions of androgynous identities can be found in Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973).

24 The late Mrs. Vanderbridge's assertiveness, resolution and jealousy can be viewed as masculine traits. While discussing a pairing of "angelically selfless Snow White" and "a wickedly assertive Stepmother," Gilbert and Gubar arrive at the conclusion that assertiveness and aggressiveness "are 'monstrous' in women precisely because [they become] 'unfeminine' and therefore unsuited to a gentle life of 'contemplative purity'" (28).

25 According to Williams, the abject is associated with the feminine, because the (m)other is "mater, material, matrix, and the repression of that element by Western culture might well be regarded as the source of several notoriously 'Gothic' emotions – horror and terror above all" (11).

gendered, the power structure of male/female relations is reflected in the act of gazing: the man is the active agent whereas the female is the passive recipient of the all-powerful male gaze.[26] In other words, one's gender gives or denies one's right to gaze. In this sense, the phantom defies the social code: "from the moment of her entrance, [she was] the dominant figure at the table. You tried to pretend she wasn't there, and yet you knew – you knew vividly that she was gazing insolently straight through you" (P 127). With the impudence of her gaze, the Other One reproduces the male need to dominate and becomes the male "penetrator." By assuming a different identity and substituting the ever-watching "eye" for "I,"[27] she tries to subvert the patriarchal deformation, if not obliteration, of female subjectivity in marriage.[28] However, it should be noted that she does not create an autonomous space and identity of her own, but merely reverses stereotypical gender roles. Her aim is not to diminish gender polarity but to broaden her options of action within the socio-cultural reality of turn-of-the-century America. Thus, instead of subverting the masculine/feminine duality through her persistent presence in the house (P 134), the phantom reinforces the patriarchal structure.[29]

The ghost's androgynous propensity offers the present Mrs. Vanderbridge a choice between espousing or rejecting her femininity. At first, she embraces the feminine ideal of acceptance, submissiveness and suffering in silence (P 131); as if drained of vital energy by the phantom, she allows her to take

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26 Edward Snow explains that feminism identifies the male gaze with "voyeurism, objectification, fetishism, scopophilia, woman as the object of male pleasure and the bearer of male lack, etc. Masculine vision is almost invariably characterized as patriarchal, ideological, and phallocentric" (30).

27 See Williams's *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*.

28 Mrs. Vanderbridge, even after death, fights with female non-existence. The Victorian duality between body and spirit lay at the foundation of gendered reality. Men denied physical presence to their wives outside marriage, and women were considered ephemeral and ornamental appendages to their husbands. That is why the first Mrs. Vanderbridge, much like Ligeia in Poe's eponymous story, comes back from the grave not as a celestial spirit but as a vengeful phantom.

29 Androgynous identities do not merely reflect gender dichotomies, they also offer a commentary on cultural and social categories particular to various societies and communities. The first Mrs. Vanderbridge provides a cultural mirror as she reflects the transgression of prescribed feminine ways of behavior which were close to extinction with the appearance of the New Woman.

precedence over her in Mr. Vanderbridge's thoughts. However, her decision to clear out the room where her husband used to shut himself up in the months following his first wife's death (P 134) offers a solution to the power asymmetry of their marital triangle. As the narrator understands it, Mr. Vanderbridge's former habit[30] "was the secret reason why my employer was sending the furniture away. She had resolved to clear the house of every association with the past" (P 134). The bundle of love letters Miss Wrenn accidentally comes upon exemplifies what Williams identifies as the "monstrous domestic secret" (10) so frequent in gothic fiction. Williams further explains that the "[r]esolution of the conventional Gothic mystery coincides with the revelation of a particular family secret, usually a hitherto unrecognized aspect of family relationship" (45). It turns out that these letters were written by the first Mrs. Vanderbridge's lover after her marriage and that she kept them in a "secret compartment" of the desk, like "a sacred treasure" (P 135). Generally, in gothic convention, "a grand, mysterious dwelling conceal[s] the violent, implicitly sexual secrets of [an] *homme fatal*" (Williams 38). In "The Past," the secret is a woman's. This is the locus of the late Mrs. Vanderbridge's subversion of the patriarchal Symbolic. Through an extramarital affair she has silently crossed over the line defining prescribed gender roles.

Mark Wigley's remarks about the intersections between space and sexuality in renaissance literature can also be applied to the Vanderbridge house (both the edifice and the family). Woman's confinement in the domestic space guarantees her chastity and therefore the legitimacy of man's offspring. The space of the house is meant to circumscribe her sexuality, which, in a wider perspective, translates into the security and stability of the patriarchal order:

> [The] primary role [of the house] is to protect the father's genealogical claims by isolating women from other men. Reproduction is understood as reproduction of the father. The law of the house is undoubtedly no more than the law of the father. The physical house is the possibility of the patriarchal order that appears to be applied to it. (Wigley 336)

30 Mr. Vanderbridge's grieving process exemplifies the relationship between memory and space; indeed, as Bachelard puts it, "the more securely [memories] are fixed in space, the sounder they are" (9).

Unprotected, or uncontrolled, by the four walls of the house,[31] the first Mrs. Vanderbridge not only called into question her own virtue as a woman [32] but also her husband's prospective paternity. She thus exposed patriarchal (in)effectiveness at regulating woman's nature and maintaining the patriarchal order.

The late Mrs. Vanderbridge opposed the process of domestication instituted through women's confinement in the house. Marriage, as a social institution, is designed to curb women's personalities, desires and expectations, and the house, as a place of entrapment, allows for such control. "As the mechanism of, rather than simply the scene for, this control, the house is involved in the production of the gender division it appears to merely secure. In those terms, the role of architecture is explicitly the control of sexuality, or, more precisely, women's sexuality, the chastity of the girl, the fidelity of the wife" (Wigley 336). The first wife clearly did not want her selfhood to be subordinated in matrimony. She did not allow the spatial order of her husband's house to domesticate her true nature; the secret stash of love letters is the living reminder of her unruly self. The secretary sees in those letters the opportunity for her employer to win her husband back, "to make him think of her [i.e. his first wife] differently […] to break for ever the thought that draws her back to him" (P 137). Proving the Other One's sexual misbehaviour [33] would certainly offer revenge to Mrs. Vanderbridge. However, it would involve competitiveness and aggression – masculine traits – and thus would mean stooping to the ghost's level and perpetuating gender dualism.

The apparition's animosity and bitterness reveal to Mrs. Vanderbridge that resorting to male problem-solving strategies (such as violence and oppression) is not a solution. She therefore decides to confront the Other One verbally rather than allow her vampirizing influence and her husband's

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31 Wigley comments that "[t]he woman on the outside is implicitly sexually mobile. Her sexuality is no longer controlled by the house" (335).

32 "A woman's interest, let alone active role, in the outside calls into question her virtue" (Wigley 335).

33 As a sexual, seductive and less than perfectly faithful wife, the first Mrs. Vanderbridge illustrates the Victorian logic about female nature. Chastity and modesty win in a good woman, whereas the *femme fatale* is the incarnation of passion and power. The figure of the demon-woman is the expression of men's phobia but also of their subconscious sexual fantasies about female assertiveness and power.

neglect to kill her (those two interpenetrate – the latter being more harmful).[34] Facing the phantom, she says: "The only way […] is to fight fairly even when one fights evil" (P 138). The ghost, quite unintentionally, has thus weakened the heroine's dependency on the male for the shaping of her identity. Moral superiority ("Nothing is mine that I cannot win and keep fairly" [P 138]) and the reforming power of empathy transform the apparition: "the dread and fear, the evil purpose, were no longer a part of her. […] It was just as if a curse had turned into a blessing" (P 138). The current Mrs. Vanderbridge's self-sufficiency and realization of the need for self-responsibility anticipate Anaïs Nin's claim that women have to actively shape their own existence: "to take destiny into our own hands is more inspiring than expecting others to direct our destiny for us" (25). However, this cannot be done at the expense of the other gender:

> To become man, or like man, is no solution. That is merely a displacement of power. […] The women who truly identify with their oppressor […] are the women who are acting like men, masculinizing themselves, not those who seek to convert or transform man. There is no liberation of one group at the expense of another." (28)

Mrs. Vanderbridge embraces her feminine identity and empathizes with both her husband and her ghostly double, thus depriving the apparition of reasons to haunt them. Earlier, the phantom was like a screen for Mr. Vanderbridge's projections of anxiety and unresolved guilt and thus had power over him. Without jealousy and competitiveness as a breeding ground for her violence, the apparition is appeased: she is no longer "hurt and tragic and revengeful" (P 133). Thanks to "a great pity, a great sorrow and sweetness" (P 138), compassion and understanding – all sources of the renewal of her repressed female self – the mistress of the house reconfigures domestic power in her household. As the narrator retrospectively puts it,

> Mrs. Vanderbridge had triumphed over the past in the only way that she could triumph. She had won, not by resisting, but by accepting; not by violence, but by gentleness; not by grasping, but by renouncing. […] she had robbed the phantom of power over her by robbing it of hatred. She had changed the thought of the past, in that lay her victory. (P 138-139)

Striking a balance between a questionable ideal of marriage and supportive female bonding that transcends heterosexual limitations seems to be the

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34 I share Carpenter's impression that "Mr. Vanderbridge is killing his wife through his neglect, weakness, and insensitivity; he is far more dangerous to her than the ghost" (131).

key to woman's harmonious existence. Only through cooperation, not competitiveness, can women refuse male objectification and discover their repressed subjectivity.

In order to oppose abusive, obstructive, or negligent males, the women in these stories form compassionate bonds, which helps them clarify the boundaries of identity. They act against the hegemonic discourse of patriarchal authority, reason and language by identifying with other women, either living or dead. The ghosts, acting as doubles, play their part, intentionally or not, in weakening male destructive power over female life: either a beyond-the-grave revenge causes the man's death, or domestic power is reconfigured. The gothic household, which "puts into play the anxieties, tensions, and imbalances inherent in family structures" (Williams 46), internalizes patriarchal oppression; at the same time, it becomes the arena where Glasgow's female protagonists triumph over patriarchy by embracing their ghostly doubles' strategies of silent, yet persistent, resistance.

Glasgow's ghost stories are synecdochal figures of a female gothic tradition and illustrate the revolutionary potential of the gothic convention: they "not only 'realize' the Law of the Father, they also expose its fissures and explore its secret chambers" (Williams 175). Both narratives subvert the assumptions behind the Law of the Father: as ghost stories, they typically "have multiple meanings, but one constant element is the challenge they offer to the rational order and the observed laws of nature, though they may do so in a variety of ways, reintroducing what is perceived as fearful, alien, excluded or dangerously marginal" (Briggs 122). In order to give a new shape to the patriarchal paradigm of gender relations, women have to confront what has been excluded or marginalized – their femininity. What Glasgow seems to suggest further is that women should be responsible for shaping their own destinies, preferably with the aid of other women. However, even though she added her voice to the suffragists' cry and advocated woman's rebellion against the patriarchal right to define women's lives through the embracement of matrilineal heritage and female bonding, she, like other Southern women writers of her time, did not present what women could do after such a rebellion.

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L'ESPACE DE LA PEUR : MANIPULATIONS ET SUBTERFUGES GOTHIQUES DANS *DARK WATERS* (ANDRÉ DE TOTH, 1944)

> In *Dark Waters*, I wanted the "Gothic" to dominate, not the locations.
>
> André De Toth (Slide 56)

Produit indépendamment des grands studios en 1944 par Benedict Bogeaus et réalisé par André De Toth, *Dark Waters* est encore inédit en France. Il a récemment été restauré par les services de préservation de l'Université de Californie à Los Angeles. C'est l'un des premiers films de la carrière américaine de De Toth (1912-2002), et le fait qu'il ait été tourné en période de guerre n'en a pas facilité la diffusion outre-Atlantique. Pourtant, la distribution est particulièrement prestigieuse, avec entre autres Merle Oberon (*Wuthering Heights*, 1939), Franchot Tone (*The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, 1935), Thomas Mitchell (*Stagecoach*, 1939) ou encore Fay Bainter (*Jezebel*, 1938). L'ambiance menaçante et le jeu d'acteurs, renforcés par la bande son, font de ce thriller psychologique pourtant tourné dans l'urgence un parfait exemple de chef-d'œuvre oublié. Les biographes de Merle Oberon désignent même le film comme un exemple de l'une des meilleures prestations de l'actrice (Higham & Moseley 167). Le problème majeur pour De Toth était le nombre de producteurs : « "Trop de cuisiniers dans la cuisine", dira[-t-il] de ce film qui ne comptait pas moins de cinq producteurs. Il y avait aussi le challenge de recréer toute cette ambiance "Southern Gothic" sur un plateau du Hollywood General Studio » (Garnier 86-87). De plus, comme il le souligne dans ses mémoires, Joan Harrison (*Rebecca*,

1940), bien que seule scénariste créditée au générique du film, avait été très largement aidée par John Huston (*The Maltese Falcon*, 1941) [1].

De Toth n'hésite pas à écrire dans ses mémoires : « the script was atrocious, an insult even to mud-heads » (327). Malgré tout, le film conserve une bonne partie des éléments présents dans la novelette de Frank et Marian Cockrell parue en quatre parties dans le *Saturday Evening Post*. Plusieurs détails furent ajoutés soit par Harrison et Huston, soit par De Toth lui-même [2], de manière à donner à l'intrigue la cohérence qui lui manquait. Après le torpillage par les Japonais du bateau qui l'emmène aux États-Unis avec ses parents, Leslie Calvin (Merle Oberon), désormais orpheline, est hospitalisée et encouragée à écrire à la seule parente qui lui reste, sa tante Emily Lamont (Fay Bainter), qu'elle n'a jamais rencontrée, pour lui demander son soutien. Dans sa réponse, Emily l'invite à emménager chez elle, à la plantation Rossignol près de Belleville en Louisiane, lieu qui se transformera vite en un véritable espace de la peur pour la jeune femme.

Tourné entre le 15 mai et le 20 juillet 1944 au General Studio d'Hollywood, le film parvient à donner une image fidèle du Sud avec ses demeures gigantesques et opulentes, sa végétation abondante et ses bayous menaçants : tout dans la mise en scène participe à créer un espace oppressant pour l'étrangère qu'est Leslie. En parlant des réalisateurs, les biographes de Merle Oberon saluent chez De Toth un certain « Gothic flair, using all-out melodramatic effects as the heroine cowers in fear before banging shutters, a sudden plunge of a room into darkness, an echoing voice in the swamp calling her name, sinister relatives bent on charming her at a candlelit table… » (Higham et Moseley, 1983 : 167). En effet, De Toth et ses assistants ont tout mis en œuvre pour créer une ambiance particulièrement pesante en insistant sur les détails les plus sombres contenus dans la nouvelle des Cockrell et en en ajoutant de nouveaux :

> It was a story of a Gothic prison, focusing on the people in it and not the expanse of location. […] To shoot it as real as Louisiana, it wasn't necessary to shoot in Louisiana; my aim was to focus the attention on the people living in that mansion. I went to

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1 Selon les biographes de Merle Oberon, c'est en raison du mécontentement de l'actrice à la lecture du script que De Toth s'était adressé à Huston (*cf.* Higham et Moseley, 1983 : 165).

2 Il déclare par exemple : « vous savez, un script ça se réécrit ne serait-ce que dans la façon de filmer. Rien qu'avec un choix d'objectif, on peut réécrire entièrement une scène, sans pour ça changer un mot » (Garnier, 1993 : 69).

> Louisiana, I have been in the swamps, I've rubbed elbows with the people. I knew how Louisiana felt, looked, smelled. Had I thought shooting *Dark Waters* on location would have made it more believable, my handle on the essence of the story would've been wrong. In Louisiana, the people felt it was shot there because the characters in *Dark Waters* didn't think, but felt they were in Louisiana. (Slide, 1996 : 12)

Pour planter le décor, De Toth a recours à des prises de vue en extérieur qui mettent les lieux en valeur : lorsque George conduit Leslie à la plantation des Lamont, la nature semble emprisonner l'automobile qui s'enfonce dans la longue allée menant à l'entrée de la maison. Espace confiné, la plantation est loin de tout et la situation initiale dans laquelle se trouve Leslie offre un terrain particulièrement fertile à Sydney (Thomas Mitchell) qui, selon la jaquette du DVD, espère rendre folle la jeune femme pour mettre la main sur son héritage. En fait, Sydney veut surtout se débarrasser d'elle pour pouvoir mener à bien son plan : vendre la plantation et empocher l'argent ; on découvrira plus tard qu'Emily et Norbert (John Qualen) sont des imposteurs et que les vrais Lamont ont été supprimés. Leslie arrive au mauvais moment et perturbe la bonne marche des plans de Sydney, mais tout semble prévu pour que son séjour soit de courte durée : le télégramme qu'elle a envoyé pour annoncer son arrivée a été perdu et tout le monde à Rossignol ne cesse de lui rappeler les circonstances qui l'ont amenée en Louisiane, ce qui l'enferme dans un interminable deuil. Chaque jour qui passe plonge Leslie dans une mélancolie qui va grandissant, et seul George Grover semble disposé à la secourir. Il arrive à point nommé à chaque fois qu'une menace survient dans la vie de la jeune femme. Mais les différents subterfuges utilisés par Sydney la convainquent qu'elle perd la raison et elle finit par rejeter George avant de comprendre qu'elle a été manipulée. Tout s'accélère alors et, après une course poursuite dans les marais, Leslie est finalement sauvée par son chevalier servant et libérée de l'emprise machiavélique de Sydney.

1. Une situation propice au harcèlement psychologique

La scène d'ouverture, sur un fond musical angoissant de Miklos Rozsa, montre au spectateur la mise sous presse d'un journal et s'attarde sur l'une des manchettes, qui fait état du naufrage d'un cargo où ont péri Philip Calvin et sa femme, laissant derrière eux leur fille unique, Leslie. Après un plan rapproché sur les gros titres et la photo de la jeune femme, le visage troublant de Merle Oberon s'anime dans un fondu enchaîné et interpelle le spectateur : « Have you ever been at a funeral where the minister forgot the service? ». Le plan montre un personnage au teint blafard qui revit le drame et qui, comme le suggère la superposition du journal et du visage, est hanté par les événements :

> Her face is haggard, it reflects every hour of the fourteen days of the watery hell in a lifeboat. A scene not to be "played," to be "felt." Lived through again as it was spoken. […] I wanted Merle to look straight into the camera, which was one of the picture-making

> no-nos at that time. I wanted her to ask the question to the audience […], involve the viewer one-to-one, so to speak. (De Toth, 1994 : 332, 333) [3]

Par ailleurs, De Toth joue sur le noir de manière à mieux faire transparaître la détresse du personnage : « It was black, black, black, not the usual Hollywood high glamor. I wanted her to look awful – the worse she looked, the better it was for the story; the better to dramatize her recuperation from her ordeal: first physical, then mental… » (Slide, 1996 : 31). L'incipit se veut donc programmatique, en s'appuyant non seulement sur le passé mais aussi sur l'évolution psychologique de Leslie. De Toth explique dans ses mémoires : « I was after reality, to show the transformation, the mental and physical development of the character » (1994 : 334). Après un fondu au noir qui restitue également la noirceur des pensées de la jeune femme et de la situation dans laquelle elle se trouve, on la découvre alitée, avec auprès d'elle un docteur qui l'interroge sur sa famille. C'est à ce moment-là que, sur les conseils du docteur, elle accepte d'écrire à une tante qu'elle n'a jamais vue.

L'arrivée de la réponse de la tante s'accompagne d'une lumière éclatante dans la chambre de la convalescente et suggère un espoir de reconstruction pour Leslie : Emily l'invite à rejoindre son foyer dès qu'elle se sentira mieux. Quand Leslie prend connaissance du message, un plan en contre-plongée donne l'impression que la joie la transporte et la soulève littéralement de terre. Elle est si heureuse de la nouvelle qu'elle lit une grande partie de la lettre d'une seule traite, omettant toute ponctuation, ce que ne manque pas de lui faire remarquer le médecin. On peut voir cette lecture comme une métaphore de la rapidité à laquelle les événements vont ensuite se succéder : une fois arrivée à Belleville, Leslie va rencontrer George et d'étranges événements vont rapidement s'enchaîner, amenant le personnage à s'interroger sur la véritable identité de ses hôtes.

Quand le train entre en gare de Belleville, Leslie s'anime, sourit, mais une fois sur le quai, elle apparaît déboussolée : elle regarde autour d'elle et

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3 Higham et Moseley rappellent un échange entre Merle Oberon et De Toth à ce sujet. De Toth aurait déclaré, pour justifier son choix de ne pas avoir recours à trop de maquillage, qu'il fallait que l'apparence extérieure du personnage soit en accord avec les circonstances : « Look, you just came from the sea. You were *plucked* from the sea. You mustn't be a Hollywood glamour girl. I want the scene to be totally harsh, frightening. You will grow enormously if you shoot without makeup and forget all about being beautiful » (165).

finit par comprendre que personne n'est venu l'accueillir. De plus, personne ne semble connaître le nom de son oncle. La caméra suit Leslie, qui arpente le quai de la gare, et opère à nouveau un plan rapproché sur son visage inquiet. Elle se retrouve une fois de plus livrée à elle-même et s'évanouit, ce que l'image rend par l'intermédiaire d'un fondu enchaîné, symbole du brouillage, de la perte de repères dont est victime Leslie. À son réveil, elle est entourée de plusieurs hommes, dont George Grover (Franchot Tone), docteur de son état. Paniquée et désorientée, Leslie formule à plusieurs reprises le désir de quitter la ville, de retourner sur ses pas, car elle ne se sent pas la bienvenue : « They don't know me. They don't want me » explique-t-elle au docteur. Mais une fois arrivée au cabinet de ce dernier, Leslie semble rassurée et elle raconte brièvement son histoire et ses souvenirs à bord d'une embarcation de fortune. On perçoit dans la voix du personnage toute sa douleur et ses peurs ; le fait qu'elle se sent isolée du monde est rendu par un gros plan sur son visage dans un décor minimal (pas de tableau sur le mur ; seul un effet grisâtre et flou entoure Leslie). Cependant, lorsque le docteur lui propose de la conduire à Rossignol, Leslie esquisse un sourire. Un fondu enchaîné nous amène au trajet en voiture, filmé en extérieur, contrairement au reste du film, tourné en studio. Grâce à la végétation envahissante, le spectateur comprend que Leslie se jette dans la gueule du loup.

Droits réservés

La demeure, qui ressemble à un hôtel particulier, se dresse, à moitié cachée par les branches, au fond d'une allée bordée d'arbres. Lorsque le porche se profile, Leslie et George rencontrent Sydney, qu'ils prennent d'abord pour Norbert Lamont, introduisant ainsi le brouillage des identités de ceux qui vivent à Rossignol. L'intérieur de la maison n'est guère plus lumineux que la route qui y mène et l'attitude de ses habitants ne semble pas naturelle : ils ont tous l'air paniqués à la vue de Leslie, comme si elle venait déranger le bon fonctionnement de leur vie. Emily parle à toute vitesse et cherche constamment le regard approbateur de Sydney quand elle s'adresse à Leslie. Norbert ne fait qu'une courte apparition et paraît également gêné de parler à sa nièce. Au moment où George quitte la maison, on aperçoit en arrière-plan Leslie qui suit sa tante dans l'escalier conduisant à sa chambre. Les ombres de la balustrade de l'escalier projetées sur les murs font penser à des barreaux de prison et la position de Leslie suggère qu'elle est entrée dans une cage. Comme l'explique Jean Roudaut au sujet des demeures dans le roman noir, « pénétrer dans un château c'est devenir personnage d'un rêve ; c'est être livré, tout en restant soi et en le sachant, à des forces libres de toute détermination logique et morale » (cité dans Lévy, 1968 : 41). En fermant la porte d'entrée, Sydney referme le piège sur Leslie et affirme d'ores et déjà son rôle dans l'intrigue. Une fois seule dans sa chambre, la jeune femme est présentée à plusieurs reprises reflétée dans le miroir, autre symbole de la chausse-trappe. Quand Emily lui tend un cadre contenant une vieille photo de sa mère, la bande son reprend les premières notes de l'ouverture pour exprimer la tristesse de la jeune femme. Une fois de plus, l'effet de traquenard est mis en avant : la photo,

emprisonnée sous le verre, fait écho à la situation de Leslie, prise au piège à Rossignol.

Lors du dîner, en dépit des recommandations que George a données avant de partir, Sydney prend un malin plaisir à questionner Leslie sur son passé, de façon à empêcher la jeune femme d'oublier sa triste histoire : c'est là une esthétique purement gothique [4], puisqu'il s'agit de faire en sorte que les souvenirs s'imposent dans le présent et continuent à hanter ceux qui voudraient les oublier. Aussi le dîner se présente-t-il comme une reconstitution des événements traumatisants : la salle à manger est sombre, éclairée uniquement par quelques bougies. L'attitude d'Emily et de Norbert est de plus en plus suspecte : à chaque question de Leslie sur la vente de Rossignol, ils éludent le sujet et Sydney coupe court à toute explication. Un sentiment de malaise plane pendant tout le repas puis Sydney, avec l'aide de son homme de main Cleeve (Elisha Cook, Jr.), détourne la conversation sur Leslie en l'interrogeant de concert sur les circonstances de son arrivée : la musique reprend et le visage de la jeune femme se fige, les souvenirs du naufrage lui reviennent en mémoire, ce qu'elle ne peut supporter. Elle quitte précipitamment la table après avoir fondu en larmes. Les premières notes du générique se font à nouveau entendre et confirment la présence indéniable des eaux sombres qui habitent Leslie. Les ombres de l'escalier sur le mur attestent que le piège a fini de se refermer sur la jeune femme. Le décor et l'ambiance obscure participent de l'aura gothique qui entoure Rossignol, comme l'explique W. P. Day : « le personnage principal que crée l'imagination gothique est par définition une victime isolée » (cité dans Amfreville, 2000 : 55). En effet, en forçant Leslie à se souvenir de la catastrophe maritime, Cleeve et Sydney l'isolent dans un passé qu'elle s'efforce d'oublier.

2. Décors menaçants et subterfuges gothiques

Au moment où Leslie arrive à Rossignol, elle tente en vain de faire valoir le fait qu'elle avait envoyé un télégramme pour annoncer son arrivée.

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4 Voir l'article de David Punter, qui lit le gothique comme une réactivation de craintes passées. Dans *Dark Waters*, Sydney joue avec le passé, le convoque par tous les moyens, pour confiner Leslie dans un espace traumatique. Ainsi, le passé ne cesse de se rejouer et Leslie de s'interroger sur sa santé mentale.

Personne ne veut l'entendre et tous lui assurent qu'aucun télégramme n'a été reçu. Pourtant, une fois Leslie installée, la caméra revient sur Sydney qui jette un bout de papier froissé à la corbeille. Il s'agit du fameux télégramme où est inscrit clairement : « ARRIVING BELLEVILLE 2:48 WEDNESDAY WITH LOVE LESLIE CALVIN ». Le spectateur connaît ainsi la vérité et commence à deviner les mauvaises intentions de Sydney. La comédie orchestrée par lui avait donc pour but de mettre Leslie mal à l'aise dès le départ. L'épisode du dîner n'est qu'une étape puisque Sydney aura par la suite recours à des stratagèmes plus élaborés pour se débarrasser de la jeune femme. Tout d'abord, il décide de lui faire visiter le bayou en compagnie de Cleeve. Alors que les trois personnages se trouvent sur un passage étroit au bord de l'eau, Sydney, au lieu de passer devant Leslie et Cleeve, se faufile derrière eux, forçant Leslie à se pencher en avant vers le marais. Depuis le drame qui a emporté ses parents, la proximité d'une étendue d'eau terrorise la jeune femme. Lorsque Sydney retourne à la maison et laisse Leslie seule avec Cleeve, ce dernier se met à lui faire des avances et tente de la forcer à l'accompagner pour un tour en bateau. Tandis qu'elle tente désespérément de se libérer de Cleeve, qui lui agrippe le bras pour la faire monter dans l'embarcation, George intervient pour la secourir et la soustrait pour le reste de l'après-midi à l'univers pesant de la plantation en l'emmenant avec lui en tournée.

Le soir, Sydney et Cleeve emmènent Leslie au cinéma. Comme dans toutes les salles à cette époque, le film est précédé d'actualités qui, en ces temps de guerre, font état des combats navals et aériens tout en retraçant des naufrages similaires à celui auquel Leslie a survécu : prise entre Cleeve et Sydney qui arborent des sourires narquois, Leslie, paniquée, revit chaque seconde du torpillage du bateau sur lequel elle avait embarqué. Les commentaires du journaliste s'accélèrent et l'intensité dramatique du reportage culmine avec le lancement d'une torpille sur le bateau. Leslie se lève et fuit le spectacle. Le cinéma fonctionne bien ici de la façon définie par Jean R. Debrix dans *Les Fondements de l'art cinématographique* : « en abolissant les frontières qui séparent le physique du mental [...] il déclenche dans l'esprit du sujet une légère perte de conscience qui permet la fusion du réel et de l'imaginaire… » (1960 : 184-185). Le cauchemar imposé par Sydney et Cleeve ne fait pourtant que commencer. Chaque fois que Leslie est seule dans sa chambre, d'étranges incidents se produisent.

Après l'épisode du cinéma, Leslie est réveillée dans la nuit par le claquement de la moustiquaire sur la porte-fenêtre. Une musique angoissante et saccadée accompagne un travelling allant de la fenêtre au lit de Leslie. Le gros plan sur le visage de la jeune femme révèle son angoisse. Elle allume la lampe de chevet, qui s'éteint brusquement avant de se rallumer devant ses yeux effrayés.

Droits réservés

Prise de frayeur, Leslie se met à hurler et appelle sa tante à l'aide. Bien qu'elle soutienne que la lampe n'a pu s'éteindre seule, Emily se veut rassurante et rattache la moustiquaire décrochée par le vent. Son attitude est bien différente de celle de Gregory dans le *Gaslight* de Cukor, sorti la même année que *Dark Waters*, quand Paula lui assure qu'elle entend des bruits de pas au grenier et que les flammes des lampes faiblissent inopinément. Contrairement à Gregory, Emily n'insinue pas que Leslie est démente. Sa stratégie est beaucoup plus subtile, puisqu'elle laisse Leslie venir d'elle-

même à cette conclusion : après avoir regagné sa chambre, Emily raconte à Norbert ce qui a réveillé Leslie. Sa voix est suffisamment audible pour que tout le monde entende l'inquiétude qui y perce. Et Leslie d'en déduire qu'elle commence à perdre la raison.

Le lendemain, Leslie se repose lorsque tout à coup la porte de sa chambre grince ; une ombre recouvre peu à peu le lit. La jeune femme se réveille en sursaut et découvre le sourire mielleux de Sydney qui prétend être venu s'enquérir de sa santé. La manière dont la scène est filmée suggère que Sydney est à l'origine de tous les soucis de Leslie : son ombre métaphorise la menace qu'il représente. Le film bascule complètement dans le gothique quand Sydney tente d'empêcher Leslie d'aller à la fête chez les Boudreaux, en faisant mine de s'inquiéter de la santé de la jeune femme. En effet, comme l'explique Marc Amfreville, « le schéma de l'intrigue [gothique] est pratiquement toujours le même : une malheureuse héroïne, belle et pure, est aux prises avec un scélérat […] qui invariablement contrarie ses amours et l'enferme dans une geôle médiévale ou le souterrain d'une abbaye en ruines » (2000 : 38). *Dark Waters* offre une transposition de ces éléments dans un contexte américain particulièrement propice à une telle mise en scène. Bien qu'il ne s'agisse pas ici d'un édifice médiéval, l'ambiance qui règne dans la demeure n'est pas sans rappeler Manderley dans *Rebecca*, et il est permis de penser que Joan Harrison avait encore à l'esprit son travail de scénariste pour le film d'Hitchcock, réalisé quatre ans plus tôt.

Cependant, contrairement aux héroïnes malléables des romans gothiques, Leslie tient tête à Sydney avec l'appui de George, qui est venu la chercher pour la fête. À leur retour, George demande Leslie en mariage mais elle fuit, pensant qu'elle ne peut imposer sa folie à celui qu'elle aime. Sa réaction offre à Sydney une belle occasion de mettre à exécution ses derniers stratagèmes : une fois qu'elle a regagné sa chambre, Leslie entend une voix qui répète son nom. Elle pense que c'est Emily qui l'appelle, mais cette dernière lui assure le contraire. Leslie évolue ensuite entre la rampe d'escalier et l'ombre des barreaux, comme pour indiquer que l'espace s'est réduit et que le personnage est désormais complètement piégé. Désespérée et désorientée, Leslie se rend près du marais, ce qui confirme la remarque de Maurice Lévy selon laquelle « la vocation du héros "gothique" est primordialement de *se perdre* » (1968 : 43) : la caméra la suit dans le bayou et la montre arrivant à son but par l'intermédiaire de son reflet dans

l'eau [5]. C'est alors que surgit Pearson, un domestique que Sydney a congédié et qui demande à Leslie si elle a entendu des voix criant son nom ; elle comprend alors qu'elle n'est pas folle mais que l'on voudrait le lui laisser croire. Il est significatif que les auteurs du texte original et du script aient choisi un Afro-Américain car, dans le Sud, le Noir est présenté tel une figure en marge, ce que Leslie est également dans cette Louisiane qu'elle découvre. La bande son change du tout au tout et reflète les nouveaux espoirs de Leslie après cette rencontre inattendue : comme pour jouer sur sa couleur de peau, Pearson vient révéler la noirceur de la situation dans laquelle se trouve Leslie. La révélation a un effet cathartique sur la jeune femme, qui comprend que puisqu'elle n'est pas folle, elle peut retourner vers George et accepter sa demande en mariage.

3. Les imposteurs démasqués, la Belle délivrée

À trois reprises au cours du film, Leslie est secourue par George : lors de l'épisode du bateau avec Cleeve, alors que Sydney tente de l'empêcher d'aller à la fête chez les Boudreaux, et lorsqu'elle comprend qu'elle est réellement menacée. Après sa rencontre nocturne avec Pearson, Leslie s'empresse de téléphoner à George mais ce dernier n'est pas joignable. À chacune de ses tentatives pour joindre le médecin, un plan d'ensemble montre l'escalier qui s'enroule derrière elle tel une corde ; son regard désespéré tourné vers l'étage atteste de sa crainte d'être surprise par ses tourmenteurs. Cleeve est hors champ pour elle, mais il est bien visible pour le spectateur : il se présente comme un véritable bourreau tandis qu'il avance, menaçant, le long du couloir qui surplombe le hall d'entrée, vers la jeune femme désemparée. Ce lent mouvement atteste également de la rencontre à venir entre l'agresseur et sa victime et annonce le dénouement.

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5 On observe la même technique dans « The Fall of the House of Usher » de Poe : le narrateur suit le reflet de la maison avant d'être véritablement confronté à elle.

Droits réservés

Leslie découvre peu après qu'elle est entourée d'imposteurs : Emily lui dit combien elle aimait sortir avec sa sœur pour aller danser – or la mère de Leslie était invalide. Le visage de la jeune femme se fige à cet instant, et une mélodie lancinante vient remplacer les mensonges de la fausse tante, reproduisant en musique les craintes de Leslie quant à ce qui va lui arriver. En entrant dans cette maison, comme le narrateur de Poe dans « The Fall of the House of Usher », Leslie s'est « enfonc[ée] dans l'irrationnel, [elle est descendue] aux couches les plus "archaïques" du Moi où la logique qui préside à l'élaboration de notre pensée consciente n'a plus cours » (Lévy, 1968 : 41). Un peu plus tard, Pearson tente de mettre la jeune femme en garde : il a lui aussi compris qu'Emily et Norbert ne sont pas ceux qu'ils prétendent être et que Leslie est en danger. Étant donné que lui seul connaissait l'apparence physique d'Emily et de Norbert, Sydney n'avait d'autre de choix que de l'écarter, de le renvoyer, car lui seul était susceptible de faire avorter son entreprise. Au moment des inquiétantes

confidences de Pearson, la menace pèse sur Leslie, comme le confirme le recours à la même mélodie que précédemment pour ponctuer les paroles étouffées qu'elle adresse à Pearson. Étant constamment observée par Sydney, elle propose à son prophétique sauveur de la retrouver dans le bayou, la nuit venue.

La caméra suit la jeune femme tandis qu'elle se rend sur les lieux du rendez-vous ; la musique soutient l'action dramatique et s'accélère lorsque Leslie découvre avec effroi le cadavre de Pearson – premier mort visible à l'écran – et prend la fuite. Le fait que le seul mort soit un Afro-Américain suggère que le film se fond dans un moule sudiste au sein duquel les gens de couleur doivent disparaître. Cependant le rôle phare qui est donné à Pearson fait de lui un personnage central au pouvoir rédempteur, trait significatif qui rejoint une idée que formulait Flannery O'Connor à propos de sa nouvelle « The Artificial Nigger [6] ». Après sa découverte macabre, Leslie croise malheureusement le chemin de Cleeve qui l'escorte à la maison comme si de rien n'était, sur une musique de plus en plus oppressante : toute fuite semble désormais impossible. Elle regagne sa chambre en hâte et apparaît de nouveau à l'écran par le biais de son reflet dans le miroir, comme le jour de son arrivée. Elle consulte les horaires d'autocar dans le but de s'échapper le plus vite possible, mais elle est surveillée de toutes parts. Lorsqu'elle sort de sa chambre, Norbert l'interpelle et l'invite à entrer dans la sienne ; en ouvrant la porte-fenêtre, elle se rend compte que Cleeve est en train de fumer sur le balcon. Elle n'a plus aucun moyen de quitter les lieux : le traquenard se referme sur elle.

Le sauvetage de Leslie est amorcé quand le téléphone sonne le lendemain matin. Elle court pour y répondre et atteint le combiné avant Cleeve, qui reste derrière elle, immobile, pendant toute la durée de la conversation. La voix chevrotante de Leslie laisse transparaître ses peurs. À table, les questions incessantes d'Emily sur la venue de George indiquent que la tension monte également dans le camp adverse. Avant l'arrivée de George, tout le monde semble anxieux : Sydney est installé dans le même fauteuil que lorsque Leslie est arrivée à Rossignol, mais cette fois il est entouré d'une Emily qui cache mal son état de nervosité (adossée au mur, elle se frotte constamment les mains et ne sait où regarder pour trouver du

6 Voir à ce sujet l'article de Marie LIÉNARD-YETERIAN, « Des manières au mystère : Une poétique du titre », dans LIÉNARD-YETERIAN et PRÉHER (2007 : 49-61).

réconfort) et de Leslie dont l'impatience de voir arriver son bien-aimé est évidente.

La musique reprend au moment où Leslie, sous la véranda, dévoile à George l'ensemble de ses découvertes. Pendant qu'elle lui parle, la caméra révèle, à l'intérieur, Sydney écoutant attentivement tout ce qui se dit. Un regard inquiet de George montre qu'il s'en est rendu compte, mais il laisse penser à Leslie qu'il ne croit pas à son histoire et lui prescrit des médicaments et du repos. Avant que la jeune femme ne se détourne pour regagner sa chambre, l'image se voile comme si la mise au point de la caméra avait été modifiée : au flou intérieur dans lequel se trouve Leslie répond ce flou visuel. Plus tard, quand Leslie déplie l'ordonnance du docteur, elle saisit la raison de sa froideur : « Believe you. S. listening inside. Too dangerous to go now. Stay in your room – be back with help right away. I love you ». Ces quelques mots suffisent à la rassurer et une musique pleine d'espoir redémarre, confirmant les découvertes qui révélaient qu'elle n'était pas folle.

Après cette scène, les choses s'enveniment entre Sydney et les faux Lamont : Norbert craint le retour de George et, lorsque Sydney suggère de se débarrasser définitivement de lui et de Leslie, les deux acolytes refusent d'être complices de meurtre et souhaitent se retirer du jeu. Emily ajoute qu'elle s'est prise d'affection pour Leslie et ne veut pas qu'il lui soit fait du mal. L'éclairage de cette scène est particulièrement intéressant : Norbert est debout dans la pénombre, Emily a le visage illuminé par la lampe et, lorsque Sydney s'exprime, seule la moitié inférieure de son visage est éclairée, symbole de sa duplicité durant toute l'histoire. Les dernières scènes du film donnent des réponses précises à toutes les questions de Leslie : Sydney explique à quels « simples dispositifs » il a eu recours pour lui faire croire qu'elle perdait la raison (le nom de la jeune femme était enregistré sur un disque, et l'allumage intempestif de la lampe était provoqué par un court-circuit volontaire). Il ajoute qu'il « est bien regrettable [que tant de subterfuges] n'aient pas suffi ». En effet, rien n'a vraiment marché comme Sydney l'aurait souhaité.

Un ultime retournement de situation fait que sa dernière chance lui échappe. Sur l'embarcation qui les mène à un lieu assez éloigné pour que les soupçons des voisins ne soient pas éveillés par leur disparition, George parvient à faire diversion en profitant de la méfiance grandissante de Cleeve envers Sydney. Il bondit hors du bateau avec Leslie : la musique s'emballe, la course poursuite dans le bayou commence. Elle est cependant

de courte durée car Cleeve est pris dans des sables mouvants [7] et Sydney se laisse convaincre par le docteur qu'il vaut mieux se rendre plutôt que de périr dans le bayou. Ainsi se termine le film : la Belle est sauvée par celui qui s'imposait dès le début du film comme son unique bienfaiteur.

André De Toth réunit tous les éléments du gothique dans un film plein de rebondissements. Même si la méfiance du spectateur est éveillée assez tôt par l'épisode du télégramme, son attention reste aux aguets grâce aux multiples tentatives des intrigants pour convaincre Leslie de sa folie grandissante. Martin Scorsese salue, dans sa préface aux mémoires de De Toth, « the gothic quality of *Dark Waters*, the way the psychology of the characters is reflected through the environment of the Louisiana bayous » (vii). Aussi embrouillée que la mousse espagnole qui foisonne dans le bayou, l'intrigue du film gagne en pertinence car le spectateur n'est jamais au bout de ses surprises, chaque découverte étant remise en question jusqu'à la dernière minute, notamment quand George semble refuser d'entendre les paroles suppliantes de Leslie. Les regards égarés d'Emily et de Norbert contrastent tout au long du film avec le regard fixe de Sydney, qui ne perd sa contenance que dans la dernière scène lorsque, trop effrayé à l'idée de finir comme Cleeve s'il s'enfuit dans le bayou, il se retrouve victime du discours de George. En regardant *Dark Waters*, le spectateur est plongé dans un monde sombre et complexe. Malgré tout, même si le mélodrame se termine bien pour Leslie et George, on ne peut s'empêcher de garder en mémoire le visage hagard de Merle Oberon à l'ouverture du film et d'entendre résonner la question qu'elle pose directement au spectateur. Étienne Souriau a bien analysé le sentiment qui subsiste au sortir du cinéma : « Par l'esprit, par les sens, nous entrons dans cet univers, tout en le contemplant. Nous y sommes invités, nous y vivons pendant des heures ; nous nous souvenons ensuite, presque malgré nous, d'y avoir vécu, et nous en restons imprégnés » (1953 : 11). De Toth a réussi à atteindre le but qu'il s'était fixé en faisant fi du lieu et en se concentrant sur l'élément qu'il considérait comme primordial : le gothique.

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7 On comprend que ses commentaires, « it must be awful drowning in quicksand », lors de la première visite autour de la maison, avaient un caractère proleptique.

Filmographie

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Gaslight, 1944, produit par Arthur Hornblow Jr. (MGM), réalisé par George Cukor (DVD Warner, 2005).

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LES HÉROÏNES DE CARSON MCCULLERS À LA CONQUÊTE DE L'ESPACE : *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER, THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING* ET *THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFÉ*

L'espace féminin, espace relevant de la sphère privée, n'existe pas en soi ; c'est un territoire à conquérir. La vie et l'œuvre de Carson McCullers [1] témoignent des efforts qu'elle a dû fournir pour s'approprier un espace de vie autonome, s'affranchir de certains tabous, et s'affirmer dans le domaine artistique. Ses héroïnes, un peu à son image, offrent des cas d'école contrastés. Mick, dans *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, et Frankie, dans *The Member of the Wedding*, malgré leur jeune âge et une certaine indétermination sexuelle, tentent de gagner leur liberté mais sont incitées à s'intégrer à l'espace social ; quant à Amelia, la femme mûre de *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, elle parvient à résister aux pressions de la communauté mais finit par se mettre au ban de la société et se murer dans le désespoir et la solitude. D'où une vision du Sud assez désenchantée et éloignée du romantisme traditionnel.

Le Sud dans lequel McCullers grandit est marqué, comme le pays tout entier, et même peut-être davantage, par la crise de 1929 et le New Deal. Il s'est industrialisé et a peu à peu perdu son caractère rural. Les valeurs chevaleresques et esthétiques d'antan ont été remplacées par des préoccupations mercantiles. L'urbanisation a aussi touché la population noire. La gloire et la grandeur précédentes ont fait place aux revendications d'un

1 Les références aux romans apparaîtront dans le corps de l'article, précédées des abréviations suivantes : *HLH* pour *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *MW* pour *The Member of the Wedding*, et *BSC* pour *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Les citations tirées du recueil d'essais *The Mortgaged Heart* seront précédées de *MH*, et celles tirées de l'autobiographie, *Illumination and Night Glare*, de *ING*.

prolétariat ouvrier, les demeures anciennes se sont lézardées, l'image idéalisée de la femme a évolué : la Belle du Sud qui suscitait une passion romantique mais restait prisonnière de son aura a commencé à disparaître avec la mémoire du passé.

Bien que McCullers s'exile dans le Nord après avoir écrit son premier roman, elle garde une certaine nostalgie de sa Géorgie natale. Elle parle de son mal du pays dans son autobiographie (« Even as a grown woman I was haunted always by homesickness » [*ING* 53]), évoque ses souvenirs de Noël à la maison dans « Home for Christmas », et retourne se ressourcer dans la maison familiale périodiquement. C'est le Sud qu'elle choisit comme cadre pour ses romans et dont elle tire son inspiration – comme l'explique sa sœur, « She could never get away from the South » (*MH* 279) – mais le rapport qu'elle entretient avec sa région d'origine est plutôt ambivalent :

> People ask me why I don't go back to the South more often. But the South is a very emotional experience for me, fraught with all the memories of my childhood. When I go back South, I always get into arguments, so that a visit to Columbus in Georgia is a stirring up of love and antagonism. The locale of my books might always be Southern, and the South always my homeland. I love the voices of Negroes – like brown rivers. I feel that in the short trips when I do go to the South, in my own memory and in the newspaper articles, I still have my own reality. (« A Flowering Dream », *MH* 279)

Malgré ses attaches sentimentales au Sud, McCullers s'efforce de conquérir son espace personnel et de s'affranchir du conformisme ambiant. Elle retrouve certes avec plaisir certaines traditions sudistes, mais dans le même temps exprime des réserves sur la ségrégation, sur les humiliations que subissent les membres des communautés de couleur et sur l'injustice dont ils sont victimes. En 1958, elle refuse d'ailleurs de céder ses manuscrits à la bibliothèque de Columbus, en Géorgie, tant que les Noirs n'y seront pas admis. Elle tente aussi de se dérober à la tendresse excessive et envahissante de sa mère – elle remarquera plus tard, « I hated all this fussing over me » (*ING* 58) – et affirme graduellement sa personnalité en prenant une orientation plus masculine : elle privilégie son second prénom, s'habille en pantalon, porte les cheveux courts et fume. Bien que mariée deux fois au même militaire, Reeves McCullers, elle éprouve une passion véritable pour certaines femmes, dont la Suissesse Anne-Marie Clarac Swarzenbach, à qui elle dédie *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. Elle revendique cette liberté de comportement en disant : « I was born a man » (Carr 159).

Libérée du cocon familial, il lui faut conquérir son espace littéraire. Le XIX^e^ siècle avait été celui des grands romans masculins, et les femmes

devaient faire leurs preuves avant d'être reconnues. Elle monte à New York et s'inscrit à des cours de *creative writing*, laissant de côté la carrière de pianiste qu'elle avait envisagée. Elle rencontre d'autres écrivains, des philosophes, des musiciens talentueux, des intellectuels européens nouvellement immigrés ; elle côtoie, entre autres, Richard Wright, W. H. Auden et Benjamin Britten dans sa maison de Brooklyn, merveilleux poste d'observation et creuset de silhouettes, de caractères et de comportements. Elle tente de concilier création littéraire et activités domestiques – déjà Virginia Woolf (*A Room of One's Own*), puis plus tard Simone de Beauvoir, précisait que le travail de l'écrivain(e) n'est pas accessoire, mais une occupation à plein temps – en convenant avec son époux, qui lui aussi veut écrire, de la répartition des tâches ménagères. Louise Westling résume très bien la position de McCullers lorsqu'elle écrit : « Carson McCullers's own situation is an extreme example of both the strength of matriarchal tendencies in Southern life and the difficult problem of self-definition for the Southern girl who wants to become a writer » (Westling, 1982 : 111).

Conquête de l'espace social et sexué/el

Les œuvres de Carson McCullers font, non sans écho autobiographique, la part belle aux femmes. En effet, hormis dans son ultime ouvrage, ce sont plutôt des héroïnes qui se trouvent au cœur de ses romans. Qu'il s'agisse d'adolescentes ou de femmes mûres, celles-ci peinent à maîtriser l'espace social balisé ; leurs tâtonnements mettent en relief leur inquiétude et leur malaise. Dans *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* et *The Member of the Wedding*, Mick et Frankie portent, comme leur créatrice, un prénom masculin, mais, contrairement à elle, sont souvent livrées à elles-mêmes ; en l'absence de la mère, leur éducation incombe en partie aux nounous noires, Portia *(HLH)* et Berenice *(MW)*. À contre-courant de l'image traditionnelle des petites filles, Mick et Frankie sont des garçons manqués, en short et tennis, aux cheveux courts, qui aiment l'exercice physique et les jeux d'adresse, fument la cigarette et ne reculent pas devant les bagarres et la violence.

Même si seul *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* laisse présager un espace à conquérir, les deux romans montrent que les adolescentes n'ont d'autre choix que de se conformer au stéréotype de la jeune fille aimable et séduisante afin de s'intégrer à la communauté, au risque d'abandonner leurs ambitions et leurs projets. Mick, qui rêvait d'être un grand inventeur ou un

compositeur célèbre et d'avoir sa voiture personnelle marquée de ses initiales (*HLH* 29), devient à 13 ans vendeuse de Prisunic pour soulager sa famille et doit donc accepter une vie ordinaire. Frankie s'imagine en fusilier marin couvert de médailles ou en pilote affrontant le danger et décoré pour avoir généreusement donné son sang afin de sauver des vies (*MW* 31) ; pourtant elle finit par se rallier à sa nouvelle compagne de classe, de façon un peu artificielle et non sans un certain snobisme, et semble vouloir effacer tout ce qui s'est passé pendant l'été. Pour les deux héroïnes, il y a une part de renoncement et de résignation (« she has been severely crippled », dit Barbara White au sujet de Mick [140]). La brillante carrière, le prestige escompté ou les rêves de liberté sombrent dans le quotidien. Des raisons économiques ou tout simplement les pressions sociales prennent le pas sur les projets individuels. Mick se sent flouée :

> What good was it? That was the question she would like to know. What the hell good it was. All the plans she had made, and the music. When all that came of it was this trap – the store, then home to sleep, and back at the store again. […]
> Their motto was supposed to be 'Keep on your toes and smile.' Once she was out of the store she had to frown a long time to get her face natural again. Even her ears were tired. (*HLH* 299)

Elle est même dépossédée de son inspiration, de sa force créatrice : « Now there was no music in her mind. […] It was like she was too tense. Or maybe because it was like the store took all her energy and time » (*HLH* 301). Le changement devient visible : Portia dit de Mick, « she getting to be a regular lady these days » (*HLH* 270), et Biff Brannon, le tenancier du Sunshine Café, remarque à son propos : « She had grown older. Her rough and childish ways were almost gone. And instead there was something ladylike and delicate about her that was hard to point out. The ear-rings, the dangle of her bracelets, and the new way she crossed her legs and pulled the hem of her skirt down past her knees » (*HLH* 305). L'aliénation se traduit par un rétrécissement de la personnalité – « loss of self » pour White (141), « a growth into conformity » pour Westling (131). Frankie, devenue Frances, n'a pas, elle, la notion d'un appauvrissement : elle note seulement un grand silence, « a hush », parfois des cauchemars liés au souvenir du passé (*MW* 185, 187). C'est le lecteur qui s'aperçoit de la mutilation ressentie, de la perte d'originalité et de vivacité, et de l'enthousiasme excessif devant les projets et les voyages envisagés (White 141).

C'est l'espace social qui conditionne la femme. « On ne naît pas femme, on le devient », a noté Simone de Beauvoir dans *Le Deuxième Sexe* ; et

justement, McCullers choisit ce moment crucial, cet entre-deux des âges, pour remettre en question une démarcation systématique. Les enfants s'essaient à transcender les limites, mais la société les contraint à s'affirmer vers le féminin ou le masculin. La remarque de Biff Brannon, « By nature, all people are of both sexes » (*HLH* 112), souligne l'arbitraire de la division entre les genres que l'on retrouve dans *The Member of the Wedding* : le petit John Henry aime jouer à la poupée et enfiler chaussures et vêtements féminins, tandis que Frankie imagine que dans un monde idéal on pourrait passer à sa guise d'un sexe à l'autre : « People could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted » (*MW* 116). Libre aux enfants de se jouer des distinctions de genre puisque, comme le confie McCullers dans son autobiographie (*ING* 5-6), le domaine sexuel était bien le sujet tabou par excellence que les parents n'abordaient jamais.

Dès le jeune âge, jeux et activités sont sexués : à Mick, la fille cadette, de pousser le landau de son plus jeune frère et de surveiller l'avant-dernier ; au frère aîné, Bill, d'avoir la plus grande chambre, avec au mur, des photos de jeunes femmes tirées de magazines et la possibilité de lire *Popular Mechanics* (*HLH* 35). Mick réussit quand même à suivre des cours de mécanique : « she got special permission and took mechanical shop like a boy » (*HLH* 88). Mais très tôt, les préoccupations des adolescentes tournent autour de la séduction : imiter les starlettes dans l'espoir d'une rencontre idéale et donc trouver le meilleur moyen de plaire. Etta et Hazel, les sœurs aînées de Mick, soignent leur tenue et utilisent crème et vernis à ongles. Mick elle-même se parfume avant de monter voir son interlocuteur favori, Mr. Singer, et fait toilette avant de donner une fête puis d'aller à son rendez-vous avec Harry : robe de soie et collier empruntés à sa sœur (*HLH* 229). Comme Mick, Frankie se défend de toute coquetterie, et pourtant l'idée de mariage la fascine. Lorsqu'elle apprend la future union de son frère, elle est transportée de joie, et rien ne la charme plus que le récit de Berenice au sujet de ses rencontres successives avec ses quatre pittoresques maris. Pétrie de bon sens, cette dernière explique que pour trouver « a beau », il faut se rendre aimable, se montrer avenante, soigner son comportement et son langage, de même que sa tenue, et surtout savoir manœuvrer : « 'What you ought to begin thinking about is a beau. […] A nice little white boy beau. […] Now you belong to change from being so rough and greedy and big. […] You ought to fix yourself up nice in your dresses. And speak sweetly and act sly' » (*MW* 98). Ces recommandations rappellent celles de Mrs.

Wilson dans *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* : « Quit frowning like that, Mick. You're coming to the age where you ought to fix up and try to look the best you can » (*HLH* 238). Il n'y a donc rien d'étonnant à ce que le mariage semble à la jeune fille le couronnement absolu de ses projets, la phase terminale de tous ses désirs. La société fustige ceux qui s'éloignent des stéréotypes, ce sont des déviants proches des *freaks*, et rien ne fait plus peur aux jeunes héroïnes que d'imaginer de secrètes affinités avec eux ou avec des travestis.

Répression et enfermement

Il est donc difficile de conquérir l'espace social et l'on ne peut s'affranchir des traditions sous peine de marginalisation et d'exclusion. La communauté exerce un rôle normatif, effraie et culpabilise ceux qui s'écartent des voies traditionnelles. Ainsi, les relations précoces de Mick avec Harry Minowitz l'emplissent rétrospectivement d'inquiétude et de dépit : « This was how it was » (*HLH* 235). Frankie, elle, a le sentiment d'être en défaut, de frôler l'interdit et la transgression – par exemple lorsqu'elle est témoin d'une scène intime entre deux locataires (« What kind of a fit was it ? » [*MW* 49]) –, et se sent mal à l'aise à l'évocation d'un incident sordide dans la grange avec Barney McKean (*MW* 99), ou après sa rencontre mouvementée avec le soldat à l'hôtel-bar The Blue Moon. Malgré une sensibilité très vive et une sorte d'intuition morale, elle ne comprend pas que son père la rejette lorsqu'il lance : « who is this great big long-legged twelve-year-old blunderbuss who wants to sleep with her old papa ? » (*MW* 62).

Pour Barbara White, « *The Member of the Wedding* is not so much a novel of initiation into acceptance of human limits as a novel of initiation into acceptance of female limits » (141). Une telle affirmation peut être appliquée à *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Frankie et Mick se heurtent constamment aux limites imposées à la femme et se trouvent confrontées à l'impossibilité de maîtriser leur destin, ce qui est rendu par la métaphore de l'espace clos. La chaleur insoutenable et aveuglante de l'été les oblige à rester dans la maison, et même enfermées dans la cuisine. Mick peut néanmoins sortir le soir, à la fraîche, et savourer dans le calme, la solitude et l'obscurité, la musique d'un poste de radio ou le trombone d'un amateur noir. Frankie rêve de parcourir la ville à la rencontre des autres, imagine pouvoir suivre son frère et sa fiancée durant leur voyage de noces, et termine ses velléités

d'indépendance par une fugue que son père a tôt fait de déjouer. Son sentiment d'enfermement est d'autant plus fort que l'été, l'espace disponible semble avoir rétréci ; le monde extérieur lui apparaît à travers une paroi de verre et reste donc insaisissable : « the town turned black and shrunken under the glare of the sun. […] the summer was like a green sick dream, or like a silent crazy jungle under glass » (*MW* 7). Le déroulement des jours pendant l'interminable été semble si répétitif qu'elle se compare à une mule qu'elle a vue dans une ferme, tournant en rond autour d'une meule : « In the sameness of her tracks that summer, the old Frankie had somehow resembled that country mule » (*MW* 59).

Dans les deux romans, les adolescentes passent à plusieurs reprises devant la prison de la ville. Elles imaginent ceux qui y sont relégués et qui tendent leurs bras vers la lumière et elles compatissent, parce qu'elles-mêmes se sentent confinées et brimées dans leurs ambitions. Le mot « jail », qui revient très souvent, est plus qu'une référence à un lieu précis : il symbolise aussi leur cloisonnement et leur sentiment de claustration. Dans *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, la cage d'escalier dans laquelle Mick est souvent vue traduit l'enfermement de l'adolescente : « Mick went slowly up the stairs. She passed the first landing and went on to the second. Some of the doors were open to make a draught and there were many sounds in the house. Mick stopped on the last flight of stairs and sat down » (*HLH* 44). L'ascension de Mick, de palier en palier, métaphorise ses aspirations, son désir de s'échapper ; les portes ouvertes sur son passage semblent être autant de leurres, de sorties qui lui sont interdites ; et une fois le haut de l'escalier atteint, Mick doit se rendre à l'évidence, toute fuite est impossible.

Enfermement ou errance, les deux romans offrent un espace de vie à l'image de la psyché des héroïnes. On sent chez l'une et l'autre un éveil des sens, la quête vague d'un accomplissement et la recherche d'autre chose. Mick, comme Frankie, se réfugie dans un espace imaginaire. La première ne songe qu'à la musique et, tapie dans l'ombre, la savoure comme « little colored pieces of crystal candy » (*HLH* 29). Elle possède un carton à chapeaux dans lequel elle remise les trésors qui lui ouvrent l'univers musical dont elle rêve : « Inside was a cracked ukulele strung with two violin strings, a guitar string and a banjo string. […] Mick was making herself a violin » (*HLH* 37). Frankie aussi se laisse porter par la musique, « a wild jazz spangle that zigzagged upward », au point de se sentir perdue lorsque celle-ci s'interrompt brusquement (*MW* 54). Mais ce qui lui permet

de compenser le côté borné, terre à terre, de son existence, ce sont ses rêves de voyages lointains en pays de neige. L'évocation d'un monde de fraîcheur grâce à deux objets, « a lavender seashell and a glass globe with snow inside that could be shaken into a snowstorm » (*MW* 17), la vision d'une île verdoyante, une simple allusion à l'Alaska, sont pour elle autant de suggestions merveilleuses pour échapper à la touffeur de l'été, à l'enfermement dans la cuisine, la maison, la ville.

Mick et Frankie se transportent toutes deux par la pensée dans des pays étrangers (Mick parle même espagnol pour mieux se dépayser), mais semblent connaître un sort semblable à ces papillons de nuit qui, attirés par la lumière, se cognent à la moustiquaire (*HLH* 19). Car il y a souffrance et crispation dans la violence qui les habite et qu'elles s'efforcent de contenir :

> [Mick] thought a long time and kept hitting her thighs with her fists. Her face felt like it was scattered in pieces and she could not keep it straight. The feeling was a whole lot worse than being hungry for any dinner, yet it was like that. I want – I want – I want – was all that she could think about – but just what this real want was she did not know. (*HLH* 44)
>
> Frankie bit the knuckles of her fist and waited […]. She saw in her mind her brother and his bride, and the heart in her was squeezed so hard that Frankie almost felt it break. (*MW* 57)

La peur les étreint, celle de l'avenir, celle du choix à faire pour quitter l'enfance dont elles ne veulent plus : rien n'exaspère Frankie davantage que de se voir traitée comme une enfant, offrir une poupée, interrogée sur l'école et la classe. Toutes deux redoutent d'assumer leur féminité, ce qui les priverait forcément d'une carrière ambitieuse et surtout de leur liberté.

Rébellion et anéantissement

McCullers a choisi des cas extrêmes. Amelia, dans *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, apparaît comme un avatar des adolescentes à l'âge adulte, peut-être une caricature de la Belle du Sud, voire de l'auteur elle-même. McCullers semble s'être mise en scène sous des traits hallucinés par l'aigreur et la souffrance. Amelia a su conquérir un espace de vie et de liberté ; c'est une maîtresse femme, certes un peu disgracieuse, mais qui en impose par sa grande taille et gère avec maestria sa vie et son domaine. À la tête de la propriété héritée de son père, elle s'entend aussi bien aux travaux de menuiserie qu'à ceux des champs, n'a pas son pareil pour tuer le cochon et surtout pour concocter dans son alambic un whisky ambré et tonique qui fait l'unanimité. Douée d'un esprit pratique, elle sait faire rentrer l'argent et

ne craint personne en matière de litige financier. Peu préoccupée de mode ou d'élégance, on la voit généralement cheveux courts, en bottes et salopette, un flacon de whisky dans sa poche revolver, se laver à la pompe, monter sa mule ou conduire sa voiture ; elle mange les coudes sur la table, assise à califourchon, fume la pipe, fait rouler ses muscles et s'entraîne à la boxe sur un punching-ball. Peu habituée à porter des tenues féminines, elle cherche instinctivement la poche de son pantalon lorsqu'elle revêt sa robe de mariée (*BSC* 38).

Elle refuse de se plier à la définition de la féminité : « Amelia is a tomboy grown up, without any concessions to social demands for sexual conformity » (Westling, 1983 : 119). Si elle possède certaines qualités et compétences traditionnellement associées à la femme (pour preuves l'atmosphère conviviale qui règne dans le café qu'elle a ouvert, sa maîtrise des remèdes de bonne femme, sa compassion pour certaines personnes), elle ne désire pas l'amour des hommes : « Amelia cared nothing for the love of men and was a solitary person » (*BSC* 9). La raison d'un tel comportement est que « she totally identifies with masculinity and refuses the diminished status of woman » (Westling, 1982 : 122). Amelia préfère répandre toute son affection et sa tendresse sur celui qui se réclame d'une vague parenté, Cousin Lymon. Lorsque celui-ci la trahit, elle s'enferme dans sa maison et clôt ses volets ; ainsi, « The destruction of Amelia's power transforms the café into a prison » (Westling, 1983 : 181). Dans le même temps, la vie se retire peu à peu de la ville : « the town is dreary. […] There is absolutely nothing to do. […] The soul rots with boredom. You might as well go to the Forks Fall highway and listen to the chain-gang » (*BSC* 83-84). La communauté est réduite à un monde stérile qu'aucun sentiment ne vient fertiliser et qui rappelle *The Waste Land* de T.S. Eliot. En fin de compte, si forte et déterminée qu'elle ait été, Amelia paye cher son défi à la communauté et son refus de se soumettre à sa vocation de femme. Elle a certes résisté aux pressions et ne s'est pas laissée modeler comme Mick et Frankie, mais elle a été sanctionnée pour ses écarts et anéantie par la société. Pour reprendre les termes de Westling, « The real force of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* lies in its depiction of a masculine Amazon whose transgression of conventional sexual boundaries brings catastrophic male retribution » (Westling, 1982 : 126).

Investir l'espace au féminin dans le Sud des années 1950 n'a rien d'une évidence et suppose de pouvoir tenir tête à la tradition, aux préjugés et aux

a priori. McCullers le montre à travers ses propres combats et à travers les héroïnes de ses romans, qui ne sont pas sans évoquer ceux d'une autre romancière du Sud, Flannery O'Connor :

> Contrary to Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and McCullers only grudgingly accept a female status that their fiction pictures as a trap, a paralysis, a diminishment. The problems they have articulated are not limited to the South, but because of the Southern tradition of the lady, the difficulties of defining a positive feminine self can be felt more intensely there. (Westling, 1983 : 183)

La société du Sud n'est pas prête encore à cautionner tous les comportements. Carson McCullers fait donc œuvre de précurseur en anticipant sur les luttes des années 1960 et en luttant pour que les femmes puissent obtenir une certaine émancipation et une relative indépendance économique et intellectuelle.

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LA BELLE SELON FLANNERY O'CONNOR : TRANSGRESSION DES LIMITES DE L'ESPACE GENRÉ DU SUD

L'espace américain est connu pour ses immenses friches, l'invitation qu'il tend aux pionniers et pionnières, la variété spécifique de ses terroirs et des cultures qu'ils abritent. La conquête d'une nouvelle terre et sa colonisation ont pu être associées au viol du corps féminin, et inversement, la domination du corps ou de l'esprit de la femme peuvent se comparer à la violation d'un territoire ; c'est d'ailleurs ce qu'illustre le poème d'Elizabeth Bishop intitulé « Brazil, January 1, 1502 [1] », où elle s'exerçait à contempler le paysage brésilien à travers le regard prédateur des premiers colons espagnols, des siècles avant elle. Les mousses et la végétation luxuriante rappelaient des tentures, associées aux draperies des femmes, et les petits cris de ces indigènes, des chants d'oiseaux – la frontière entre les corps humains, animaux, végétaux, s'estompant lors de l'agression commune qui leur était réservée. Dans cet autre Sud des États-Unis, la femme hérite d'une tradition qui la hisse sur un piédestal, pour mieux la confiner dans une sphère d'impuissance. La fameuse Belle dépeinte par Tennessee Williams incarne le désastre de cet enfermement aliénant. Ainsi, dans *A Streetcar Named Desire*, les hommes bannissent Blanche, privent cette femme cultivée du droit d'exercer son métier d'enseignante de littérature et la dépossèdent de son indépendance financière. Ses ancêtres n'ayant su garder la belle maison aux colonnes blanches, elle en est réduite à chercher asile dans l'appartement exigu de sa sœur mariée, et cette impossibilité de jouir d'un espace privé bien à elle ou de partager celui du couple précipitera la

1 « They ripped away into the hanging fabric, / each out to catch an Indian for himself – / those maddening little women who kept calling, / calling to each other (or had the birds waked up?) / and retreating, always retreating, behind it. » (Bishop 94)

mésentente. Pour mieux l'évincer et l'expulser, son beau-frère la viole, nie son crime et précipite Blanche dans la folie et la prison de l'hôpital psychiatrique.

L'espace-territoire et l'espace des genres se renvoient mutuellement l'un à l'autre, particulièrement dans le Sud de Flannery O'Connor. La nouvelle « Good Country People [2] » inscrit dans son titre l'espace campagnard, l'associant à l'innocence du paradis, préservé de la corruption urbaine et de la civilisation ; mais le titre s'avère d'une cinglante ironie. Après avoir observé les invariants des personnages féminins des nouvelles dans leur non-conformisme aux archétypes, nous verrons la manière dont est réprimée l'insoumission féminine au patriarcat ; nous entrerons dans l'espace de l'interdit, observerons cette interaction trouble entre la monstruosité et le voyeurisme qu'elle suscite ; nous assisterons à la défloration des espaces vierges et tenterons d'explorer la pluralité des lectures possibles du dénouement de la nouvelle, dans son retournement de situation, le coup de théâtre final entre farce et tragédie, et nous déterminerons comment l'espace du Sud s'est trouvé bouleversé par l'héroïne et dans quelle mesure sa défaite apparente pourrait devenir pour elle l'occasion d'une reconquête de son propre territoire intérieur.

Flannery O'Connor éclairait ses personnages féminins d'une lumière peu flatteuse ou les présentait dans des situations peu enviables : souvent ridiculisées, humiliées, assassines ou assassinées, ces veuves ou divorcées, chefs d'entreprise et de famille apparaissent sous les traits de grotesques mégères, d'hypocrites réactionnaires adeptes de la ségrégation, de moralisatrices condescendantes, de capitalistes avares, de mères incapables d'inculquer à leurs enfants les valeurs socialement reconnues. Les filles sont irrespectueuses, insolentes, rebelles, souvent imparfaites physiquement ou déséquilibrées psychiquement, et apportent peu de satisfactions à leur mère.

Mères et filles partagent fréquemment un espace relativement clos, îlot cultivé au milieu d'une friche sudiste, comme dans « A Circle in the Fire », « The Life You Save May Be Your Own », ou « Good Country People » ; dans « The Displaced Person », le maître de la plantation est encore une femme censée pallier l'absence de père de famille. La pastorale américaine tourne à l'enfer sur terre lorsque la maîtresse reste emmurée vivante dans son domaine déserté par tous (« The Displaced Person »), ou que des

2 Toutes les références aux nouvelles sont issues de O'Connor 1990.

malveillances le transforment en brasier (« A Circle in the Fire »). Le microcosme économique et social de l'entreprise établit une hiérarchie génératrice de tensions, le cocon poreux de la propriété peine à protéger ses occupantes, les rejetons filles tentent de repousser les limites de l'enceinte, de bousculer les habitudes, de renverser l'attribution des pouvoirs ou privilèges traditionnellement masculins, ou encore de transgresser les codes et frontières, notamment entre sphère publique et sphère privée.

Ces filles héritent rarement de traits conventionnellement féminins, les mères étant sans doute incapables d'un tel legs. L'employée de ferme, mère de deux séductrices du Sud dans « Good Country People », porte un patronyme masculin, « Mrs. Freeman », et l'expression qu'offre son visage à ses interlocuteurs est comparée au mode de déplacement d'un poids lourd qui aurait pour seules fonctions les marches avant et arrière, la marche avant suivant la ligne jaune de manière hypnotique, sans un regard de côté, la marche arrière équivalant à un repli intérieur proche de l'autisme afin d'éviter à tout prix de revenir sur ses affirmations. Les héroïnes inversent l'image de la Belle du Sud, héritage de la tradition sudiste romantique : si par exception, dans « The Life You Save May Be Your Own », une jeune femme est dotée de la beauté des anges, il s'agit d'une demeurée mentale. Un visiteur diabolique accepte de l'épouser contre une voiture à remettre en état, pour aussitôt l'abandonner en voyage de noces dans un restaurant du bord de route. Dans « Revelation », la peu gracieuse et mal nommée Mary Grace, l'intellectuelle de Wellesley College, que sa mère morigène outrageusement pour sa disposition peu amène, saute à la gorge d'une patiente volubile imbue de sa personne dans la salle d'attente du médecin pour l'étrangler avant de la vouer aux feux de l'enfer ; sa rage est maîtrisée par une camisole chimique et promet d'être contenue dans l'enfermement d'un asile d'aliénés.

La férocité de Flannery O'Connor visait particulièrement les héroïnes dont elle se sentait proche. La maladie l'avait contrainte à se confiner dans la grande maison familiale du Sud auprès de sa mère, et à s'appuyer sur des béquilles qu'elle appelait ses « jambes d'aluminium ». Or dans « Good Country People », elle affuble d'une jambe de bois une intellectuelle vivant seule avec sa mère, Mrs. Hopewell, sur une exploitation agricole. Hulga a dépassé la trentaine ; sa mère se désole que l'accident de chasse qui a nécessité l'amputation d'une jambe à l'âge de dix ans l'ait privée d'une vie normale et condamnée à ne jamais s'amuser. Seules les études, couronnées

par un Ph.D. en philosophie, ont distrait son existence, mais sa faiblesse cardiaque lui interdit la carrière d'enseignante à laquelle elles devaient aboutir et la voue à manquer son envol vers une vie indépendante, plus urbaine et plus proche des sphères de l'esprit. Solitaire, hautaine, insensible à tout ce qui touche une jeune fille du Sud, les délicatesses de la nature comme l'attrait des jeunes gens – « she didn't like dogs or cats or birds or flowers or nature or nice young men » (276) – Hulga a développé un nihilisme dont elle écrase sa mère, s'appliquant à déplaire à son entourage et à se montrer sous son jour le moins flatteur. Pourtant un jeune vendeur de Bibles ambulant qui dit s'appeler Manley Pointer fait irruption dans son paysage désert et réussit à enjôler la mère, qui l'invite à rester dîner ; les deux jeunes gens se donnent rendez-vous.

Le jeune homme se prétend cardiaque lui aussi ; il amadoue Hulga en avançant sa fascination pour son handicap, qui la rend unique, et finit par obtenir d'elle, comme gage d'amour, le sacrifice suprême : qu'elle lui accorde de dévoiler l'endroit où sa prothèse est fixée au moignon. D'abord sidérée par l'indécence et l'impudence de cette requête, Hulga se met à croire en la sincérité totalement innocente de ce rustaud qui a su viser juste, et cède à ses injonctions insistantes. Dans le jeu de la séduction, elle se prend à un fantasme absurde : une vie commune où il s'adonnerait au rituel sacré d'ôter et remettre sa jambe de bois. Mais il éloigne brusquement celle-ci de sa portée ; Hulga, impuissante, réclame sa jambe à grands cris, de plus en plus impérieux, alarmés, jusqu'à ce que le jeune homme sorte d'une Bible creuse au fond de sa valise, comme d'une boîte de Pandore, la trilogie de l'anti-puritanisme présentée en offrande sur un autel païen : une fiole de whisky, un paquet de cartes à jouer obscènes et un médicament contre les maladies vénériennes – alcool, jeu, sexe. Manley Pointer retrousse ses babines comme un chien d'arrêt assoiffé du sang de sa proie ; l'indignation de la jeune fille scandalisée fait se récrier le faux missionnaire devant plus vaste imposture que la sienne, car sa morale conservatrice dénonce en elle une fausse nihiliste et une piètre athée.

Pour elle, l'impudeur s'est muée en impiété, le vol de sa jambe de bois est devenu un viol mental, une atteinte à l'intégrité de son essence spirituelle : « She took care of it as someone else would his soul, in private and almost with her own eyes turned away » (288). Le diable lui a volé son âme et emporte son trophée, qu'il insère dans sa collection hétéroclite de fragments de pièces rapportées au corps féminin, dont un œil de verre,

tandis que la jambe, rangée en travers de la valise entre deux Bibles, dessine la forme d'une croix hérétique. Prise par où elle croyait prendre après avoir voulu séduire le jeune homme et avoir secrètement triomphé de le voir si aisément tomber sous ses charmes – « She had seduced him without even making up her mind to try » (288) –, elle se retrouve victime d'une farce où le ridicule la condamne en la dépeignant sous des traits d'une grotesque difformité. Naguère leste avec sa jambe de bois pour grimper dans le grenier à foin, la voilà unijambiste perchée au septième ciel sans pouvoir redescendre à ras de terre, là où la métayère arrache des oignons puants en compagnie de sa mère. Celle-ci jette un regard de commisération sur ce pauvre simple d'esprit qui prend la clef des champs. Après avoir écourté un entretien avec Pointer au motif d'un rendez-vous en ville, Mrs. Hopewell, dans sa condescendance, n'avait-elle pas approuvé d'un « good country people are the salt of the earth! » (279) la condition de campagnard, nature humble nécessairement innocente de complexité et de méchanceté, qu'affectait d'assumer, comme en s'excusant, le jeune homme ? Hulga, elle-même de disposition méfiante, constate, médusée, qu'elle s'est laissée abuser par la façade lorsque le masque tombe, et elle reprend les mêmes termes : « aren't you just good country people? » (290).

La rébellion contre l'ordre patriarcal matée

On pourrait s'arrêter à cette farce, si les schémas classiques, tels celui de l'hybris et de la nemesis, n'y étaient pas tantôt mécaniquement, voire littéralement, appliqués, tantôt inversés au point de réclamer un nouvel examen. Ainsi Hulga a renversé la religion établie, qu'elle a remplacée par sa propre religion de l'athéisme, poussée jusqu'au nihilisme. L'étymologie du nom même du philosophe français dont elle assène les théories à sa mère, Malebranche, suggère la malignité du choix. Or le faussaire en religion, démasqué comme ennemi des « good country people » parmi lesquels elle l'avait rangé, s'il feint d'abord d'admirer son indépendance d'esprit en matière de religion – « That's very unusual for a girl » (285) –, ironise sur ses airs offusqués lorsqu'il déclare ne croire en rien : « I thought you was some girl! » (290).

Pointer triomphe de celle qui l'écrasait secrètement de son génie – « True genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind » (284) –, se venge de son arrogance et pense lui avoir prouvé les limites de son intelligence :

« you ain't so smart » (291). D'ailleurs son Ph.D. en philosophie s'avère non seulement vain dans ce Sud profond, mais il la singularise dans son milieu et la prive de raison sociale. Loin de s'enorgueillir des prouesses de sa fille et de son instruction, sa mère est embarrassée pour décliner ce statut indéfini, anachronique et décalé, finalement inavouable :

> The girl had taken the Ph.D. in philosophy and this left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss. You could say, "My daughter is a nurse," or "My daughter is a schoolteacher," or even, "My daughter is a chemical engineer." You could not say, "My daughter is a philosopher." That was something that ended with the Greeks and Romans. (276)

La philosophie, affaire d'hommes dans l'Antiquité gréco-romaine, ne sied guère à une femme du Sud, qui devrait se contenter d'espérer briller en société par sa beauté et son élégance plus que par son éloquence et ne rien faire qui pourrait porter atteinte aux prérogatives masculines.

Or l'élégance n'est pas le fort de Hulga, de plus en plus disgracieuse, « bloated, rude and squint-eyed » (276) aux yeux de sa mère qui, l'imaginant dans le rôle d'enseignante, ne peut que se la figurer en épouvantail. Car elle réprouve son allure négligée et son mauvais goût vestimentaire, dont cette image de cow-boy sur la poitrine : « here she went about all day in a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat-shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it. She thought it was funny; Mrs. Hopewell thought it was idiotic and showed simply that she was still a child » (276) [3]. Pour le rendez-vous galant, alors que Pointer arbore un chapeau neuf, Hulga, non contente d'enfiler un pantalon comme un homme, porte du linge défraîchi. Le blanc de son chemisier, loin d'être immaculé, suggère non seulement une négligence délibérée mais sans doute aussi le deuil anticipé de sa virginité, que par ailleurs à trente-deux ans, elle serait, selon les critères sudistes, bien avisée d'avoir perdue sur l'autel sacré du mariage, à l'instar de Carramae, mariée et enceinte à quinze ans, ou de Glynese, dont la mère vante les nombreux admirateurs. Le seul réflexe séducteur de Hulga, c'est, à défaut de parfum, de vaporiser sur son col une bouffée de nébuliseur nasal : « She wore a pair of slacks and a dirty white shirt, and as an

3 Son émule Mary Grace, dans « Revelation », penche pour le même manque grossier de raffinement ou de féminité, « Girl Scout shoes and heavy socks » (491) ; sa propre mère lui pardonnerait sa mise, son embonpoint et l'acné qui la défigure si elle ne l'associait à ses mauvaises manières : « it was one thing to be ugly and another to act ugly » (492).

afterthought, she had put some Vapex on the collar of it since she did not own any perfume » (284).

Renversant les codes, Hulga semble avoir pris l'initiative du lieu de rendez-vous : sa mère, intriguée, l'a vue de loin attendre le vendeur de Bibles pour lui parler (280-281). Quant à Mrs. Freeman, qui a manifestement observé leur manège, Hulga désamorce l'inquisition de son regard en la questionnant sur le récit des amours de sa fille Glynese. Hulga a consciemment omis d'apporter un pique-nique, prétexte de la rencontre ; dénuée de coquetterie, elle est arrivée à l'heure précise, tandis que le galant se cachait derrière un buisson et la laissait un bref instant déconfite de ne trouver personne. Sa fureur sourd lorsqu'elle soupçonne la malveillance d'un piège : « She […] had the furious feeling that she had been tricked, that he had only meant to make her walk to the gate after the idea of him » (284). Le narrateur revient trois fois sur le fait que Hulga accompagne le jeune homme jusqu'au portail de la ferme, ce qui met l'emphase sur les avances récurrentes de la jeune fille qui se compromet. Libérée du souci du qu'en dira-t-on et du regard inquisiteur des mères, elle se montre prête à franchir le pas, celui du portail comme celui de l'initiation sexuelle. Or ce pressentiment d'une indélicatesse ne suffira pas plus que les autres signes à la mettre en garde. Lorsqu'il affirme n'avoir jamais douté de sa venue – « I knew you'd come! » (285) –, son assurance l'irrite. Elle insiste auprès du galant sur le caractère superflu de cette valise qu'il tient à hisser péniblement dans le grenier à foin, et de la Bible qu'elle contient. Elle mène la danse tout le long du trajet : « She led the way and he came breathing heavily behind her » (286). Elle lui prouve son agilité à grimper aux échelles en s'introduisant la première dans l'ouverture de la grange puis, impatiente, le tance ; son expertise (« expertly ») ridiculise la maladresse, (« awkwardly ») du jeune homme (286). Pourtant cette apparente maîtrise de la situation par Hulga ne tarde pas à s'effondrer ; ses conseils doctes, ses péroraisons philosophiques font place à un désarroi implorant lorsque Pointer, dénué de scrupules, refuse de lui rendre sa jambe de bois et la tient à sa merci.

Ne se sont-ils pas, au-delà du portail du paradis pastoral, aventurés en *terra incognita*, dans le lieu où le chaperon rouge rencontre le méchant loup : « They went down into the pasture toward the woods » (285) ? C'est à l'orée du bois, « edge of the wood », que Pointer lui applique son premier baiser insistant. Sur le fond de cette lisière sombre, « dark ridge of woods » (287), se détache à sa vue non encore brouillée le paysage des deux

mamelons rosés que forment des collines, réplique de son propre corps allongé ; puis il la prive de ses lunettes et de la perception de cette nature qui la reflète. Les mères apercevront Pointer après son forfait, tandis qu'il émerge des bois, traverse le pré et se dirige vers la route où il retourne au nulle-part ou au non-lieu d'où il vient, rendu à l'état non équivoque de bandit de grand chemin (« highway »).

Sa différence fait de Hulga un objet de curiosité, qu'elle attise en accentuant cette singularité. Sa mère a toujours pensé qu'elle amplifiait à dessein le bruit désagréable de sa claudication, et qu'elle avait choisi de se re-nommer Hulga, comme palimpseste de Joy, donné à sa naissance, parce que c'était le prénom le plus laid qu'elle ait pu trouver. Pour autant, elle préserve jalousement son intimité. Lorsque Mrs. Freeman, en cachette de sa mère, l'appelle par ce prénom de re-baptême, la jeune fille renâcle devant l'intrusion : « the big spectacled Joy-Hulga would scowl and redden as if her privacy had been intruded upon » (275). Pour cette femme, l'attrait du prénom va de pair avec la fascination qu'exerce sur elle la jambe de bois, mais Hulga ne sait percevoir la préfiguration du danger que lui fait courir l'autre adepte de la monstruosité qui matera sa rébellion contre le patriarcat : Manley Pointer a lui aussi créé son nom de toutes pièces, arborant ainsi le legs de la masculinité.

L'espace de l'interdit : voyeurisme et monstruosité

Mrs. Freeman et Manley Pointer partagent en effet une curiosité malsaine que Pointer pousse jusqu'au fétichisme pervers. Le voyeurisme est un travers condamné par l'Église dans la nouvelle « A Temple of the Holy Ghost » ; les prédicateurs ont fait fermer la foire aux plaisirs où l'on pouvait, dans une tente, voir les parties intimes d'un hermaphrodite : « 'It pulled up its dress and showed us' » rapportent les fillettes (245), retenant que le corps féminin est un temple du Saint Esprit, à révérer. La nudité est un sujet littéralement brûlant pour Sally Virginia Cope, vêtue en garçon et bardée de pistolets dans « A Circle in the Fire », lorsqu'elle s'enfonce dans les bois de la propriété familiale pour une expédition punitive qui reste à l'état de fantasme, à l'encontre des voyous agressifs venus tourmenter sa mère. Elle découvre alors les jeunes gens, en tenue d'Adam, en train de s'adonner à des ablutions dans un abreuvoir à vaches. Sitôt après avoir contemplé leurs longs corps nus luisant au soleil et leurs jeux équivoques,

elle les voit mettre le feu aux bois et aux champs : comme si ce spectacle volé devait être aussitôt puni par les feux infernaux. Ce désastre la vieillit en quelques instants, l'arrache à une innocence édénique pour la plonger avec sa mère dans l'acceptation fataliste de la malédiction et du malheur dévolu aux simples mortelles (193).

Pour Manley Pointer, voir – « a long penetrating look » (288) – et posséder un fragment fétiche de la personne se substituent à la consommation de l'acte d'amour, ce qui prive Hulga de sa victoire, sans pour autant la laisser intègre. Il l'examine comme un animal de zoo fabuleux, excité par son anormalité : « like a child watching a new fantastic animal at the zoo » (283), « He gazed at her now as if the fantastic animal at the zoo had put its paw through the bars and given him a loving poke » (286) ; comme par quelque parodie de cristallisation amoureuse inversée, Pointer est obsédé par l'idée de découvrir de ses yeux ce qu'elle cache jalousement, son âpreté fétichiste augmentant à l'aune du secret de l'objet convoité. Or Hulga s'est vantée de son exceptionnelle clairvoyance salvatrice lui permettant de dépasser le visible : « We're all damned […] but some of us have taken off their blindfolds and see that there's nothing to see. It's a kind of salvation » (288). Déjà, elle avait mis sa mère au défi de voir l'invisible et l'envers de l'être à l'intérieur de soi : « Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? » (276). Elle se targue auprès de Pointer de jouir d'un regard qui transperce les choses, jusqu'au néant – « I'm one of those people who see through to nothing » (287) –, capacité qui chasse les illusions et bannit le mot amour.

Or cette supra-lucidité fait place en réalité à un aveuglement cultivé qui gauchit sa perception du jeune homme : « Joy, whose constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face, would stare just a little to the side of her, her eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it » (273). Sa myopie s'aggrave en effet de l'ignorance délibérée de ce qui l'entoure : si peu habituée à jeter le moindre regard sur le paysage, elle ne se rend pas compte que Pointer a subtilisé ses lunettes en l'embrassant (287), ce qui entraîne une distorsion supplémentaire de son acuité visuelle, puisque le lac – ou son illusion – qu'elle aperçoit par-dessus son épaule lorsqu'il l'embrasse se dédouble. Ce dédoublement renvoie aux œufs qu'elle mange toujours par deux au petit-déjeuner ; elle les avale en même temps que sa honte devant Mrs. Freeman, embarras qu'elle devrait ressentir en face de

cette question absurde posée par le jeune homme : « You ever ate a chicken that was two days old? ». Devant son acquiescement imperturbable, il répond par un triomphe hilare : « it must have been mighty small! » (283) Cette plaisanterie sibylline pourrait rappeler la façon dont l'étranger enseigne le mot « Bird » à Lucynell Crater, simple d'esprit et muette dans « The Life You Save May Be Your Own », et suggérer quelque double sens phallique, quelque indécence latente : ainsi « screw » – « The boy was unscrewing the top of the flask » (290) – contient un sens imagé impudique. Pour Pointer, cependant, la plaisanterie reste du domaine verbal, car sa puissance virile se limite à l'alcool illicite, au voyeurisme et aux manies de collectionneur. Pour le lecteur, ces sens cachés, secrets, cryptiques, croisés, ces doubles sens, tissent des réseaux souterrains qui affleurent en créant un effet comique – l'interdit émergeant au grand jour en crevant la surface de la bienséance pour étaler leur obscénité choquante, confondante ou hilarante selon le point de vue adopté – et creusent un fossé entre les personnages innocents et les roués.

Ce champ sémantique de l'impudeur, transgression de la bienséance, est rendu manifeste par l'allusion mythologique. En effet, Hulga, si fière d'avoir rivalisé avec sa mère dans l'acte de se re-nommer – « One of her major triumphs was that her mother had not been able to turn her dust into Joy, but the greater one was that she had been able to turn it herself into Hulga » (275) –, identifie ce nouveau prénom, objet de sa création, au pouvoir du dieu Vulcain, version romaine du dieu grec Héphaistos, le dieu boiteux forgeron : « she had a vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had come when called. She saw it as her highest creative act » (275). Mrs. Hopewell ne la jette pas du haut de l'Olympe comme l'avait fait Hera avec son enfant déficient, mais se lamente de ses mauvaises manières, bien peu conformes aux codes féminins du Sud, préférant se passer de sa compagnie pour la promenade plutôt que de la voir grincheuse : « If you can't come pleasantly, I don't want you at all » (274). Comme le dieu, Hulga se rebelle contre la déception de sa mère et demande à être acceptée telle qu'elle est : « If you want me, here I am – LIKE I AM » (274). Pourtant, parce qu'elle est attachée à sa prothèse comme le paon à sa queue – « she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about its tail » (288) –, elle se rapproche aussi de Héra, dont l'emblème, souligne

O'Connor dans un essai, était le paon [4]. Or la déesse-mère avait été ligotée sur un trône d'or magique fabriqué par son fils en guise de représailles et l'avait appelé à l'aide pour la délivrer. Hulga, qui émule l'ambition créatrice du dieu Vulcain tout en adoptant les goûts animaliers de Héra, semble s'identifier aux deux, de manière ambiguë ; mais c'est bien la position de la femme indécente qui lui échoit, non celle du dieu.

Cette confusion des rôles se retrouve dans l'identification de la jeune femme au rôle maternel. Ainsi Pointer lui déclare avant de la tenter avec un pique-nique : « I like […] to see what Mother Nature is wearing » (284). Cette allégorie de la mère nature pour le moins cryptique suggère de manière proleptique le sens du dénudement de la jeune femme qu'escompte Pointer. Ironiquement, Hulga incarnerait pour lui la mère nature, son vêtement le plus couvrant étant sa jambe de bois. Sans cet attribut, la jeune femme se révèle nue jusqu'à l'âme, et obscène. Avec des bruits de succion, Pointer l'embrasse puis marmonne, tel un enfant qu'on endort : « His breath was clear and sweet like a child's and the kisses were sticky like a child's. […] the mumbling was like the sleepy fretting of a child being put to sleep by his mother » (287). « You poor baby » (287) s'exclame-t-elle avec une condescendance teintée de tendresse en face de la détermination du jeune homme à lui arracher une déclaration d'amour. Le dénouement renverse à nouveau le mythe. En effet, Héphaïstos aurait séduit de nombreuses femmes, mais lorsque son épouse Aphrodite le trompe avec Arès, dieu de la guerre [5], il prend le couple dans ses filets, afin que tous les dieux puissent assister au spectacle des deux coupables et en rire. Hulga, qui usurpe l'autre genre en se représentant par métonymie dans le rôle du dieu mâle tout en incarnant aussi Héra, ne se doute pas de l'ironie de son association, puisque c'est elle seule qui sera confondue, telle Aphrodite. Déjà « mesmerized » (290), paralysée et rendue muette par l'offre de

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4 Voir « The King of Birds » (O'Connor 1972: 4-5).

5 Pointer possède la violence d'Arès, dont il partage l'analogie canine, puisque le chien était consacré au dieu guerrier. Ce dernier venait de Thrace, pays de chevaux, dont Hulga arbore un rappel sur son sweat-shirt avec cet imprimé de cow-boy à cheval.
Le mythe antique nous invite à voir Hulga remplir également le rôle d'Aphrodite, infidèle – ici, à ses idées –, confondue par Héphaïstos, mais aussi séduite par Arès, dieu de la guerre, connu pour sa force brutale. En même temps elle a subi le sort des fils des Amazones, filles du même Arès et de la nymphe Harmonie, qui mutilaient leurs enfants mâles à la naissance, les rendant aveugles et boiteux ; si bien qu'en termes mythiques, elle transgresse plusieurs fois la frontière du genre.

Pointer de boire le whisky au goulot, elle se retrouve prisonnière sur la paille du grenier du fait du larcin de sa prothèse, qui rend patente sa culpabilité d'un instant.

Déflorer les espaces vierges

Dans le jardin d'Éden, la reconnaissance de la faute après la désobéissance provoque la honte et le remords chez Adam et Ève, qui cachent leur nudité car ils ont perdu leur innocence. Lorsque la veille du rendez-vous Hulga prémédite son rôle de tentatrice, de séductrice, elle conçoit la honte comme l'apanage de l'homme. Elle s'arroge un rôle de rédemptrice dans ce fantasme nocturne où elle ôte à Pointer son remords et sa honte en les sublimant : « She imagined that she took his remorse in hand and changed it into a deeper understanding of life. She took all his shame away and turned it into something useful » (284). Le lendemain, dans le grenier à foin, elle s'émerveille de la totale innocence de Pointer dont elle ne perçoit pas le double jeu, pas plus qu'elle ne soupçonne le coup de théâtre qu'il prépare. En effet, dans la réalité, les événements inversent son scénario. Pointer engage la conversation de manière abrupte : il lui demande son âge, qu'elle divise pratiquement par deux, puis il aborde tour à tour ses faiblesses, sa jambe, l'étrange prénom dont elle s'est affublée, ses lunettes, sa maladie de cœur. En face de cette indélicatesse, Hulga est assez timorée, vraisemblablement pour mieux couler son portrait à l'effigie de la belle effarouchée. L'air soumis, elle admet volontiers sa timidité : « You're shy, aren't you, Hulga? » […] She nodded » (284). De fait, elle a l'air impressionnée par la grosse main rougeaude qui empoigne la gigantesque valise. Son arrogance évanouie va de pair avec des rougissements qui la replacent dans le rôle de la Belle.

Ces stigmates de la honte ou de la culpabilité virent du rose au violet. Lorsque Mrs. Freeman suggère qu'elle l'a vue avec le vendeur de Bibles, Hulga ressent une rougeur au cou, l'endroit du corps de Glynese où s'affairait prétendument Harvey Hill, son chevalier servant dans sa voiture, pour des raisons dites curatives, avant sa demande en mariage (281) : « her face remained expressionless but the color rose to her neck and she seemed to swallow it down with the next spoonful of egg » (282). Cette roseur, que Hulga avait déjà ressentie lors de l'emploi de son prénom par Mrs. Freeman et qui traduit ici une confusion liée à l'évocation d'un rapport d'ordre sexuel,

se transforme en rougeur disgracieuse lorsque Manley Pointer lui demande de voir la jointure de sa prothèse : « putting his hand on the small of her back, he asked softly, "Where does your wooden leg join on?" She turned an ugly red and glared at him » (284). Le terme « ugly » dénote l'hostilité de ses sentiments autant que son enlaidissement. Après que Pointer a joint l'obscénité à l'hérésie, la rougeur de Hulga fonce encore : « Her face was almost purple » (290), et lorsqu'elle le voit déguerpir en emportant sa prothèse dans sa valise impie, la laissant démunie sur la paille, son visage en feu traduit un véritable état de congestion cérébrale : « she turned her churning face toward the opening » (291). Cette défaite est d'autant plus cuisante que la philosophe croit en la suprématie de l'intelligence et du cerveau, qu'elle juge capable de filtrer et de régir les émotions comme les sensations, y compris celle du premier baiser : « She had never been kissed before and she was pleased to discover that it was an unexceptional experience and all a matter of the mind's control » (285-286). La tête froide pendant les baisers suivants, elle ne se laisse troubler par aucun émoi.

Hulga a tort de se croire immunisée contre la honte, elle qui est certaine de l'avoir, grâce au savoir, éradiquée de son système de la même façon que le scalpel du chirurgien extrait un chancre : « As a child she had sometimes felt subject to feelings of shame but education had removed the last traces of that as a good surgeon scrapes for cancer; she would no more have felt it over what he was asking than she would have believed in his Bible » (288). Elle refuse de reconnaître en elle-même une réaction d'amour-propre ou de pudeur en face du voyeurisme de Pointer et nie être heurtée par l'obscénité de sa demande : « The obscenity of the suggestion was not what shocked her » (288). Elle décrit ce qu'elle ressent de manière métaphysique, désincarnée. Elle a remplacé Dieu par une idole narcissique, cette jambe de bois qui est pour elle ce que l'âme est aux croyants : « She took care of it as someone else would his soul […] » (288) – à tel point que lorsqu'il parvient à la convaincre, à force d'empathie feinte et de fausse admiration éperdue, de se séparer de ce membre artificiel, elle a le sentiment de s'abandonner corps et âme dans un mystère de la foi qui la fera renaître miraculeusement : « it was like surrendering to him completely. It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his » (289). D'ailleurs n'avait-il pas, la veille, rappelé cette parole biblique : « He who losest his life shall find it » (280) ? C'est dire qu'en emportant ce membre, Manley Pointer prend à Hulga plus que sa virginité : alors qu'elle était toute prête à abandonner celle-ci, il a ravi ce que précisément elle n'aurait jamais

cédé de son plein gré. Ce faisant, il la replace dans le rôle traditionnel de la femme dépendante et humiliée. Il reproduit sur elle la violence de l'accident de chasse, sport masculin, qui l'avait mutilée, en l'amputant une nouvelle fois de ce membre phallique sans lequel même son esprit qui, quelques instants plus tôt, était « clear and detached and ironic » (285), arrête ses fonctions polyvalentes puisque le cerveau chez elle relaie le muscle cardiaque défaillant (289). La voici vaincue, bafouée, et selon les critères masculins, implicitement consentante, trop honteuse pour oser se plaindre, trop coupable pour pouvoir se poser en victime.

Selon les critiques canoniques, Flannery O'Connor aurait voulu montrer que la mésaventure de Hulga est en réalité miséricordieuse pour la victime, qui voyait son salut en son nihilisme. Paradoxalement, le salut viendrait précisément de cette déconvenue. Contrairement aux apparences et aux intuitions de Hulga, le jeune homme est un vaurien invétéré ; ainsi la jeune femme ne s'interroge pas sur le chapeau neuf trop grand qu'il arbore et qui, si l'on se fie à *The Violent Bear it Away*, est le trophée probable d'un autre viol, littéral ou plus probablement symbolique. Manley Pointer continuera à prendre son plaisir pervers dans ces humiliations et dans cette récolte de fragments, synecdoques de la personne, dont il ne sait que désirer des parties, artificielles et aliénables, résidus de souffrances. Mais la violence qu'il inflige à Hulga risque de la forcer à renaître, renaissance qu'elle avait espérée : atteinte dans son corps par une infirmité qui a défini sa psyché, elle s'est rigidifiée, fossilisée à l'image de son membre artificiel, s'est identifiée à cette laideur asexuée ; or, privée de cette prothèse, elle se retrouve nue jusqu'au fond de l'être, transpercée par le regard pénétrant que jettent les yeux du jeune homme, tels deux pieux d'acier (« The boy gave her a long penetrating look » [288], « his eyes like two steel spikes » [289]), regard qui sonde les reins et les cœurs. Elle se voit dépourvue de la barrière qu'elle érigeait entre le monde et elle, désarmée, « disempowered », contrainte de redéfinir sa relation au monde et sa propre nature, d'accepter sa vulnérable humanité, de reconnaître le besoin de son corps et de celui des autres, et de réunifier en elle le corps et l'esprit, selon l'exhortation d'Adrienne Rich. En termes psychanalytiques, la confrontation à sa propre impuissance peut receler une fonction édifiante et cette épreuve déstabilisante peut conférer une valeur initiatique à sa souffrance. La sublimation de la honte, qualifiée de « remords », qu'elle escomptait opérer en Pointer, pourrait fonctionner pour elle-même et, en ses propres termes, « se transformer en une chose utile » et améliorer son appréhension de l'existence, en dehors de tout

existentialisme ou toute cérébralité (284). Selon une interprétation optimiste, elle sortirait de sa prison pour devenir une femme plus libre, et surtout plus femme, si tout cela à la fois est compatible dans les années cinquante. Une lecture réaliste, plus féministe, la verrait dominée et vaincue par l'inévitable pouvoir patriarcal qui la renverse, la prive de son membre viril pour l'émasculer [6], la soumettre et la punir. Betty Friedan a souligné combien la société infantilise la femme – la mère de Hulga a gelé son âge à celui de l'accident, soit de sa prothèse, dix ans – et conteste la féminité des femmes diplômées [7]. Hulga illustre parfaitement cette théorie dans le contexte socio-culturel de l'époque, et c'est au lecteur de décider s'il privilégie sa défaite manifeste ou s'il écrit une suite heureuse, qui la rachète et libère sa féminité, ou encore s'il s'apprête à accueillir la nouvelle Harmonie [8] que pourrait engendrer cet accouplement entre Aphrodite et Arès.

La latitude interprétative peut concilier deux versions contraires, selon la même ambivalence qui habite les mythes. Louise Westling rappelle que O'Connor refusait absolument de jouer le rôle de la Belle du Sud et de se conformer aux normes du féminin, accentuant elle aussi son refus dans sa démarche et dans sa mise ; Natalie Wilson, quant à elle, insiste sur son utilisation du corps dans sa fiction comme lieu de contestation sociale et culturelle [9]. Que cette contestation s'incarne dans une jambe de bois est d'une ironie caustique, lorsqu'elle devient signe, et langage, en face de la langue de bois de la mère de la philosophe désillusionnée, Mrs. Hopewell, et de celle qui a engendré l'hyper-féminité, séductrice et procréatrice, Mrs. Freeman, dont le nom semblerait indiquer la nature résolument masculine de la liberté. Les deux commères communiquent en effet à coups d'aphorismes *ready-made*, hérités de la langue patriarcale, qui les affranchissent de la nécessité d'innover, les momifient dans leur suffisance et jettent un voile pudique sur le fond de leur pensée. Qu'elles soient le stéréotype

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6 Voir Christine ATKINS, « Educating Hulga: Re-Writing Seduction in 'Good Country People' », dans Caruso.

7 Voir également Donald DONAHOO, « O'Connor and *The Feminine Mystique*: The Limitations That Reality Imposed », dans Caruso.

8 Voir note 5 sur la nymphe Harmonie, née de l'union d'Arès et Aphrodite, selon la légende thébaine. Car dans les traditions de Samothrace, elle serait la fille de Zeus et d'Électre, une des filles d'Atlas.

9 Natalie WILSON, « Misfit Bodies and Errant Gender: The Corporeal Feminism of Flannery O'Connor », dans Caruso.

inverse de la Belle du Sud, comme Hulga, ou son incarnation pathétique, comme Glynese ou Carramae, ces filles semblent irrémédiablement dominées par le légendaire patriarcat qui écrase leur rébellion et réprime leur désir de libération. Pointer rappelle le visiteur de *The Glass Menagerie* de Tennessee Williams, lui aussi invité par la mère, Amanda, et qui casse la corne de la licorne de la jeune fille boiteuse comme Hulga : Laura se résigne à la perte de cette différence qui range son animal dans les objets ordinaires et rassure Jim : la licorne se sentira moins « freakish », plus à l'aise avec les autres. La mère de Williams, Edwina, avait pareillement fait lobotomiser sa fille Rose, dont les indécences verbales lui étaient insupportables.

Une perspective métafictionnelle pourrait infléchir notre ultime lecture, nous ramenant à l'intolérable créativité féminine. Lorsqu'elle écoute Manley Pointer décliner ses tares en guise d'entrée en matière, Hulga revêt l'apparence d'une page blanche, « blank, solid and silent » (283), rappelant la nouvelle d'Isak Dinesen, « The Blank Page [10] », où les jeunes princesses écrivent l'histoire de leur défloration nuptiale avec leur sang sur le drap de lin tissé par les nonnes, pour l'encadrer puis l'exposer dans la galerie du musée royal – l'histoire la plus éloquente car la moins attendue et la plus subversive étant celle du tableau immaculé, qui laisse libre cours à l'imagination des visiteurs. Dans la nouvelle de Flannery O'Connor, Manley Pointer vole à Hulga le scénario qu'elle avait préparé, il le ré-écrit avec le corps de la jeune femme, ce qu'il peut en saisir, et salir, la punissant en l'amputant une deuxième fois, la réduisant au statut d'objet, passif dans la création. Il prononce désormais le nom qu'elle s'était forgé d'une voix dénuée de toute admiration.

De plus, l'artefact de la prothèse est ainsi décrit, dans sa prosaïque et ravissante laideur : « The artificial limb, in a white sock and brown flat shoe, was bound in a heavy material like canvas » (289). Il ressemble à la branche d'un arbre, « limb », arbre dont on fait la pâte à papier ; le terme « limb » est également employé pour désigner les jambages d'une lettre tracée sur le papier ; ce membre de bois est enveloppé, « bound », vocable qui décrit aussi la reliure d'un livre – d'une toile, « canvas », support d'un tableau : Jacques Derrida a associé l'hymen à la page et le stylo au pénis, ce membre

10 Voir Gubar. On pense bien sûr aussi à *The Wide Sargasso Sea* de Jean Rhys comme réplique à *Jane Eyre* de Charlotte Brontë, où la parole est rendue à la femme exilée, prisonnière au grenier.

rigide qui est confisqué à Hulga, et c'est par ce manque que l'histoire sera dévoilée aux commères, un manque qui pourrait être métamorphosé « miraculeusement » en espace de créativité neuve pour l'artiste, et de résistance à l'héritage féminin comme masculin. Cet espace honteusement vierge est tout aussi scandaleusement profané dans le grenier à foin ou à folle – « the mad woman in the attic » – où ne cesse de se rejouer la scène primitive de la violence de l'écriture dans la société sudiste d'alors qui dépossède, bâillonne et mutile le corps féminin colonisé.

Le schéma dramatique de la nouvelle, réduit à une pantomime, se résumerait ainsi à l'introduction d'un inconnu malin dans le jardin d'Éden, l'espace de la plantation de l'ordre sudiste ancien. Cet espace clos, hérité par des femmes, sorte de gynécée édénique porteur des graines de la faute, et que les flammes transforment aisément en enfer, est traversé par des prédateurs masculins prêts à toutes les ruses et impiétés pour tromper leur vigilance, violer leur espace et les détrousser. La transgression ultime est religieuse, le blasphème s'ajoutant au défi de la prohibition et à la profanation du corps féminin. Cependant, un espace plus virtuel, celui de l'esprit et de l'intellect que s'est approprié la jeune fille dans la nouvelle, devient terrain de pouvoir où s'affrontent les sexes. Croyant fonder sa toute-puissance sur la culture et la science, l'intellectuelle se laisse abuser et perd la partie. S'illusionnant sur ses facultés de renverser l'ordre patriarcal en se soustrayant au rôle traditionnel de la femme du Sud héritière, établie, mais soumise, elle se trouve prise à son propre piège, paralysée et privée de ses pouvoirs. Aveuglée par le brio de la philosophie nihiliste, elle ne sait pas reconnaître son propre attachement au respect du sacré. En voulant créer son scénario et initier son partenaire du moment, elle s'est vue contester et voler son histoire. Mais en perdant ce qu'elle a de plus cher et de plus aliénable, sa jambe de bois, stigmate de la violence de son histoire personnelle objective, elle reçoit une révélation : la possibilité d'un avenir en dehors de sa claudication. Au moment précis où elle est privée du pouvoir de s'approprier l'espace, lui est offerte, par cette petite mort, la chance de se retrouver, de s'accepter et de se construire en dehors de sa blessure de chasse et de son membre manquant. L'artiste qu'elle incarne, poète de sa vie – du verbe grec signifiant créer –, apparaît comme un bouc émissaire d'une société largement misogyne, mais aussi comme un sujet capable de renaître de son anéantissement et de s'octroyer sa propre rédemption, de se réenfanter, de reconquérir et d'habiter son espace intérieur, intime, qu'il soit affectif ou mental, aussi bien que l'espace géographique et social.

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2. ESPACE ET TEMPS

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MOMENTS DE TRANSE ET RAVISSEMENT DANS LES NOUVELLES DE EUDORA WELTY

Soudain, pour quelques personnages des nouvelles de Eudora Welty – et ils sont peut-être des « élus » –, la respiration change de rythme, ils retiennent leur souffle ; c'est le vertige, parfois une plongée dans le noir, parfois l'éblouissement ; quelquefois les larmes se mettent à couler ou un sourire de béatitude détend leur visage tandis qu'un sentiment de grand bonheur envahit le sujet. Le temps paraît aboli. Cela peut se produire au cours d'une rencontre, venir d'un seul regard ; et c'est le coup de foudre. Les éléments accompagnent ce moment fou de leur excès : tonnerre et pluie diluvienne, ou alors, parfois même, le soleil brille avec une telle violence que la couleur se retire du monde. Cela peut faire peur aux autres, car en effet le sujet perd le contrôle ; mais c'est sans doute aussi le moment où quelque chose commence. Eudora Welty recherche ces états de transe où le personnage est comme en suspens, entre deux mondes, en train de passer peut-être, de devenir autre et même parfois l'autre. Nous voulons ici rassembler quelques uns de ces états précaires tels que les évoque Welty, éclairer leurs points communs, les questionner, peut-être montrer qu'ils sont des moments d'origine et à l'origine de la passion de créer de l'artiste.

Un exemple très révélateur est celui de Loch, dans « June Recital ». Le jeune garçon n'a pas encore l'âge de raison lorsqu'il entend « Für Elise » joué dans la maison voisine par Virgie, une amie de classe de sa sœur Cassie et la meilleure élève du professeur de musique, Miss Eckhart. Le morceau le transporte d'aise.

> A little tune was playing on the air […].
> The tune came again, like a touch from a small hand that he had unwittingly pushed away. […] All at once tears rolled out of his eyes. He opened his mouth in astonishment. Then the little tune seemed the only thing in the whole day […]. (*CS* 280)

Le temps s'est immobilisé. C'est un moment de bonheur, de ravissement. Loch ferme les yeux à moitié et la musique le transporte dans un lieu où il ne fait qu'un avec sa sœur Cassie : « It took him back to when his sister was so sweet, to a long time ago. To when they loved each other in a different world, a boundless, trustful country all its own […] » (*CS* 280). Le garçon, fiévreux, est censé garder la chambre mais, fasciné, il est passé par la fenêtre et s'est avancé sur une branche d'arbre, d'où il observe ce qui se passe dans la maison d'en face, pendu par les genoux, tête en bas :

> Holding by the knees and diving head down, then swaying in the sweet open free air and dizzy as an apple on a tree […].
> He opened his arms and let them hang outward, […] watching house, sky, leaves, a flying bird, all and nothing at all.
> […]
> And then the old woman stuck out a finger and played the tune. (*CS* 285)

Loch doit avoir le sang à la tête. En cet instant de suspens littéral entre sa chambre et la maison voisine où il imagine que se passent d'étranges choses, il est entre deux mondes, pendu, replié, la tête en bas : « He hung still as a folded bat » (*CS* 285), tel l'enfant dans le sein maternel. La loi n'existe plus, Loch occupe un espace illimité, hors du temps, un lieu d'indifférence, entre la fenêtre de sa chambre et celle de l'autre maison. Il n'éprouve aucune peine à se suspendre ainsi dans un équilibre que seul un enfant ou un acrobate peut tenir.

« Acrobats in the Park [1] », l'une des premières nouvelles de Welty, certainement fondatrice de son art, met en scène des saltimbanques dont le numéro d'excellence est une pyramide humaine composée de tous les membres de la famille. Leur entente parfaite permet la réalisation quotidienne de cette construction délicate. Mais un soir, les Zarros ne réussissent pas à garder l'équilibre et la formation s'effondre lamentablement. La stabilité familiale est remise en question par la faute de Tina, l'épouse d'un des frères Zarros, Bird, affligé d'impuissance : le poids plume d'un enfant tout juste conçu et preuve de son infidélité encore secrète avec l'autre frère, Ricky, fragmente brutalement l'harmonie du groupe que rien n'avait jusqu'alors menacée et entraîne la catastrophe. Le soir précédent, en voyant

1 Nouvelle publiée dans la revue *Delta* (Université de Montpellier) en novembre 1977, puis traduite par Michel Gresset pour *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (juillet-août 1981). Les références renvoient à la revue *Delta*.

Tina enjamber l'espace entre son frère et lui, Ricky avait aussitôt su : « It burst in his brain, rebounded to his muscles – a sudden release, and an overwhelming sense of bliss » (*AP* 8). Il doit maintenant faire face à la vérité, à la perte d'innocence : « Never before has he felt at all appalled at the intimacy between his performance and his life, between the routine and the desire, having thought they were one » (*AP* 7). Mais il finit par comprendre que cette épreuve était nécessaire : il fallait que l'ensemble se disjoigne pour que les Zarros, menacés de raideur par la routine, trop confiants dans leur agilité et la cohésion familiale, refermés sur eux-mêmes, puissent créer à nouveau et donner vie à une nouvelle forme. Le futur père découvre cette vérité dans une grande effusion de bonheur et de chagrin : « And suddenly Ricky feels tears in his eyes. He loves his family. […] Pity, modesty, horror, reactions against the unwelcome spectacle of hope and penalty, and even an unwilling secret exaltation have been steadfastly dormant in his love for his brother. Now he feels like crying » (*AP* 6). Welty reviendra souvent à ces moments d'amour et de jouissance mais aussi d'audace, à cette rencontre avec le mal, et à l'expérience de la perte et de la souffrance qui l'accompagne. Une nouvelle vie peut commencer pour les Zarros, qui sauront créer de nouvelles œuvres d'art.

Dans « The Wide Net », il y a, au-delà d'une charmante satire des prétentions masculines, un moment d'enchantement semblable. William Wallace s'est disputé avec sa femme, dont il ne comprend pas le comportement. Elle va avoir un bébé dans six mois et voilà qu'elle a disparu ; peut-être s'est-elle noyée ? Et William Wallace, affolé, part à la rivière pour la repêcher. La rivière coule lentement, si lentement qu'elle semble près de s'immobiliser. C'est l'entre deux saisons (« changing-time » [*CS* 176]) et déjà William Wallace ne sait plus où il est : « 'What is the name of this river?' » (*CS* 176), dit-il aux villageois étonnés qui sont venus à la rescousse. C'est comme s'il disait « Où suis-je ? Qui suis-je ? D'où est-ce que je viens ? », questions naturelles pour celui qui va être père et qui, de ce fait, est entre deux identités. Mais comment se sentir père quand on ne peut voir le bébé, insoupçonnable dans le ventre maternel, dont la seule preuve d'existence est la déclaration d'une épouse fantasque ? Il est vrai que William ne voit pas non plus Hazel. Pourtant mère et enfant sont bien là, tout à côté de lui, mais il ne les voit pas. Il lui faudra ouvrir les yeux, regarder autrement ; d'où ce détour initiatique par la forêt et la rivière. Il lui faut changer d'élément, faire le grand plongeon s'il veut saisir quelque chose du secret que porte

Hazel, du mystère de l'enfantement – question qui préoccupait beaucoup Welty quand elle était petite. Quelle naïveté de croire que le grand filet apporté par les amis pourrait attraper ce secret, faire cette pêche miraculeuse ! C'est à William de retenir son souffle et d'aller jusqu'au seuil de sa propre mort et de son ancienne naissance. Il descend en apnée dans ce monde aquatique où les contradictions n'existent pas et toute tension semble réduite : « Once he dived down and down into the dark water, where it was so still that nothing stirred, not even a fish, and so dark that it was no longer the muddy world of the upper river but the dark clear world of deepness […] » (*CS* 180).

Il remonte, à la limite de l'asphyxie, avec un morceau de plante aquatique (« a little green ribbon of plant, root and all » [*CS* 181]) : rien, pour ainsi dire, mais un rien qui est tout. C'est vrai, tout est là, un ruban vert : prix décerné à celui qui a passé l'épreuve, mais aussi signe de vie. Le narrateur ne dit-il pas auparavant que quand on a perdu quelque chose tout fait signe (« […] when you go looking for what is lost, everything is a sign » [*CS* 179]) ? Au cours de cette plongée, William Wallace perd le sens commun, celui du temps, du lieu, de la pesanteur. Il redevient poisson, remontant le temps et le devenir de la création, comme le remarque à sa façon Sam, le petit noir : « "Now us got scales," wailed Sam. "Us is the fishes'' » (*CS* 183). Après l'épreuve William est changé. Le sceptique a des visions. Il ouvre les yeux sur une autre scène et se laisse lui aussi ravir par la musique qui vient d'une petite église blanche. La scène, toute virginale, ressemble à une peinture naïve. Une dame en blanc enlève la housse fleurie de l'orgue, époussette le clavier et commence à jouer (s'agirait-il déjà de Miss Eckhart ?) [2]. Et voici le héros qui sourit comme il sourirait à sa mère, comme à Hazel, comme à toutes les femmes (*CS* 187). Il est l'enfant de toutes, bercé par d'immémoriales chansons. Il est son propre enfant. Le signe de la nouvelle alliance, de la réconciliation, c'est dans la nuit l'étrange arc-en-ciel, léger comme le tulle d'une robe d'été qui laisse transparaître les étoiles, que William voit avant de pousser la porte de sa maison et d'entendre sa femme l'appeler (*CS* 187). Sans doute le mystère de l'autre à naître est-il indicible ? Aucun filet ne peut le saisir mais il s'esquisse entre

2 Peut-être faut-il également voir dans cette « lady playing » une allusion au motif de la dame en train d'écrire, « the lady writing », que l'on rencontre chez Virginia Woolf dans *The Waves*, c'est-à-dire l'artiste. Eudora Welty se sentait appartenir à la même famille d'esprit que Woolf.

ces images, dans ce sourire de reconnaissance, entre ces quelques mots et dans l'écart de leurs consonances : « gauze », « haze », « gaze », « Hazel » enfin, qui veut dire « God sees ». C'est à peine une trace, ce n'est qu'une brume, un écran léger. Ce que Welty tente de saisir dans ces instants de ravissement, c'est ce qui est imperceptible à l'œil nu mais que Hazel, bénie entre toutes les femmes, sait que William Wallace vient d'avoir la grâce de retrouver.

Katie Rainey rapporte un autre émerveillement, à moins qu'elle ne l'invente [3]. Elle conte comment Snowdie a eu le coup de foudre pour son mari. La conteuse, mariée à un homme sans surprise (« […] Fate Rainey ain't got a surprise in him, and proud of it » [*CS* 265]), imagine non sans humour que King, mari infidèle s'il en est, a proposé à son épouse Snowdie une rencontre amoureuse dans les bois. Katie suggère une nouvelle façon d'échapper à la routine, au rituel conjugal, au lit de plume qu'elle partage avec l'ennuyeux Fate Rainey. Morgan's Woods est le lieu sauvage par excellence, illimité dans l'espace et le temps, sous la loi de la fée Morgane. C'est le lieu de l'illusion, des sortilèges, celui, bien sûr, de la fiction. La magicienne, l'illusionniste, c'est Katie, qui fait apparaître Snowdie, transformée, radieuse comme le printemps, celui-là même, dirait-on, peint par Botticelli – Snowdie virginale et enceinte. Un miracle, naturellement : « It was like a shower of something had struck her, like she'd been caught out in something bright » (*CS* 266). Cette nouvelle porte bien son titre, « A Shower of Gold », une pluie d'or semblable à celle dont Zeus inonda Danae ; mais c'est aussi la réminiscence du voile de lumière de « The Wide Net », ou encore le souvenir d'une autre miraculée de l'amour, la belle jeune fille de *Delta Wedding* qu'Ellen Fairchild rencontre dans un bois, rayonnante de beauté après son aventure avec George et avant sa mort tragique. Ellen sait intuitivement que la jeune fille est en grand danger, qu'elle est littéralement entre la vie et la mort. L'expression poétique « *to shed* beauty » lui vient à l'esprit et, émerveillée, elle en comprend tout à coup le sens. Le temps s'arrête dans la contemplation de cette lumineuse apparition : « In the stillness a muscadine fell […], and like the falling grape the moment of comfort seemed visible to them and dividing them, and to be then, itself, lost » (*DW* 71). Cette épiphanie éclaire Ellen sur la liberté qu'elle doit

3 Il s'agit de la première nouvelle du recueil *The Golden Apples*, « Shower of Gold ». Voir l'analyse de Danièle PITAVY-SOUQUES (198-214).

donner à sa propre fille, l'héroïne du mariage éponyme ; mais surtout, l'éblouissante apparition, le figé de l'image ainsi que le léger souffle du vent du bayou dans les cheveux, le temps arrêté un bref instant, sont pour Ellen la clé du royaume de la poésie.

« At The Landing » propose une version sombre de l'aventure de Snowdie. À l'instar des princesses de contes de fées, Jenny est protégée, tel un bien précieux, par son aristocratique grand-père, qui lui interdit de parler à quiconque ou de sortir. Elle peut à la rigueur se rendre au cimetière déposer des fleurs sur la tombe de sa mère, morte folle, peut-être d'avoir été, elle aussi, séquestrée. Jenny vit dans un état de complète innocence et de semi léthargie dans une demeure décorée de miroirs et de pendeloques de cristal qui réfractent à l'infini les lumières de l'extérieur, une maison de sortilèges et d'illusions. Est-ce un prince charmant ou un mauvais garçon qui l'éveillera ? Floyd est justement celui que craint le grand-père : c'est un pêcheur sans feu ni lieu, aussi dangereux que la crue qui menace le village. Son nom même le suggère (Floyd / flood). Jenny surprend le jeune homme dans une prairie ensoleillée où paît un cheval. Elle l'observe par une trouée du feuillage, immobile et silencieux dans la lumière éblouissante, sa chevelure blonde et dorée retombant sur son front. L'apparition est paisible et marque Jenny à jamais. Tandis que le fleuve déborde et que les nuages se déchargent de pluies diluviennes, Jenny est comme ensorcelée. À la mort du grand-père, qu'elle va annoncer aux femmes du village, Floyd lui apparaît à nouveau ; quand elle touche sa manche et l'appelle par son nom, il enfourche son cheval et part au galop : « he seemed somehow in his tattered shirt – as she watched from beneath her arm – to stream with the wind, and he circled the steep field three times, and with flying yellow hair […] rode up into the woods » (*CS* 245). Pour Jenny, confinée entre sa maison et le cimetière, Floyd à cheval, au galop dans la lumière dorée, représente la vie ; le suivre, elle le pressent, reviendrait à perdre son innocence, sa liberté, son identité, à se perdre. Mais l'amour rend audacieux. La crue progresse à toute allure, irrésistible. Floyd la sauve de la noyade en la prenant sur son bateau. Jenny sait qu'elle navigue sur les tombes de sa mère et de son grand-père, et consomme ainsi l'interdit. À la violence de la nature s'ajoute celle de la défloration, qu'il accomplit tout simplement. Mais l'initiation n'est pas terminée, car tandis que le fleuve se retire Floyd disparaît. Jenny rentre chez elle et entreprend de nettoyer la maison des traces laissées par la crue, catharsis qui lui permet de se remettre du choc

amoureux (« and then she was healed of the shock of love » [*CS* 257]). Puis elle se lance à sa recherche dans une quête incessamment recommencée, dans ce lieu étrange où la terre fait eau et où l'eau devient air, dans cet espace d'échange des éléments où pour la jeune fille règne la confusion : « All at once the open sky could be seen – she had come to the river. […] All things, river, sky, fire, and air, seemed the same color, the color that is seen behind the closed eyelids, the color of day when vision and despair are the same thing » (*CS* 257). Cette nature sauvage qui est aussi celle de Floyd l'attire. C'est à elle qu'elle s'abandonne lorsque, indifférente aux hommes qui la violent, elle espère le retour de Floyd, arborant un sourire éternel (*CS* 258). Dort-elle ? Est-elle folle ? Ou morte ? demande une vieille femme. Ne serait-elle pas plutôt en transe, ravie ? Elle attend Floyd : « and she would wonder almost aloud, "Ought I to sleep?" For it was love that might always be coming, and she must watch for it this time and clasp it back while it clasped, and while it held her never let it go » (*CS* 253).

Easter, l'une des plus sauvages, des plus libres des adolescentes de Eudora Welty, toujours en train de s'échapper, connaît les autres chemins, ceux qui mènent ailleurs [4]. Au camp de Moon Lake, en équilibre sur le tremplin, elle tombe dans l'eau sombre du lac parce que Exum, le petit noir, l'a effleurée au talon avec sa baguette de saule, de la plus tendre et de la plus obscure des caresses. Le corps tombe lentement, comme dans un film au ralenti, avant de disparaître dans l'eau sombre. Loch, qui a grandi depuis « June Recital », est le maître-nageur du camp et il plonge aussitôt à la recherche du corps, comme William Wallace dans « The Wide Net ». Que remonte-t-il dans un premier temps ? la même chose que William Wallace : « long ribbons of green and terrible stuff, shapeless black matter, nobody's shoe » (*CS* 363). Mauvais signe, signe de mort ? Pourtant c'est de cette matière informe qu'il va tirer, non sans peine, le corps d'Easter – comme c'est de cette boue innommable que Welty, plongeuse elle aussi, tire son inspiration. Mais la fillette ne respire plus ; Loch, après l'avoir posée sur une table, fait des efforts titanesques pour lui rendre la vie, couché sur son dos, soudé à elle, se soulevant, s'accrochant tout en gémissant, retom-

4 « Moon Lake », une des nouvelles incluses dans l'ensemble *The Golden Apples*, est le récit d'un camp de vacances où se retrouvent les enfants de Morgana ainsi qu'un groupe d'orphelines, parmi lesquelles la jeune Easter.

bant sur elle comme s'ils avaient de toute éternité fait partie l'un de l'autre, comme s'ils s'étaient échangés, même, puisque c'est de Loch que l'eau ruisselle tandis que sèche la robe d'Easter : « He was dripping, while her skirt dried on the table » (*CS* 370). Les enfants regardent, médusés. Miss Lizzie, la mère de l'une des fillettes, interprète mal les efforts de Loch, lui fait honte et veut le chasser. Pour Nina, l'une des vacancières, c'est tout autre chose. Devant le mystère de la vie et de la mort, elle se demande où Easter, son aimée-détestée, son indifférente, est partie. Où rêve-t-elle à cet instant ? Nina sait qu'elle se tient, se retient secrètement ailleurs. N'est-ce pas pour le savoir et la rejoindre qu'elle s'évanouit à son tour ? Quand Easter, indépendante en toute occasion, reprend connaissance et se redresse, son geste fait tomber Loch de la table, comme pour lui signifier qu'elle ne lui doit rien. Peu importe le parti pris de faire rire aux dépens du boy-scout qui se prend pour un homme ; quelque chose de grave s'est passé au cours de ces moments de ravissement : une découverte du mystère de la vie, de l'identité sexuelle, de la différence. Nina, Easter et Loch faussent compagnie au lecteur, ils partent pour un ailleurs où ils retrouvent leur autre, ils se coulent dans l'autre, dans cet espace intemporel où ils s'échangent librement, comme l'eau et la terre, la terre et le ciel, le haut et le bas, la pluie et la lumière qui deviennent pluie de lumière. Quand vient le moment de quitter cet état de bonheur, il leur reste des traces de leur ravissement et le désir de le revivre. Souvenons-nous du petit Loch, bercé par l'air de « Für Elise » et rêvant du pays où la loi n'existe pas, où tout est tendresse et plénitude avec sa sœur Cassie.

La soif d'absolu rapproche ces enfants, ces amoureux, ces acrobates qui sont prêts à défier la loi, les lois de l'équilibre, s'approchent de la mort, la frôlent, la courtisent, la défient sans jamais l'apprivoiser. Eudora Welty multiplie ces moments de ravissement, regarde ses personnages y entrer, en sortir. La scène se déroule sur un rythme lent, comme si le temps allait s'arrêter. Elle est le plus souvent cadrée, comme un fantasme, par une fenêtre, des branches d'arbre, le viseur d'une longue-vue. Un effleurement, une pichenette, déclenchent la séquence d'images. Welty accompagne aussi loin que possible le sujet en syncope. Elle pressent cette absence de l'être comme un retour à l'indivision, au temps d'avant la séparation originelle, celui de tous les dangers, mais grâce auquel le sujet gardera un souvenir de lumière où puiser l'énergie, le rythme, la musique de l'écriture. La musique joue en effet un rôle capital : elle facilite l'effusion, entraîne à l'extase, guide

le sujet là où bat le cœur de l'autre. Ceci nous ramène au cœur de l'œuvre, où nous retrouvons Miss Eckhart. De ce personnage, Welty dit :

> As I looked longer and longer for the origins of this passionate and strange character, at last I realized that Miss Eckhart came from me. […] What counts is only what lies at the solitary core. She derived from what I already knew for myself, even felt I had always known. What I have put into her is my passion for my own life work, my own art. Exposing yourself to risk is a truth Miss Eckhart and I had in common. (*OWB* 101)

Effectivement, Miss Eckhart fait cette expérience. Cassie, la grande sœur de Loch, se souvient d'avoir été le témoin d'une scène surprenante, un jour où un orage l'a retenue avec deux autres élèves chez le professeur de musique, après le cours. Sans dire un mot, tandis que gronde le tonnerre et que tombe la pluie, Miss Eckhart se met à jouer une musique inconnue. Son visage change, comme aperçu derrière le voile d'une cascade, tremblé, tremblant : « in playing it Miss Eckhart assumed an entirely different face. Her skin flattened and drew across her cheeks, her lips changed. The face could have belonged to someone else – not even to a woman, necessarily » (*CS* 300). Elle semble ne rien voir mais regarder dans le vide, n'exister que pour cette musique déchaînée venue peut-être de son pays natal, une musique inconnue des enfants : « There in the rainy light it was a sightless face, one for music only » (*CS* 300-301). Les fillettes, qui ont jusqu'alors associé Miss Eckhart à la discipline implacable du métronome, sont déconcertées : où est le sens de la mesure du professeur de musique ? Miss Eckhart semble s'être libérée de tous les métronomes de Morgana, être tout à coup indifférente à la loi, souvent mesquine, et aux préjugés des habitants, qui la rejettent en tant qu'étrangère, être allée plus loin encore dans un temps archaïque où l'amour règne. Cassie, témoin de cette confidence excessive adressée à Virgie la bien-aimée parce qu'elle est la seule qui comprend la musique, perçoit la violence de l'instant sans pouvoir encore l'accepter. Elle se protège de l'excès du comportement, de la conduite inconvenante de Miss Eckhart et détourne les yeux : « The music was too much for Cassie Morrison. It lay in the very heart of the stormy morning » (*CS* 301). Elle met de côté, à l'écart, les images qu'elle ne peut encore développer. Ce n'est que plus tard qu'elle comprendra la passion de Miss Eckhart pour son art et son désir de le partager avec

Virgie, et que c'est la musique qui la libère de la petitesse de Morgana, lui permet de revenir à elle. La musique est le médium [5].

Outre le cadrage, l'effleurement, la lumière réfractée par l'eau, et le souffle que l'on retient, ces instants de transe, d'absence à soi, à la réalité, ces moments d'amour fou, foudroiements, ravissements, sont, comme on l'a vu, accompagnés de musique. La musique est justement l'art de la syncope, c'est-à-dire de la perte, de l'ellipse, du manque, de la rupture. Elle est le lieu même de la médiation entre le corps et l'âme, entre l'espace et le temps, entre le conscient et l'inconscient. Les arpèges à la fin de « The Bride of the Innisfallen » (*CS* 517), les inventions mélodiques de « Für Elise », les notes glissées du blues sont ce qui surprend l'auditeur, lui dérobe ce que Lévi-Strauss appelle « ses repères temporels habituels, sa périodicité organique » et qui, en le plongeant dans le ravissement, lui font entrevoir le fondement de son identité :

> L'émotion musicale provient de ce qu'à chaque instant le compositeur retire ou ajoute plus ou moins que l'auditeur ne prévoit du projet qu'il croit deviner… Que le compositeur retire davantage et nous nous sentons arrachés d'un point stable du solfège et précipités dans le vide. Quand le compositeur retire moins, c'est le contraire : il nous oblige à une gymnastique plus habile que la nôtre. (Lévi-Strauss 23)

L'art de Welty est largement fondé sur la syncope, le moment où l'on retient son souffle, donc celui de l'inspiration par excellence. Coup de foudre, ravissement, évanouissement sont de la même famille. Ils suspendent le temps, créant l'illusion d'un moment d'immortalité. C'est un élargissement du champ de conscience, une perception nouvelle. De ce chaos, seul le nouveau peut émerger : « Cette éclipse qui fracture la conscience est la condition de l'acte créateur » (Clément 361). Dans ce moment de faiblesse, le sujet se sépare du monde, son identité sociale s'efface. Quand il revient à lui il se sent à la fois déprimé et rempli d'allégresse. Ces instants sont bien sûr éphémères. La séparation, la perte, la chute laissent le sujet

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5 Comme l'écrit Catherine Clément : « En forçant les limites du moi la musique suit le rythme de l'acte créateur […]. Elle contrarie le rythme des viscères, pénètre à l'intérieur de la subjectivité, en disperse l'identité en la submergeant d'émotions. C'est la phase « schizoïde » où l'on vous sépare du monde, non sans avoir le sentiment d'une subtile et familière agression. Si pianissimo soit une musique qui commence, elle oblige à sortir sans bouger du lieu où l'on se trouve, et à rentrer en soi-même où on sait qu'on ne se trouvera plus. Une fois passé ce moment l'on a franchi le désaccord d'avec le réel, et l'on a trouvé, avec la musique, l'accord fondamental. » (390-391)

désorienté dans un moment paradoxal où douleur et jouissance se mêlent étrangement, un moment d'extrême danger. Celui de l'écriture même.

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THE GEOGRAPHY OF SPACE AND PLACE IN EUDORA WELTY'S "LIVVIE"

In one of the lectures he gave in the 1960s, Michel Foucault claimed that "the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time" (23). The tendency to shift focus from "temporality" to "spatiality" has indeed gained ground among scholars working in the fields of anthropology, history, sociology as well as literary studies. The adoption of a "spatial" point of view has brought into the foreground questions of "space" and "place" with many scholars, who started borrowing vocabulary from the field of geography (Thacker 1). Most geographers recognize the meaning of space as wider and vaguer than that of place and on many instances suggest that "space" precedes "place" (geographically and historically) or, at least, that the latter is contained within the former. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Yi-Fu Tuan emphasizes the close connection between place and space as follows:

> "Space" is more abstract than "place." What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value…The ideas "space" and "place" require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (6)

Contrasted to the abstraction of space, place is usually linked to the small or the local and often refers to a settled community, a locality with a distinct character – physical, economic, and cultural. For Doreen Massey, "places are unique, different from each other; they have singular characteristics, their own traditions, local cultures and festivals, accents and uses of language" (46); that is why people talk of the "spirit" or "personality" of a place. Just like a human personality is a fusion of natural disposition and acquired traits, the personality of a place is a composite of natural

endowment (the physique of the land) and the modifications wrought by successive generations of human beings (Tuan, 1996: 445). Because a place is created by people, it has no inherent meaning save that which they give it; it becomes a central part of their identity,[1] reinforces their development as a group and underlines their difference(s) from other groups. The emotional bond that emerges is known among anthropologists, geographers and sociologists as "sense of place." It is rooted in every aspect of the individuals' experiences and subsequently pervades their everyday lives (Rose 88). It is based on repetition, "repeated experience," which gives birth to a "feel of place" (Tuan, 1996: 452). The reason why people tend to explicitly define the boundaries of the place they feel they belong to is that boundaries help distinguish outsiders, that is, those who do not belong.

Looking at Southern culture, it is easy to realize that "topophilia"[2] has always bound Southern people with their land in an interdependent relationship. Their tempestuous history made them crave a sense of stability which was assuaged by their feeling of belonging to the region. Indeed, according to Barbara Ladd, "a sense of place" "provides a sense of relative permanence" and "might be defined as the sense of stability amid flux" (46). As for Scott Romine, he explains that "sense of place" "connotes something that is not just *geographically* different (a Southern variation of a thing that exists elsewhere) but *qualitatively* different (a thing distinctive to the South)" (23). Over the course of time, place has become associated with the identity of Southerners to such an extent that the two concepts are now studied together by historians. Their deep connection to the land protected them against external influences and kept them immured in place. As a result, Southern society became insular and resistant to imported change, a fact which contributed to the South's lagging behind in modernization and progress.

Eudora Welty underlined the importance of place in her essay "Place in Fiction":

> I think the sense of place is as essential to good and honest writing as a logical mind; surely they are somewhere related. It is by knowing where you stand that you grow able

1 See Gillian Rose's article on the connection between place and identity.

2 The term "topophilia" is used by Tuan to describe "a feeling one has toward a place because it is home, the locus of memories, and the means of getting a livelihood" (1990: 93).

> to judge where you are. Place absorbs our earliest notice and attention, it bestows on us our original awareness; and our critical powers spring up from the study of it and the growth of experience inside it. It perseveres in bringing us back to earth when we fly too high. It never really stops informing us, for it is forever astir, alive, changing, reflecting, like the mind of man itself. One place comprehended can make us understand other places better. Sense of place gives equilibrium; extended, it is sense of direction too. Carried off we might be in spirit, and should be when we are reading or writing something good; but it is the sense of place going with us still that is the ball of golden thread to carry us there and back and in every sense of the word to bring us home. (*ES* 128-29)

In an interview, Welty also stated that it would be impossible for her to write a story that happened nowhere or was set in a place like New York, which is "both familiar and unfamiliar, a no man's land" (Prenshaw, 1984: 97). I would like to argue that space and place interact in Welty's short story "Livvie"[3] in accordance with the ideas put forth by cultural geographers, sociologists, and anthropologists. In the story, place is synonymous with stasis, stability and security, whereas space is connected to mobility, change and renewal.

In an interview with Gayle Graham Yates, Welty explained that a specific "place" (characterized in particular by bottle trees[4]) had inspired her to write the story "Livvie" (Prenshaw, 1996: 91), in which place and space are juxtaposed. Place is represented by the neatly ordered, well-furnished house that Livvie, a young woman of sixteen, comes to live in when she marries Solomon, a black man who owns his land. The space is that of the Old Natchez Trace, on which Solomon and Livvie travel before getting to the house. A feeling of isolation pervades the first paragraph:

> Solomon carried Livvie twenty-one miles away from her home when he married her. He carried her away up on the Old Natchez Trace into the deep country to live in his house. She was sixteen – only a girl, then. Once people said he thought nobody would ever come along there. He told her himself that it had been a long time, and a day she did not know about, since that road was a traveled road with *people* coming and going. He was good to her, but he kept her in the house. She had not thought that she could not get back. (*CS* 228)

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3 The original title of the story was "Livvie Is Back"; it was changed to "Livvie" when the story came out in book form.

4 In *Photographs* Welty included a picture showing several trees with bottles on the branches and a blooming peach tree.

The claustrophobic impression is likewise conveyed a bit further in the text: "He had built a lonely house, the way he would make a cage" (*CS* 237).

Solomon's name implies wisdom, control, order and discipline, qualities that are reflected in his house. The symmetry of his environment is enhanced by the patterns of twos, threes or fours in which household objects are positioned: in the living-room is a three-legged table bearing a lamp with three gold feet. On the kitchen table are three objects: two jelly glasses holding spoons, knives, and forks, with a cut-glass vinegar bottle between them. Even the baited mousetraps are placed symmetrically, one in each corner of the kitchen. On either side of the porch there is an easy chair with overhanging fern and a dishpan of zinnia seedlings growing at its foot on the floor. Every detail contributes to the sense of balance and orderliness, which shows that safety and security are important qualities in Solomon's life. The colored bottles on the branches of the crape myrtles are meant to trap the evil spirits and keep them from entering the house (perhaps suggesting Solomon's anxieties over having married a much younger wife). Peter Schmidt has commented on the ironic parallels between the bottle tree lures and Solomon's house: "Livvie, too, has been lured into an enclosed space, and even though her husband does not think of her as 'evil' he does have an intimation that this May/December wedding of his is a rather unstable union, in need of all the protection and validation it can get" (125). Moreover, Solomon's identity is very tightly connected to two objects: the Bible which he always keeps on the bedside table, and the silver watch that he constantly holds in his hand and even sleeps with.

Livvie's identity is tied in with service and domestic ritual: her one possession is the picture of the white baby of the family she has worked for in the past, suggesting that her existence is primarily defined by her role as a servant. Ironically, her marriage to Solomon has not liberated her from such a role. Her housekeeping is, as Ann Romines notes, "a careful round of self-suppression" (205). Welty portrays Livvie's daily domestic activities as follows: "Livvie knew she made a nice girl to wait on anybody. She fixed things to eat on a tray like a surprise. She could keep from singing when she ironed, and to sit by a bed and fan away the flies, she could be so still she could not hear herself breathe. She could clean up the house and never drop a thing, and wash the dishes without a sound" (*CS* 230). Livvie tries to assert herself through a round of household chores. A dedicated nurse, she wants to please Solomon by preparing his favorite dishes, which

he cannot even taste, as he is dying of old age. She is the mistress of her husband's place, but at the same time, like a trapped bird, she is not allowed to venture any further than the yard. Her isolation and vague restlessness become quite evident as the story unfolds. An insight into her state of mind is provided when one day she wanders onto the Natchez Trace and expresses her wish "for a stirring of the leaves, and a breaking of the nets" (*CS* 230).

On the first day of spring, the orderliness and propriety of Solomon's place is disrupted by two intruders who bring about a radical change to the course of the story. It is no accident that both come from the Natchez Trace, a space that is associated with legendary folk heroes such as Mike Fink, infamous bandits like the Harpe brothers, a number of explorers and warrior Indian tribes,[5] and a heterogeneous host of other adventurers: traders, circuit-riding evangelists, fortune hunters, medicine peddlers, pioneers, etc. The area is often presented as a confrontation point between civilization and the wilderness. Its turbulent history and the efforts of different ethnic groups to take advantage of this path in order to secure their domination account for its persistence in the national imagination, even though it stopped being used for overland travel with the invention of the steamboat. It became symbolic of America's westward expansion and has been explored in a number of works by Southern writers, including Welty.[6]

The first intruder is the cosmetics saleswoman, Miss Baby Marie, who tempts Livvie with bright lipstick; Livvie has not tried cosmetics before, so this encounter initiates her to the world of commercialized beauty. In the course of their conversation, the remoteness of Solomon's house is emphasized when the saleswoman exclaims, "'it's far away from anywhere, I'll tell you that. You don't live close to anywhere'" (*CS* 234). When Livvie applies the lipstick and looks in the mirror, her face "dances before her like a flame" (*CS* 234), which suggests romantic excitement and passion. However, the lipstick cannot be had, as she has no money to pay for it. As

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5 For general information on the Natchez Trace see the entry "Natchez Trace" in *The Companion to Southern Literature* (524-526).

6 Welty used the Natchez Trace as the setting for most of the stories in *The Wide Net* and in her novella *The Robber Bridegroom*. As she states in "Fairy Tale of the Natchez Trace": "In *The Robber Bridegroom*, the elements of wilderness and pioneer settlements, flatboats and river trade, the Natchez Trace and all its life, including the Indians and the bandits, are all to come together" (*ES* 302).

Carol Ann Johnston points out, after underlining that "The standard cultural arrangement between husband and wife dictates that the wife, in charge of domestic duties, is afforded the domestic purse," "Solomon has kept such tight reign on Livvie that she doesn't even know about spending money for the household, much less for herself'' (21). Although Miss Baby Marie takes the lipstick with her when she departs, a trace is left: "the outside world has impinged on [Livvie's] secure, withdrawn world in a form crassly commercial, but its effect is romantically exciting" (Vande Kieft 49). When the saleslady leaves, Livvie does not wipe off the lipstick even though she knows that Solomon will disapprove of it. It is the first time she consciously rebels against her husband's strict ideas and makes an effort to assert herself. After living in her gilded cage for nine years, she gets restless and is ready for change.

The meeting with the cosmetics lady also allows Livvie's nostalgia for her childhood home to surface:

> [S]he was carried away in the air through the spring, and looking down with a half-drowsy smile from a purple cloud she saw from above a chinaberry tree, dark and smooth and neatly leaved, neat as a guinea hen in the dooryard, and there was her home that she had left. On one side of the tree was her mama holding up her heavy apron, and she could see it was loaded with ripe figs, and on the other side was her papa holding a fish-pole over the pond, and she could see it transparently, the little clear fishes swimming up to the brim. (*CS* 234)

This is the first time in the story that Livvie's past is referred to. It is as if the application of cosmetics had triggered her homesickness and liberated her: she can now permit images of her family and the home she left upon her marriage to enter her mind. The images of the ripe figs and the fish allude to fecundity and are certainly at odds with the barren life she has been living with Solomon.

The second intruder is Cash McCord, a black field hand dressed in flashy clothes[7] – "a kind of field god," as Robert Penn Warren has suggested (254). Cash takes pleasure in showing off his flamboyant city

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7 In her interview with Gayle Graham Yates, Welty explained that she had copied Cash's outfit from a man she had seen in Jackson: "[I] saw a man in a zoot suit on Farish Street in Jackson that I copied, that I put on Cash. That was a real outfit. I couldn't have made it up. Those were the times of the zoot suit. Nobody now knows what they are" (Prenshaw, 1996: 92).

clothes and there is a hovering suspicion that he has stolen the money from Solomon in order to buy his fine outfit. His presence breaks the rules, and his vitality and defiance simultaneously intrigue and attract Livvie. Ann Romines contends that Cash "has subverted the feudal order, rooted in patriarchy and the seasons" (205). As Livvie walks beside him, she senses the danger in "the way he moved along kicking the flowers as if he could break through everything in the way and destroy anything in the world" (*CS* 236), but she gives in to his charm and kisses him. His disregard for order and protection is illustrated when he throws a stone at Solomon's bottles in the trees, breaking some of them and possibly releasing evil spirits. Cash is presented as a Pan-like figure, making a noise "like a hoof pawing the floor" (*CS* 237) when he enters the house. Livvie is attracted to his youth and vitality while she simultaneously senses a threat in the way he moves about.

Livvie's awakening is momentarily shadowed by guilt when she realizes that Solomon is dying, and she rushes to his bedside. As he sleeps "under the eyes of Livvie and Cash," his face reveals "like a mythical story that all his life he had built, little scrap by little scrap, respect" (*CS* 237). Vande Kieft has noted the curious blend of sympathy and criticism implied in the images used to describe Solomon's method of acquiring respect – like an ant or a beetle laboring, or an Egyptian builder-slave working on the pyramid (50). When he understands that his time has come to depart from this world, Solomon admits his mistake: "God forgive Solomon for carrying away too young girl for wife and keeping her away from her people and from all the young people would clamor for her back" (*CS* 239). Upon dying, Solomon offers Livvie his silver watch, the symbol of his orderly existence and one of his most treasured possessions. When Cash seizes her and they move toward the door, Livvie drops the watch and relaxes in his arms like a bird in a nest. Even though a feeling of exuberance is conveyed in the ending of the story through the images and sounds of spring, the presence of death complicates it and poses several questions: will Livvie be able to invent her own language in order to sustain her newly found autonomy or will she succumb to Cash's values of immediacy? Will she abandon her passivity and create her own narrative so as to actualize her sense of release and renewal? Livvie's liberation entails both freedom and risk, as she gets ready to venture beyond the carefully marked boundaries of Solomon's property.

Leaving behind Solomon's house and the static life she has led for nine years, Livvie ventures onto the Old Natchez Trace, which is connected to the notion of space and implies a geography of myth and imagination, a sense of infinity, freedom and movement. The interplay between space and place, the excitement of the open road and the security of home, the contrast between innovation and tradition, are dialectics Welty explores in the story. Her treatment of these polarities illustrates the complexity of the narrative strategy she uses and confirms her view that place is connected to identity: "Every story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else" (*ES* 122).

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"THE CALL OF THE HEARTH OR THE CALL OF THE WILD?": NEGOTIATING THE SPLIT BETWEEN THE HOMEPLACE AND THE WIDER WORLD IN BOBBIE ANN MASON'S FICTION, WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE NANCY CULPEPPER STORIES [1]

> Like many Americans, I long to know the past. There's a sense of loss in America today, a feeling of disconnectedness. We're no longer quite sure who we are or how we got here. More and more of us are rummaging in the attic, trying to retrieve our history. We draw genealogical charts and hang old quilts on the wall. We seem to hope that if we can find out our family stories and trace our roots and save the old cookie jars and coal scuttles, we just might rescue ourselves and be made whole.
>
> Bobbie Ann Mason, *Clear Springs* (ix)

> The past is a haven to the spirit which is not at ease in the present.
>
> Bobbie Ann Mason (Shils 207)

In 2006 Bobbie Ann Mason published the collection *Nancy Culpepper*, which includes all the stories in which the eponymous character appears. It contains three stories from the period 1980-1982 ("Nancy Culpepper," "Blue Country," and "Lying Doggo"); the short novel *Spence + Lila*, originally published in 1988; "Proper Gypsies," first published in *The Southern Review* in 1995[2]; and two previously unpublished stories, "The Heirs" and "The

1 The research on which this paper is based was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and the European Regional Development Fund (project HUM2007-63438/FILO) as well as by the Xunta de Galicia (network 2007/145).

2 "Nancy Culpepper" was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1980 and was included in the collection *Shiloh and Other Stories*, in which "Lying Doggo" also appeared. "Blue

Prelude," dating from 2002 and 2005 respectively. In a promotional interview, Mason denied that Nancy Culpepper is an autobiographical character but she conceded that "Nancy is the only one of my characters really close to me in sensibility," that "[h]er parents are very close to my parents," and that she shares "Nancy's sense of striving." The author said that when she wrote "Lying Doggo," the second story in the collection, she had "a notion that [she] might keep writing stories about her." A Nancy Culpepper story would come to her from time to time, but she "wasn't consciously trying to make a narrative out of it." She expressed her surprise "that there's so much consistency and interlocking, that it turned out to have that cohesiveness" (Phillips). Nancy Culpepper is Mason's most intellectual and independent heroine, undoubtedly the one closest to her creator. As Joseph Flora rightly notes, "Nancy is special to Mason's imagination, as Miranda was to Katherine Anne Porter or Nick Adams was to Ernest Hemingway" (279). The stories are unified by the character of Nancy as well as by the theme of personal identity, with recurring questions such as "who am I?" and "where do I belong?" Throughout the collection, we see Nancy creating and reordering her self-identity against the backdrop of the shifting experiences of her day-to-day life and the fragmentary tendencies of modern society. She examines where she has come from and where she is going. Simultaneously, she is condemned to search for, and build, an identity that is destined never to be complete or unified, and to negotiate the split between her native Kentucky and the wider world, between the past and the present.

Sociologists argue that the advent of modernization brought with it this acute need to pose questions about identity because the obvious and time-honored answers were no longer on offer. As Zygmunt Bauman notes, "you tend to notice things and put them into the focus of your scrutiny and contemplation only when they vanish, go bust, start to behave oddly or otherwise let you down" (17). In pre-modernized times, the world for most people ended at the boundaries of their immediate neighborhood. Those of us who come from agricultural families know that our parents existed in a society of mutual acquaintance, and that in such a network of familiarity – from the cradle to the grave – the place of each person was too evident

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Country" is a previously uncollected story copyrighted in 1985, published and syndicated by Fiction Network. "Proper Gypsies" was included in the collection *Zigzagging down a Wild Trail* (2001).

to be pondered or questioned. Identity as a problem to be solved emerged as the holding power of traditional communities began to diminish and disintegrate, overtaken by a revolution in transport and the universal reach of homogenizing mass media; prior to this, it was determined by birth. Now the fluid, ever-changing present makes identity a task, something to be worked on, and the questions "who am I?" and "what do I want to become?" acquire a renewed urgency.

Bobbie Ann Mason, like her alter ego Nancy Culpepper, was born into a farming family of western Kentucky. Her parents never thought about moving and searching for something as nebulous and unthinkable as "another identity." Then, quite suddenly, rural Kentucky was, like every other place, swept by what Alvin Toffler terms "future shock," which he defines as "the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time" (2). A previously stable and permanent world was divided into those who adapted to the looming future and those who failed to adapt. Such accelerated forms of change have personal, psychological, and sociological consequences, reaching deep into personal lives, compelling individuals to act out new roles, confronting them with the danger of a new psychological disease: "future shock" or "the dizzying disorientation brought on by the premature arrival of the future" (Toffler 11). In her memoir *Clear Springs*, Mason reminisces about the wave of change that revolutionized the pace of daily life in Kentucky, how it affected the way people experienced the world around them. She describes the central dynamic of her native area as "[t]he tension between holding on to a way of life and letting in a new way – under the banners of Wall-Marts and chicken processors." She laments the fact that "something larger than myself, larger than our family, is ending here. A way of life with a long continuity, tracing back to the beginnings of this country, is coming to an end" (*CS* 212). As in the rest of rural America in the 1970s and '80s, the core of the economy of western Kentucky underwent the shift from agriculture to industry and service sectors. Mass culture made its appearance, with literature and art heavily commodified so as to appeal to unrefined tastes, and a massive process of cultural homogenization swept the cornfields and caused the decay of communities.

In many of her stories, Mason dramatizes the dangers of failing to adapt to the inexorable changes of society as well as the disruption caused by rapid transformations in the inner lives and social relationships. She

juxtaposes characters who are tempted to withdraw to the security of home and the past with others who strive to break free from narrow and restrictive social roles and welcome the new dynamism, eager to experiment with new and adaptive ways to meet social demands. In Mason's best-known story, "Shiloh," the male protagonist, Leroy, is puzzled by the changes that his wife is undergoing. She has no difficulty in adapting to new ways and takes advantage of the wider possibilities offered to women. He, on the other hand, feels nostalgic when he "notices how much the town has changed. Subdivisions are spreading across western Kentucky like an oil slick." Shopping malls and industrial parks have displaced "[t]he farmers who used to gather around the courthouse square on Saturday afternoons to play checkers and spit tobacco juice" (*S* 11). Leroy's somewhat confused conclusion is that "[n]obody knows anything" and that "[t]he answers are always changing" (*S* 13). In fact, the questions are changing just as fast, and Mason explores how the rapidly evolving questions and answers about gender affect average men and women in what Bauman terms the "fluid" phase of modernity. It is a situation in which "[f]rames, when (if) they are available, should not be expected to last for long" (51), a society which no longer functions as a principled arbiter and gives no orders about how one should live.

Although aware of its risks and shortcomings, Mason has always looked at the accelerative thrust that affected her generation with approving eyes. In a 1988 interview, she spoke of her satisfaction with a changing South in terms that bring out the similarities between her and many of her characters, especially female ones:

> I'm not nostalgic for the past. Times change and I'm interested in writing about what's now. To me, the way the South is changing is very dynamic and full of complexity. There's a certain energy there that I don't notice in other parts of the country. It comes out of an innocent hope of possibility. (Wilhelm 1988: 11)

Mason has always celebrated the new sense of heterogeneity in cultural consumption and concurs with the optimistic postmodernist view that the continually changing marketplace of goods and images is an arena of personal freedom, a healthy alternative to established cultural and social norms that so often entail restrictions, particularly for women. She considers "the chaotic life that we mostly live now" a blessing and welcomes the loss of "that baggage of the past" that restricts the individual (Lyons and Oliver 451).

Accelerated social change is precisely what gave Mason the opportunity for self-transcendence (notably through learning) and for the transcendence of social structures (leaving rural Kentucky to go to university allowed her to change social classes). Mason was the first member of her family to go to college; she went to graduate school in the North, an experience which afflicted her with a strong sense of cultural dislocation. In a 1995 interview she acknowledged:

> What I write about essentially is culture shock – the bewildering experience of moving from the land into modern urban life. Culture shock has been my experience, in moving from the South to the North, and I see versions of it in everybody at home as they deal with change. (Wilhelm 1998: 130)

Nancy Culpepper expresses the same feeling in "Lying Doggo" when she says, "One day I was listening to Hank Williams and shelling corn for the chickens and the next day I was expected to know what wines went with what" (*NC* 44). In *Clear Springs*, Mason reminisces about her university days up in the North in the tumultuous 1960s: "As I struggled to become sophisticated, my folks and their country culture were always present in the deepest part of my being. Yet I was estranged from them, just as I was a stranger there in the North. I was an exile in both places" (*CS* xi). Nancy Culpepper embodies the conflict between the security of home and tradition and the thrill of adventure, between rootedness and rootlessness, which has always plagued Mason. Author and character follow in the footsteps of many other real and fictional daughters of the South, like Eudora Welty and her autobiographical character Laurel McKelva, who experienced the soul-wrenching dilemma of being "the loved one gone." In her autobiography, Welty recounts that, when as an aspiring writer she took trips to New York to sell her stories, she felt torn between the pursuit of her artistic ambition and her wish to follow tradition and domestic ritual:

> The torment and guilt – the torment of having the loved one go, the guilt of being the loved one gone – comes into my fiction as it did and does into my life. And most of all the guilt then was because it was true: I had left to arrive at some future and secret joy, at what was unknown, and what was now in New York, waiting to be discovered. (Welty 93-94)

Like Welty in *One Writer's Beginnings*, Mason in *Clear Springs* strives to make sense of what her parents, knowingly or not, contributed to her

development as a writer, and deals with the conflict between the desire for independence and the desire to protect back those who protected her.[3]

As the fictional projection of her creator, Nancy Culpepper does a lot of traveling, mental and physical, out of and back to Kentucky, as well as elsewhere. Paradoxically, the more she travels, the more aware she becomes of regional differences and of herself as a rural Kentuckian. The main coordinates of her existence are two fundamental experiences: her rootedness in a particular place of origin, and her travels. Her being is the intersection of the process of sinking roots and the impulse to take flight from the past and move into the future. In the story "Blue Country," Nancy, whose parents never went anywhere, says, "I was the one who left, but they always expected me to keep running back" (*NC* 31). Her story is that of an obsessive concern with the advantages and drawbacks of "adventuring." Her ambivalence about Kentucky is a permanent source of conflict with her husband Jack, as well as with herself, which contributes to making her an original and complex character. In "Proper Gypsies," a story narrated in the first person, Nancy says, "I knew I was always trying to fit in and rebel simultaneously" (*NC* 164). This dilemma is Mason's as well: "I often suspect that I am a transient pretending to be a resident" (Hill, "An Interview" 86). In fact, most of Mason's fiction is fuelled by the conflict between residence and transience, a theme that figures explicitly in the title of one of the stories in the *Shiloh* collection.

In "Residents and Transients," Mason advocates a prospective over a retrospective approach. The protagonist, Mary, after years of rootlessness and experimentation with various lifestyles, has returned to her native Kentucky to enjoy a spell of pastoral tranquility, seduced by the idea of returning to an "original" condition, an illusion of permanence and stability. Her husband moves to the city of Louisville to work and find a house, whereas she stays in her parents' old farmhouse, saying, "I do not want to go anywhere" (*S* 128). Mary is divided between the pull of a quiet, traditional way of life and the scaring uncertainties of a protean, fluid present, the same present that has led her mother off to an unknown future in a Florida mobile home. Towards the end of the story Mary begins to glimpse the

3 In an interview Mason expressed her admiration for Welty, whose "stories are so wonderful, and I can tell how akin all Southern writers are to her" *(Atlantic Unbound)*.

dangers of immobility, and sees that eventually she will move to Louisville and a new life with her husband. She tells her lover Larry about the two kinds of wildcat populations: "Residents and transients. Some stay put, in their fixed home ranges, and others are on the move. They don't have real homes. Everybody always thought that the ones who establish the territories are the most successful […]. They are the strongest, while the transients are the bums, the losers." However, scientists are now beginning to think that "it may be that the transients are the superior ones after all, with the greatest curiosity and most intelligence. They can't decide" (*S* 135-136). Scientific opinion is as divided as Mary is about which lifestyle to pursue. Commenting on this story, which she considers "the focal point for the main theme in *Shiloh*," Mason said that the people she writes about are

> kind of naive and optimistic for the most part: they think better times are coming, and most of them embrace progress. But I think they reflect that tension that's in the culture between hanging onto the past and racing towards the future. […] [T]here are some people who would just never leave home, because that's where they're meant to be; and others, are, well, born to run. (Smith 425)

In her stories of the 1980s, Mason, while retaining some of this ambivalence between tradition and modernity, clearly shows her preference for what sociologist Piotr Sztompka calls the "innovational" over the "authoritarian" personality. Among the characteristics of the latter, Sztompka mentions the "compliance to patterns of life dictated by tradition and authorities," "submissiveness, obedience, conformity, avoidance of responsibility and the need for dependence," as well as "lack of creativeness and innovativeness." In contrast, the innovational personality shows an "inquisitive and manipulative attitude to the world," seeks better solutions and attempts to introduce changes, is open and tolerant, and puts emphasis on creativeness, originality and novelty (240). Mason says that she is interested in the people, especially women, who take advantage of the greater possibilities provided by a changed culture, not in those who "would choose to stick to their own narrow, provincial worlds," those who are "determined to close their eyes and put blinders on – to protect themselves from outside influences and stick to their old ways" *(Atlantic Unbound interview)*. In modern times, identity is an act of liberation from the inertia of traditional ways, from immutable authorities, preordained routines and unquestionable truths. Mason's most sympathetic characters have always been those who prefer the open road. In the novel *In Country*, Samantha Hughes is thrilled by the "feeling of strangeness" of the road, which is where "[e]verything in

America is going on" (17), and she feels "that everything is more real to her now that they are on the road" (19). This takes her on a linear progression towards untried locations, places that might offer new opportunities and thus prevent her from mortgaging her future on certainty and stasis.

Mason belongs to a generation of writers who reject the traditional conception of the literary hero. Her interest is in the anonymous character who never makes it into the history books. She once said that her protagonists are heroes "[i]n that it takes heroism to get through the day. These are quiet struggles that the media wouldn't think are struggles, but these people are living day to day and dealing with hard things […]. They're very personal struggles" (Phillips). The book that comes closest to historical fiction is her novel *Feather Crowns* (1993), about a farm wife from her own hometown who gave birth to quintuplets in 1896. Nevertheless, Mason does not consider it a major departure from what she generally writes about: "[i]t's the same people, the same landscape I have been preoccupied with since the start. The contemporary characters in my stories are the descendants of the rural people who were rooted on the farm for generations" (*Missouri Review* interview 106). In a sense, *Feather Crowns* is Mason's personal history, the history of her kind, of farm people like her parents and grandparents. Harriet Pollack made the best defense of Mason as a "historian":

> Mason, like other Southern women writers, attends history not as Foote and Faulkner have but as women's historians of recent decades have, re-centering it. For them, history is not the chronicle of great deeds and greater battles, borders, treaties, and territories, but an account of lives lived on the margins of official history and culture – of lives silent in history because, by race, class, or gender, they lacked access to official power and event. (96)

Significantly, Nancy Culpepper has a degree in history. As Mason herself said in reply to a question about the role of the past in the Nancy Culpepper stories, "Nancy is something of a historian, but I don't think she lives in the past, I think she wants to bring the past into the present through her imagination. That's how she wants to experience it. She wants to make it real" (Phillips). Constantly moving back and forth between her roots in Kentucky and her life in the present, Nancy is engaged in the challenging task of examining her multiple selves, trying to grow roots and wings simultaneously. In a sense she is like her creator, who, though a writer from the South, was not immersed in her region when she wrote most of her fiction.

Nancy Culpepper is markedly different from the rest of Mason's characters, most of them ordinary small-town people working at ordinary jobs. Instead of trying to go back, at least momentarily, to the stability of tradition and the simplicity of the past (Leroy in "Shiloh," Jenny in "Love Life," Mary in "Residents and Transients"), Nancy searches her past in order to discover and understand herself and because of her commitment to the future – not because she is dissatisfied with the present or with the orientation of the life she chose. What she finds in that past is the formative basis of her current self, what Whitman calls the "preparations."[4] Her exploration yields both immobility and change, the intense desire to break out of confines and move away, the transient's impulse that has always underpinned her self. Nancy realizes that her female ancestors' yearnings were the same as hers; but she is lucky enough to have been born in an age when socio-economic conditions made it possible for her to leave provincial Kentucky in search of new opportunities and environments congenial to her roving disposition. In the Kentucky past she finds her current self and confirmation that she is in the right, not just a reassuring antidote to the uncertainty and the anguish of living in the modern world of change.

In the first story of the cycle, "Nancy Culpepper," Nancy is a "new woman," more sophisticated and progressive than her 'sisters' in the *Shiloh* collection. She lives in the North in an egalitarian marriage to a photographer, Jack Cleveland, but she has not completely exorcised the guilt of leaving her parents and her past in Kentucky. She does not hold on to the past nostalgically, as her husband Jack sometimes accuses her of doing, but tries to understand how exactly it relates to her. Her visit to Kentucky to help her parents move Granny to a nursing home provides her with the opportunity to delve into the past in an anguished effort to identify the sources of her self. She engages her grandmother in the search for a long dead great-great aunt, also named Nancy Culpepper, who serves as her link with the past. Significantly, Nancy has kept her maiden name instead of

4 In section 44 of "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman defines the present self as the product of a long line of evolution that has been affecting it ever since "the huge first Nothing": "Immense have been the preparations for me, / Faithful and friendly the arms that have help'd me" (248-249).

taking her husband's. She is fascinated to learn that she is a "reincarnation" (*NC* 10) of an ancestor whose wedding picture reveals "frightened" eyes which however "sparkle like shards of glass." In the picture, she appears to Nancy as a "young woman" who "would be glad to dance to 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' on her wedding day" – which is what Nancy herself did. As with so many men in Mason's fiction, the husband in the picture "seems bewildered, as if he did not know what to expect, marrying a woman who has her eyes fixed on something so far away" (*NC* 18). In her uncertainty about the way of life that she has chosen, Nancy finds some assurance in the fact that she has been right to fix her eyes on the "far away" and on the future, to embrace the modern world without forgetting the past and all that she has left behind. As Darlene Hill observes, "the contemporary Nancy has integrated her past with her present to form a new identity with which to face the changes she cannot escape" (85). Maybe Nancy Culpepper is a character who exists at a point somewhere between those who reject outright past beliefs and the ways of life which have subjected them (like Opal in "Love Life" and Norma Jean in "Shiloh") and those who search in the past for the order and the stability they cannot find in a chaotic present (like Jenny in "Love Life" and Leroy in "Shiloh"). Nancy rejects neither the past as wholly useless and oppressive nor the opportunities of the present and the promises of the future. She is as much the product of the pull of the "far away" as of the nourishing past.

The uncertain identity of the woman in the picture (Granny and Nancy's mother disagree on who she is) complicates matters for Nancy and the issue of her true identity. Granny cannot tell if the ancestor looks like the present-day Nancy either. In this first Nancy Culpepper story, a flashback provides the key to the whole cycle. During a visit to the cemetery with Granny, on one of her previous trips home, Nancy saw the stone marked "NANCY CULPEPPER, 1833-1905" and later told Jack that "[i]t was like time-lapse photography, […] I was standing there looking into the past and the future at the same time. It was weird" (*NC* 10). Having her favorite character look simultaneously in two opposite directions can be seen as an echo of the challenge Mason confronts as a Southern writer: she has left the South but revisits it in most of her fiction.[5] As Arnold notes, "Nancy does not want

5 In an interview, she said, "I'm a writer from the South and I write out of Southern culture, but I'm not immersed in the South. I think my exile in the North gave me a

to escape *into* the past; she hopes to take strength from it in order to deal with the present. It is Jack […] who is hiding" (138-139). As she discovers that her ancestors possessed a roving disposition, there seems to be no radical break. Similarly, even though Mason went away and became a writer,[6] one can argue that she followed in her parents' footsteps: she did not become a farmer, yet by writing she was able to maintain the same kind of independent life that the farmer enjoys, avoiding a factory or a clerical job. Mason regularly underlines the importance for her as a writer of the world she left behind, as for instance in this 1985 interview:

> I left that kind of world, too, but never could quite get rid of it, and it haunted me. It seems that I started writing because I was preoccupied with my past. […] I left because I felt trapped in a conventional small-town culture, so I try to imagine what that world is like for people who don't leave. I guess I kind of project myself into it to know what it would be like for me. (Havens 88)

Nancy Culpepper, then, is not a character through which Mason presents a depiction of herself as she would have been if she had stayed behind, but as she actually is: the farmer's daughter who went away and made good.

In the story "Blue Country," Nancy is attending a wedding near Boston when a call from home informs her of Grandma's death. Because of the fog, she cannot get a flight home to attend the funeral. As if to justify herself, she asserts, "if you have a choice between a wedding and a funeral, you should go to the wedding" (*NC* 24). Nancy tries to keep her guilt at bay by concentrating on the food served at the wedding, but the funeral keeps intruding: "There was food at funerals too, Nancy thought. The neighbors would bring hams and pies and cakes" (*NC* 28). She is glad to have stayed but at the same time feels confused. The situation prompts her to reconsider Jack's origins and her own: "Jack came from a different world – private school, summer camps. How did we ever get together?" (*NC* 21). She also compares herself to her parents, who never went anywhere: "They sent me out as an explorer, […]. Like Columbus" (*NC* 31). The day after the wedding

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sense of detachment, a way of looking in two directions at once" (*Missouri Review* interview 97).

6 "I think the strength of my fiction has been from the tension between being from there [Kentucky] and not from there. I don't think I could have written the way I've written if I had stayed there. I had to go through a phase of turning my back on it, but I don't think I could write the way I have if I'd turned my back on it completely, the way a lot of Southerners do when they go North." (Todd 135)

they go out to sea to watch whales. This last section of the story, which is about the dangers and the wonders of exploration, contains echoes of *Moby Dick*. Not only does Nancy mention Captain Ahab, but she finds an analogy between the waters that attracted roving adventurers like Ishmael and her grandmother's character: "Staring at the ocean, Nancy thought that its vast blankness and mystery were like her grandmother's mind in those final months – something private and deep she had saved for herself" (*NC* 32). At the very end Nancy clearly sides with the adventurous part of her self, relishing the force and the wildness of the whales that she would never have seen if she had not left Kentucky: "At that moment Nancy knew that this – not something quaint or cozy – was what she had come so far away from home to see" (*NC* 33).

"Lying Doggo" is a much more intimate story than "Blue Country." Nancy and Jack have been married for fifteen years; their old dying dog Grover functions as a catalyst for the revelation of their respective personalities. The story provides many hints about the rifts caused by Nancy's and Jack's different backgrounds. He is the typical uprooted Northerner, always chiding Nancy about her Southern reserve, the exaggeration of her humble background and her tendency to cling to the past. The story suggests that Nancy's rural values are more positive in terms of life and compassion than Jack's. She is in favor of allowing the old sick dog to cling to life, like her grandmother had done, whereas the practical and modern Jack is in favor of putting him to sleep to end his misery. Talking about the story several years after it was written, Mason praised her grandmother for hanging on to life and possessions like the dog in "Lying Doggo" and described an argument she had had with her husband about a dog which died in early April of 1986, noticing that the story "seem[ed] prophetic" in this regard (Hill, "An Interview" 88-89).

In *Spence + Lila* (1988), a novella about the family crisis caused by Lila's breast cancer, Nancy is a minor character. The couple at the center of the narrative is based on Mason's parents and it is obvious that the author means to pay homage to people like them. Nancy flies from Boston to western Kentucky to help the family in those times of trial. Her need to be involved in important moments (illnesses, deaths, burials, moving Grandma to the nursing home) is a recurrent theme in her fictional development. As a human being, Nancy needs to be a creature of legacy in order to inhabit the world humanly. Back home in Kentucky she is both a member of the family

and a stranger. Her parents resent her stubbornness and individualism, but are simultaneously proud of her achievements, particularly of her capacity to adapt to the fast pace of modern life.[7] The books that she reads so voraciously and which were her ticket out of provincial Kentucky to the world beyond also bring her many burdens, making her anxious about dangers such as cholesterol and environmental damage, and alienating her from straightforward feeling. Her parents find her slightly bossy, what with all the new ideas she brings home, and in some ways they prefer Cat, who never left Kentucky. Her mother is aware that "[w]hat Nancy knows is from books, but Cat knows people" (*NC* 136); she laments that in spite of "[a]ll those books Nancy reads, […] she never has much to say about what she really feels" (*NC* 155).

In "The Heirs," Nancy, now 59, is much more nostalgic and more ready than ever to appreciate the heritage of her past. It is February 2002 and Nancy is alone in Kentucky, disposing of the family farm that is being sold to make way for an industrial park. In the attic of her grandmother's house, where she grew up, Nancy finds letters, pictures and other remains from the family past, and looking through these helps her to understand herself better. She has not lived on the farm for many years, but "[w]henever she returned to the farm, she always felt intimate with it," as it "had shaped the family for generations" and "[i]t was the place she had always called her real home, and it had endured." But the farm "had changed over time, just as she had herself" (*NC* 179), and all of this is now about to disappear from her life. In a shoebox she came upon in the attic, she eagerly looks "for family secrets, for clues that [would] illuminate her own life" (*NC* 180). She finds information about two great-aunts who lived during the Depression, the farmer's wife Nova and her spinster sister Artemisa, who later married Nova's widowed husband. Nancy sympathizes with them, imagining them as having been "worn into submission by the steady routine of farm work, […]. She thought of the tyranny of men – their expectations of meat and pie on the table and clean, starched shirts" (*NC* 184-185). Like the photographer in Antonioni's movie *Blow-Up*, Nancy studies the pictures to uncover the story of her great-aunts. She behaves like a historian, recreating the past from scant available sources. And she does indeed recreate the story of

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7 Nancy's sister Cat has problems with the rapid changes in the culture. When she hears that some pictures have arrived from the North via Federal Express overnight, she says, "I can't get over that, […]. Anymore, everything so fast" (*NC* 98).

Nova and Artemisa, who in their dream of escape fell victims to a swindling scheme that promised to make them heirs to a substantial tract of land in New York State in return for regular sums of money. Artemisa, who survived her sister, "felt her small life enclosed by the split-rail fences of [her husband] Beaulus's sixty acres," and "[h]er mind wound around and around, craving […] books to read, paper for writing, a man from a newspaper to talk to her about the world, to bring her news of the world, the world that spun around and around and around" (*NC* 200).

The story's title acquires a new meaning in relation to Nancy, who can now consider herself the heir to the aspirations of her great-aunts. She has an epiphany in the story's brief last section, when "the weight of her heritage came rushing through her mind, as if the [hot] brick [she, as a child, slept with on cold nights], a straight aim from those two desperate women, had been thrown at her" (*NC* 201). She cries for the loss of her parents, especially her mother, who, like Nova, has "burned with frustration and desire," and because "she [Nancy] had gone away and had not shared her life with them [her parents], except in her imagination." Thanks to the farm people, who never threw things away, Nancy has been granted access to the treasures from the past which give meaning and continuity to life: "Nancy saw herself in this group of people, lives that had passed from the earth as hers would too. She felt comforted by the thought of continuity" (*NC* 202). The farm gets sold, but in her memory and imagination it remains part of her. For the rest of her life she will be the heir to the culture and the spirit it embodied. The self that Nancy left in Kentucky was more securely at home than she initially thought; but she would never have found it if she had not left, moved by the desire to keep her options open. She never imagined to what extent her present self was going to be enriched, even given reality, by her past.

The last story, "The Prelude," is about a visit to the English Lake District, during which Nancy and Jack attempt a romantic reconciliation after a period of separation. They are about to become grandparents and Jack has been diagnosed with prostate cancer. Intimations of mortality pervade this story, which questions the possibility of repeating the past and explores the relationship between present and past personal identities. Nancy allies herself with the Romantics, imagining them to be unaffected by time: "She felt the sorrow of separation and unrequited love and romantic obsession – all of life's romance blowing like a cyclone through those lives [Wordsworth, Coleridge and Dorothy] two centuries ago, when they were

innocent of time" (*NC* 223). She actually perceives the presence of the Romantics, "like ghosts." She can feel them, "young people struggling with the future" (*NC* 224). She has no doubt gone to the Lake District precisely to fight the ravages of the passage of time with its ensuing destruction of youth, vigor, and love.[8]

Nancy the historian finds cultural connections between the Romantics and her parents and grandparents. In continuing the search for her place in history, for her identity as part of the continuum of time, she looks back on her life with Jack and ponders on the reasons why she left Kentucky, until suddenly, one night, "it occurred to her that she had left home in Kentucky to get away from the hard labor that had enslaved her parents." She then goes over all the phases of her life: the time when she and Jack were living in Boston and "Kentucky would not release her" because "[s]he wouldn't let it"; the "serious separation [of] a decade ago," when "she went to England"; the death of her parents, a few years back, "in a ghastly six-month period" after which she "broke from Boston […] and began living part-time in Kentucky while she reconsidered herself and waited for her grief to subside" (*NC* 217).

One of the scenes in "The Prelude" refers back to the cemetery scene in "Nancy Culpepper," in which Nancy looked into the past and the future at the same time, and complements its meaning and resonance. Nancy is examining her face in the mirror while Jack is talking to their son on the phone, and she sees that "[m]ore and more, she resembled her mother." Gazing into her reflection, "she could remember the stages of her growth in photographs," and

> see all her faces morphed together, each peaking out of the other, the guises through which she had acted out the scenes of her history. And, too, she saw her mother's turned up nose and scared eyes; and her father's square jaw; and her grandmother's sagging jowls. She imagined other unknown faces of ancestors, and she saw her son, his mouth and warm coloring. And somewhere in her face was her grandchild. (*NC* 222)

The activities of historian and photographer – related in both cases to the scrutiny of the world and the self – that have been so important in the

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8 In answer to my question as to whether she intended to write more Nancy Culpepper stories, Mason said that "if there were more stories, they might take place in depressing situations as the characters age, and I don't have any desire to go into that territory. But I won't rule out a change of heart!" (e-mail to Constante González-Groba, 29 August 2007).

collection come together in this passage, which reflects a Whitmanesque conception of the present self as a compound of the "preparations" of the past and the seeds for the future, as well as Nancy's unvoiced attempt to counteract the many signs of mortality and finality.

The collection ends on a note of typically postmodern uncertainty. Both Nancy and Jack want to get back together, but they are unsure whether they can and where they are going to live, as they sold their house in Boston when they split up. Such hesitations are fitting in the final story about a character on whom Mason has projected her own permanent wavering between tradition and modernity, past and future, rootedness and rootlessness. Somewhat surprisingly, Mason did not have her most autobiographical character return to Kentucky, as she herself did: "The journey I've been on is a common enough one. First, you go out into the world in quest of understanding. Then you return to your origins and finally comprehend them" (Wilhelm 1998: 130). This idea is central to *Clear Springs* and some of the stories in *Zigzagging down a Wild Trail*, particularly "The Funeral Side." The Mason who in the 1980s favored the straight line of those who go away from home into the world is now resorting to one of Hawthorne's favorite symbols, that of the spiral. To the old question of "the call of the hearth or the call of the wild?" (*CS* 280), she replies: "The answer is the mingling of sunlight and shadow; it's ambiguity, not either-or. The best journeys spiral up and around. […] In the Zen journey, when you return, you know for the first time where you came from" (*CS* 280-281). From the beginning of Mason's writing career, Nancy Culpepper has best represented this spiraling movement, ceaselessly moving to different places and returning to Kentucky to visit, always comparing her new destinations, and herself in them, with her self and her origins in Kentucky. Thus, Mason's dearest character has been allowed to have the best of both worlds: the opportunity to escape the restrictions of an oppressive environment, and the self-knowledge that comes with the constant re-examination of one's origins. Nancy embodies what Bauman terms "the ambivalence of identity," consisting of "nostalgia for the past together with complete accordance with 'liquid modernity'" (7). Only after relating to locations beyond the homeplace are Mason and Nancy able to get a better grasp of the character of that very homeplace and of their selves. Mason acknowledges that "[b]eing an exile seemed to give the place [Kentucky] more importance as an inspiration and an impetus for writing" (Wilhelm 1998: 133). Neither Mason nor Nancy would have truly known herself as a

Southerner had she not left the South. From their traveling they learnt not only about regional differences but also about the continuities between their ancestors, their younger selves, and their present selves.

The binaries home / outer world, permanence / transience, security / insecurity, tradition / modernity, private / public spheres have never been as separate as they seem, but are in fact interdependent. As Mason said of herself and her siblings, "[w]e've been free to roam, because we've always known where home is" (*CS* 13). The journey outwards helps to see the meaning of home just as home helps to undertake and understand the journey: "It has been a long journey from our little house into the wide world, and after that a long journey back home. Now I am beginning to see more clearly what I was looking for" (*CS* 14). If a fruitful fusion of the opposites of home and the outer world is in order, so is the abolition of the simplistic dichotomy between tradition and innovation. Perhaps the most reasonable stance on tradition is what Piotr Sztompka calls the "tradition of critical traditionalism." It is a strategy of dialogue, one that avoids "the fallacy of blind traditionalism, the uncritical following of tradition informed by the mistaken equivalence of past with good" – the attitude that defines characters like Leroy in "Shiloh." "Critical traditionalism" equally rejects "the opposite fallacy of dogmatic anti-traditionalism" that ignores "the beneficial role that tradition as such, and some traditions in particular, may play in human society" (68). The coexistence of tradition and modernity is not only possible, but modernization itself may strengthen tradition. After all, nostalgia for the suddenly rediscovered positive aspects of traditional society is a recognizable facet of modernity, and Mason's partial return to the past in her latest fiction is paradoxically just another characteristic of the modernity she has embraced all along.

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L'ARTISANAT DE LA MÉMOIRE DANS *NATIVE GUARD* DE NATASHA TRETHEWEY

Le Sud des États-Unis est le matériau poétique privilégié de Natasha Trethewey, seconde poétesse originaire de cette région à avoir reçu le prix Pulitzer [1]. Son histoire personnelle lui a permis de connaître le Sud de manière approfondie puisqu'elle est née à Gulfport, dans le Mississippi, a emménagé à Decatur (Géorgie) avec sa mère, Gwendolyn Grimmette, après la séparation de ses parents, et rendait des visites régulières à son père, le poète Eric Trethewey, à la Nouvelle-Orléans (Louisiane). Dans les trois recueils de poèmes qu'elle a publiés à ce jour, la dimension raciale du Sud occupe une place centrale. Trethewey, née d'un père blanc et d'une mère noire à une époque où les mariages interraciaux étaient encore illégaux dans le Mississippi, part de sa propre identité pour explorer ce passé trouble. Dans son premier recueil, *Domestic Work* (1999), lauréat du prix de poésie *Cave Canem*, Trethewey fait entendre la voix des des bonnes, des couturières et des ouvrières de la région du Delta du Mississippi, à travers des sonnets, des ballades et des poèmes en vers libre mêlant récits et mythes familiaux. Dans « History Lesson », Trethewey donne corps et voix à un passé collectif qui lui permet de mettre en perspective son vécu personnel :

> I am four in this photograph, standing
> on a wide strip of Mississippi beach […]
>
> I am alone
> except for my grandmother, other side
>
> of the camera, telling me how to pose.

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1 La première poétesse du Sud à avoir reçu le prix Pulitzer de poésie est Claudia Emerson, en 2006. Elle est originaire de Virginie.

> It is 1970, two years after they opened
> the rest of this beach to us,
>
> forty years since the photograph
> where she stood on a narrow plot
> of sand marked *colored*, smiling […] (Trethewey 1999 : 45)

Cette anecdote rappelle un événement similaire de la vie de sa grand-mère ; entre ces deux repères, le flux de l'histoire a apporté son lot de changements. Les trois cadres utilisés (la photographie de la grand-mère, celle de la poétesse, et le cadre du poème) correspondent à trois instants imbriqués. La mise en abyme, procédé de structuration fréquent chez Trethewey, est rendue possible par l'enracinement des voix poétiques dans une région particulière et les transformations que celle-ci a connues.

Dans le second recueil, *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002), Trethewey a recours aux mêmes procédés mais cette fois les photographies sont inspirées de l'œuvre de John Ernest Joseph Bellocq, photographe rendu célèbre par les clichés des prostituées du « Red Light District » de la Nouvelle-Orléans qu'il a réalisés au début du XX^e^ siècle. Ces portraits sont à l'origine de la création d'Ophélie, femme métisse qui, au fil du recueil, apprend à se conformer à ce que l'on attend d'elle dans un univers extrêmement codifié. Sa peau claire lui offre une place de choix parmi les prostituées mais les obstacles auxquels elle se heurte indiquent que l'espace dont elle dispose dans la ville est tout aussi restreint que celui de ses proches, restés travailler dans les plantations de coton. Étant femme et métisse, elle ne réussit pas à gagner sa vie autrement que par la prostitution.

La condition de la femme et l'histoire, deux des thématiques majeures de Trethewey, se retrouvent mêlées dans le troisième recueil, *Native Guard* (2007). La poétesse y explore en trois parties distinctes le souvenir de sa mère décédée, le destin des « Native Guards [2] », et son rapport identitaire au Sud à travers le prisme de son propre métissage, sa « biracialness ». Alors que la structure du recueil pourrait faire craindre un simple collage de thématiques disparates, *Native Guard* représente une étude complexe de ce que l'on pourrait appeler la mémoire de l'espace, une évocation des différentes strates qui forment le Sud tel que Trethewey le conçoit. La côte nord-américaine du Golf du Mexique – en particulier celle de l'état du

2 Premier régiment de soldats afro-américains et créoles formé pendant la guerre de Sécession par les États confédérés mais qui finit par se battre aux côtés de l'Union.

Mississippi – est la région que la poétesse a identifiée à plusieurs reprises comme sa terre natale et l'endroit où elle se sent chez elle [3]. Pendant son enfance et son adolescence, elle y passait tous ses étés. Avec sa grand-mère, elle se rendait sur Ship Island, au large de Gulfport, et visitait le fort, souvenir de la guerre de Sécession. Si une plaque honore la mémoire des soldats confédérés morts au combat, aucun monument à la gloire des soldats noirs qui ont servi dans le régiment des « Native Guards » n'y est érigé. Cette observation est l'une des inspirations majeures qui préside à l'écriture du recueil. Le non-dit historique, la volonté d'effacer de la mémoire du Sud la contribution des Afro-Américains, ont incité Trethewey à s'interroger sur sa propre identité. L'histoire amputée du Sud trouve une résonance particulière dans son vécu ; sa vie a en effet basculé en 1985, lorsque sa mère fut assassinée par son second mari, dont elle venait de divorcer après des années de maltraitance et de violence conjugale. Dans un entretien accordé au *New York Times*, Trethewey revient sur cet épisode tragique et déclare : « He had a history of violence. He killed her so no one else could have her » (Solomon). Effacer la vie de cette femme noire ou passer sous silence le sacrifice des soldats afro-américains participent de cette « histoire de violence » qu'explorent et interrogent les trois parties de *Native Guard* [4]. Dans le même entretien, Trethewey insiste d'ailleurs sur son attachement à la mémoire historique : « I've been interested in historical erasure and historical amnesia for a long time, those things that get left out of the record ».

Je m'interrogerai ici sur les manifestations de ce travail contre l'oubli et plus particulièrement sur ses répercussions sur l'espace du Sud tel qu'il se présente dans *Native Guard*. Quelles modifications cette redécouverte du passé et cette volonté de remplir les blancs de l'H/histoire entraînent-elles ? Qu'est-ce qui, dans l'écriture de la poétesse, relève de ce combat contre « l'effacement » et « l'amnésie » historiques ? En tant que poète femme,

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3 Voir Natasha Trethewey's reading at Emory on May 8, 2007 in celebration of the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for *Native Guard*.

4 Trethewey a établi un rapprochement très clair entre sa mère et les « native guards » : « My mother does not have any kind of stone on her grave. That sort of hit me, the history that had not been properly memorialized, remembered, tended by someone native to her – it was my mother's history. She was just like those black soldiers. No monument existed, and in that way she was erased from the landscape. » (Anderson)

métisse, et héritière du Sud, comment Trethewey œuvre-t-elle pour la mémoire ? J'étudierai d'abord la façon dont elle reprise l'histoire, personnelle ou collective, et comment elle en analyse les sutures. Puis, afin de mieux cerner les enjeux de l'entreprise de reconquête de l'espace du Sud, j'explorerai les interstices de l'oubli tels que la poétesse les définit, ainsi que l'importance qu'elle accorde à la commémoration et au pouvoir de la parole poétique face au vide.

Native Guard [5] s'ouvre sur le poème « Theories of Time and Space », placé en exergue avant la première partie. Les notions abordées dans le texte sont communes à toutes les sections de l'œuvre : le retour à la terre d'origine, l'impossibilité de recouvrer le passé et la nécessité paradoxale de l'interroger, de l'explorer sans cesse. Trethewey utilise l'adresse directe et de nombreux impératifs pour donner à ses théories une portée générale. Le voyage dont il est question dans le texte est celui qu'elle a elle-même effectué, le trajet en bateau de la jetée de Gulfport jusqu'à Ship Island. Le sujet lyrique conseille à son interlocuteur, qui semble être à la fois le lecteur et Trethewey elle-même, de ne pas s'encombrer de bagages inutiles : « Bring only // what you must carry – tome of memory, / its random blank pages » (*NG* 1). La poétesse invite et s'invite à remplir cette mémoire « blanche », vierge, et qui est tout sauf linéaire, ordonnée ; le trajet familier est devenu une « route non prise » rappelant Robert Frost, un cheminement vers la réalité historique oubliée de Ship Island et du passé personnel, vers une densité que seule la poésie peut appréhender. Or, la métaphore du « tome de mémoire » est précédée d'une autre observation indissociable du travail du souvenir : « – dead end // at the coast, the pier at Gulfport where / riggings of shrimp boats are loose stitches // in a sky threatening rain » (*NG* 1). Les gréements des crevettiers, semblables à des « points lâches » (« loose stitches »), participent de cet horizon que Trethewey va consolider et repriser au fil des textes. Il ne s'agit pas ici de donner voix aux couturières, comme dans *Domestic Work*, mais de leur emprunter leur artisanat pour l'appliquer au tissu poétique. La nature exacte de la matière que ces coutures assemblent reste à déterminer, tout comme celle du

5 L'édition utilisée est celle publiée par Mariner Books en 2007.Toutes les références apparaîtront dans le corps de l'article, précédées de *NG*.

danger qui semble peser sur le projet poétique, symbolisé par le « ciel comme une menace, lourd de pluie » (« a sky threatening rain »).

L'une des valeurs majeures conférées aux points et aux sutures semble être celle d'amarres du passé dans le présent. Dans « At Dusk », le sujet lyrique écoute une voisine appeler son chat qui hésite à rentrer, captivé par l'infinité de possibles qui s'ouvre à lui hors du foyer, puis la poétesse entame une réflexion sur le pouvoir de sa propre voix, espérant que celle-ci agisse tel un pont :

> I listen as my neighbor's voice trails off.
> She's given up calling for now, […]
> left me to wonder that I too might lift
> my voice, sure of someone out there,
> send it over the lines stitching here
> to there, certain the sounds I make
> are enough to call someone home. (*NG* 15)

L'absence de détermination agit comme une mise en garde contre une lecture trop biographique de l'œuvre, d'autant que Trethewey injecte dans les textes les plus personnels une dimension méditative destinée à servir une entreprise de mémoire qui mêle les dimensions collective et privée. Les liens à la fois spatiaux et temporels qui joignent « here » et « there » sont semblables aux vers (« lines ») puisqu'ils existent sur la page et précèdent la lecture et l'action de la voix. Le sujet lyrique ne prétend pas les créer, les tisser, mais les faire résonner, comme une corde mise en vibration par un archet. Les rapports entre le présent et le passé, le proche et le lointain, sont autant de fils conducteurs pour la voix qui leur donne sens, de la même façon que l'œil suit le trajet des vers et de l'enjambement entre « here » et « to there » et donne au poème son unité. Un hiatus entre poète et sujet lyrique apparaît alors, car si le « I » du poème semble se contenter d'élever la voix pour « l'envoyer sur les lignes qui cousent l'ici / au là » (« send it over the lines stitching here / to there »), la création de ces passerelles et de ces lignes/vers correspond bien à la mission de Trethewey. « At Dusk » révèle deux dimensions des coutures de la mémoire dans *Native Guard* : leur formation par la vision et l'écriture de la poétesse, ainsi que leur activation, leur résonance, qui est le fait de la lecture et de la voix. Le poème se clôt sur l'ambiguïté entre la perte de l'être aimé et du passé partagé avec lui, et le pouvoir que donnent à celui qui reste les fils qui demeurent entre son présent et ce que le temps lui a pris. Le sujet lyrique affirme le pouvoir de sa voix en se déclarant dans les deux derniers vers

« certain that the sounds I make / are enough to call someone home » ; en convoquant le souvenir de la personne disparue, il continue à entretenir une relation avec elle. L'écueil du pathos est évité grâce à l'accent placé sur le processus de métaphorisation de l'action de la mémoire.

Si « At Dusk » est centré sur le rapport entre le passé et le présent du sujet lyrique, l'historique et le contemporain sont eux aussi raccordés, comme dans « South », le dernier poème du recueil. À travers l'observation de différents paysages naturels du Sud, Trethewey insiste sur les innombrables points de convergence entre passé et présent, et ceux-ci finissent par représenter l'un des traits principaux du paysage et de l'identité sudiste : « I returned to a stand of pines, / bone-thin phalanx // flanking the roadside, tangle / of understory » (*NG* 45). Le Sud que retranscrit la poétesse est un « enchevêtrement » (« tangle »), une succession de points de sutures qui mêlent d'une part le végétal à l'humain dans la métaphore des pins semblables à de gigantesques « phalanges [6] », et d'autre part l'actualité à l'historique puisque les paysages regorgent de manifestations physiques de l'histoire sous-jacente (« understory »). Plus loin, les magnolias en fleurs rappellent les drapeaux blancs de la défaite au terme de la guerre de Sécession, tandis que les champs de coton contiennent le souvenir vivant de l'esclavage :

> […] I returned
> to a field of cotton, hallowed ground –
>
> as slave legend goes – each boll
> holding the ghost of generations:
>
> those who measured their days
> by the heft of sacks and lengths
>
> of rows, whose sweat flecked the cotton plants
> still sewn into our clothes. (*NG* 45-46)

Les manifestations de l'histoire dans le présent prennent ici différentes formes. Le point de couture maintient une continuité entre la souffrance des esclaves et ses répercussions, son empreinte indélébile sur les plants de

6 Le terme « phalanx » renvoie à l'humain dans ses deux acceptions que sont « phalange » et « troupe ». Trethewey utilise d'ailleurs ce terme pour désigner le régiment des « native guards » à plusieurs reprises, notamment dans « Elegy for the Native Guards ».

coton et sur les vêtements que portent aujourd'hui les héritiers du Sud. Trethewey inscrit ainsi son propos dans la tradition d'une culture née de l'esclavage. Le rythme des journées interminables aux champs, qui s'est reflété dans les « work songs », les « negro spirituals » puis le « blues » enraciné dans le Delta du Mississippi, trouve ici un écho dans la régularité de l'anapeste suivi des trois trochées de « by the heft of sacks and lengths // of rows » ainsi que dans l'accélération par paires d'assonances, « sweat flecked », « cotton plants », « still sewn ». Trethewey souligne son héritage musical à plusieurs reprises dans le recueil : l'un des poèmes de la première section s'intitule « Graveyard Blues », et la deuxième section a pour épigraphe un vers de la chanson « Mississippi Goddam » de Nina Simone.

Le champ sémantique du point apparaît également dans « Scenes from a Documentary History of Mississippi », où Trethewey évoque la rudesse de la condition des travailleurs dans les champs de coton. Cette fois, cependant, le point n'est pas « suture » ou « couture », termes réservés à l'entreprise de rattachement du passé au présent, mais « pointillé » et « ponctuation » : « […] the deformity – the humped back, curve / of spine – punctuating the routine hardships / of their lives […] » (*NG* 22). Si les répercussions physiques du labeur éreintant viennent ponctuer la vie des ouvriers agricoles, l'incise évoquant les courbes de la colonne vertébrale et l'emploi du terme « punctuating » rappellent aussi l'aiguille et le fil pénétrant le tissu. La poétesse file la métaphore de la « déformité » dans le recueil jusqu'au dernier poème, « South », avec l'image des « pins » pareils à des « phalanges décharnées » (« a stand of pines, / bone-thin phalanx »). Dans « South », le point ou pointillé devient trait d'union et le tissage se fait métissage lorsque Trethewey s'inclut dans ce patchwork représentant le Sud et fait référence à sa propre histoire en ces termes : « […] I return / to Mississippi, state that made a crime // of me – mulatto, half-breed – native / in my native land […] » (*NG* 46). La technique de l'incise entre tirets gagne en intensité par l'inclusion du terme « half-breed », ce signifiant qui matérialise sur la page l'identité suturée de la poétesse. L'action dénaturante du Sud est à nouveau mise en lumière dans la référence aux lois anti-métissages qui ont fait de Trethewey « un crime ». La volonté de la poétesse d'embrasser le Sud dans sa diversité et ses contradictions apparaît de façon évidente dans l'épigraphe de la troisième section du recueil [7],

7 « O magnet-South! O glistening perfurmed South! my South! / O quick mettle, rich blood, impulse and love! good and evil! / O all dear to me! » (Whitman in *NG* 33).

empruntée aux *Leaves of Grass* de Walt Whitman. Mais alors que chez Whitman le flot prosodique et les énumérations ont une visée globalisante pour chanter l'amour de la totalité américaine, l'attention de Trethewey se porte davantage sur ce qui maintient ensemble les éléments disparates de sa terre natale. Pour autant, la parole poétique ne se limite pas à mettre en évidence les coutures du Sud, elle consolide également les liens fragiles qui nouent le présent de cette région à son héritage.

Dans plusieurs poèmes, l'oubli est présenté comme une entité menaçante et un danger omniprésent. L'ouragan Camille, qui a frappé le Golfe du Mississippi, la Louisiane et l'Alabama en 1969, devient, dans « Providence », la métaphore de l'éradication et de l'oubli. Le poème est de forme lâche, décousue. Les strophes ainsi que l'espacement des vers sur la page sont irréguliers et les seuls souvenirs qui relient cet événement au présent sont inadéquats, quelques images de fête et de vent prises avant que l'ouragan ne s'abatte : « What's left is footage: the hours before / Camille, 1969 – hurricane / parties, palm tree leaning / in the wind […] » (*NG* 42). Ce qui reste de l'espace après le passage de l'ouragan dépend entièrement de la mémoire de la poétesse. Dans ses souvenirs précis, introduits par « I recall », Trethewey montre que Camille est l'instrument de l'oubli : « […] Then after: […] / a swamp // where graves had been […] » (*NG* 42). L'inondation provoquée par l'ouragan fait disparaître la marque tangible du passé (les pierres tombales), ce qui fait pendant aux noms oubliés et aux tombes englouties des soldats afro-américains de la « Native Guard ». Le même danger guette le foyer du sujet lyrique :

> The next day, our house –
> on its cinderblocks – seemed to float
>
> in the flooded yard: no foundation
>
> beneath us, nothing I could see
> tying us to the land.
> In the water, our reflection
> trembled,
> disappeared
> when I bent to touch it. (*NG* 42)

Ces derniers vers mettent l'accent sur l'oblitération de l'identité. Tout comme les inégalités raciales avaient mis en péril le souvenir des soldats morts pour leur région, Camille a effacé les traces des disparus. L'utilisation de

l'adjectif possessif pluriel « our » constitue un présage inquiétant, puisqu'il participe de la technique de généralisation de Trethewey et renvoie donc à la fois à la famille et à toute une génération de sudistes. Celui qui a perdu son reflet et ne se connaît plus ne risque-t-il pas de répéter ses erreurs ? Trethewey ne s'attarde pas sur cette question, car son projet n'est pas d'effrayer mais de réparer les liens.

Les nombreuses références aux coutures symbolisant les attaches entre passé et présent trouvent un écho dans le patchwork stylistique que constitue *Native Guard*, dans ces nœuds textuels qui unissent l'œuvre à diverses traditions littéraires, dont beaucoup sont propres au Sud des États-Unis. Ainsi, dans « Southern Gothic », Trethewey emprunte au « gothique sudiste » pour contrebalancer la dimension confessionnelle d'un texte dans lequel elle se remémore un épisode de 1970 où, enfant, elle s'était allongée dans le lit de ses parents qui n'étaient pas encore séparés. Le rapport ambigu entre maltraitance et souvenir [8] transparaît dans l'allusion au destin tragique de sa mère. L'image de la femme assoupie prend valeur de métaphore proleptique et annonce son décès futur causé par la violence de son second mari :

> I am again the child with too many questions –
> the endless *why* and *why* and *why*
> my mother cannot answer, her mouth closed, a gesture
> toward her future: cold lips stitched shut.
> The lines in my young father's face deepen
> toward an expression of grief. […] (*NG* 40)

La violence est encore en gestation mais la métaphore des « lèvres froides, cousues » (« cold lips stitched shut ») s'inscrit dans la tradition littéraire du gothique sudiste tel qu'on le trouve chez Flannery O' Connor, Truman Capote ou William Faulkner [9] par son caractère abrupt, quasi grotesque, renforcé par l'enchaînement impétueux des quatre allitérations et l'emploi de monosyllabiques. Les sutures qui condamnent les lèvres de la mère au

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8 Dans « Photograph: Ice Storm, 1971 », Trethewey écrit au sujet d'une photo de famille, « why on the back has someone made a list / of our names, the date, the event: nothing / of what's inside – mother, stepfather's fist? » (*NG* 10). Le thème de la violence domestique est également abordé dans « What the Body can Say » et « What is Evidence ». Certains points reprisent passé et présent, mais certaines sutures réduisent au silence.

9 Trethewey fait directement référence à Faulkner dans « Pastoral » et « Miscegenation ».

silence et à l'oubli s'opposent aux « lignes » (« lines ») qui marquent le visage du père ; à la fois rides et vers, ces « lignes » sont également des fils reliés au présent de l'écriture. « Sutures » et « lignes » sont aussi fortement contrastées par leur « destination », comme l'indique l'anaphore de « toward » : alors que l'avenir de la mère est silencieux et scellé, celui du père est creusé par un chagrin sans bornes.

Dans « Southern Gothic », la violence du Sud n'est pas uniquement physique. L'ostracisme, l'oppression et le racisme dont sont victimes les Afro-Américains et les blancs qui les fréquentent apparaissent également :

> […] I have come home
> from the schoolyard with the words that shadow us
> in this small Southern town – *peckerwood* and *nigger*
> *lover*, *half-breed* and *zebra* – words that take shape
> outside us. We're huddled on the tiny island of bed, quiet
> in the language of blood […] (*NG* 40)

Les insultes sont « des mots qui prennent forme / hors de nous » (« words that take shape / outside us ») et sont différents de la « langue du sang », celle des échanges au sein de la famille mais également celle de la poésie. Dans « South », on l'a vu, Trethewey précise que l'appellation « half-breed » vise à faire d'elle un « crime », à la rendre hors-la-loi. Ici, les injures nées à « l'extérieur » (« outside ») tentent de faire d'elle une étrangère dans sa région, elles « l'assombrissent » (« shadow »), la stigmatisent, figent son identité à la marge de la société, et sont opposées, dans la cartographie du Sud qui se dessine au fil des poèmes, à « l'île minuscule du lit », c'est-à-dire au foyer, à l'espace où il lui est possible de se sentir chez elle. L'un des objectifs du projet poétique de *Native Guard* est de jeter des ponts entre la sphère de la « langue du sang » et le reste du Sud, de créer du lien là où se trouvent des fissures semblables aux enjambements entre « us » et « this small Southern town », « *nigger* » et « *lover* ».

Mais la brutalité du Sud est grande et elle est exprimée en des termes qui rappellent l'image de la maison perdue au milieu de la cour inondée dans « Providence » : « […] the house, unsteady / on its cinderblock haunches, sinking deeper / into the muck of ancestry […] » (*NG* 40). Cette fois, cependant, la maison ne flotte plus, elle s'enfonce (« sinking ») dans ce qui n'est plus de l'eau mais de la boue (« muck »), tandis que le vers se clôt sur un terme qui convoque le spectre de l'esclavage, « ancestry ». Le danger est double, mélange de violence directe (comme les insultes qui introduisent de l'étrangeté – les italiques – dans le corps du texte) et

indirecte puisque le foyer « sombre » dans la « boue des ancêtres », ceux dont l'histoire est obscure et vague. L'instant sur lequel se referme le poème est des plus incertains, puisqu'il est impossible de dire quelle valeur le temps accordera à ce souvenir et à ceux qui l'habitent : « […] Oil lamps flicker / around us – our shadows, dark glyphs on the wall, / bigger and stranger than we are » (*NG* 40). Les ombres tremblantes projetées sur les murs, disproportionnées et étranges, représentent des doubles monstrueux et des « glyphes obscurs », des inscriptions gravées et pour l'heure indéchiffrables. Les tropes gothiques sont ambivalents, puisque d'une part ils permettent d'exprimer l'inquiétude et le doute que ressent le sujet lyrique et que d'autre part ils mettent en perspective l'instant évoqué dans un cadre littéraire plus vaste. Trethewey inscrit le personnel dans le collectif, le passé dans le présent, le détail dans le général, tout en plaçant l'accent sur les coutures de ce patchwork pour éviter toute généralisation, réduction ou simplification.

Dans un entretien, Trethewey explique que c'est son intérêt pour « l'effacement historique » qui l'a incitée à écrire sur l'histoire du régiment des « Native Guards ». À la question « What intrigued you enough to write about the Native Guard series? », elle répond :

> That it was buried history, historical erasure. When I began to read about the Native Guards, what really got me was that their colonel had confiscated a diary from a Confederate in Louisiana and took it for his own and began to cross-write over what was there. That hit me as a perfect metaphor for what I was trying to say about our history of the South and of Americans; this cross-hatching a perfect intersection of North and South, black and white, that you can't separate. They also were about me, being a Southerner, wanting to write myself into history, wanting to be a recorder of another period. (Anderson)

Le motif du journal intime court dans la seconde section du recueil, centrée sur les « Native Guards ». Chaque poème est un fragment de ce journal. Afin de coudre ces extraits fictifs au corps du recueil, Trethewey répète le dernier vers de chaque entrée datée en tête de la suivante en la modifiant parfois légèrement de manière à créer une sorte de chiasme. Ainsi, la fin du texte daté de novembre 1962, « […] I now use ink / to keep record, a closed book, not the lure / of memory – flawed, changeful – that dulls the lash / for the master, sharpens it for the slave » (*NG* 25), est reprise au début de celui de décembre de la même année : « For the slave, having a master sharpens / the bend into work, the way the sergeant / moves us now to perfect batallion drill […] » (*NG* 25). Ces « intersections » formelles sont le reflet du croisement entre deux écritures (celle de l'ancien esclave et celle

du soldat confédéré) mais aussi entre histoire personnelle et histoire collective, véritable point de croix qui assure la continuité du récit et l'intégration des fragments dans le patchwork qu'est *Native Guard*. La notion d'intersection est particulièrement importante pour Trethewey :

> I've always been interested in the intersections between our personal or family history and public history. […] One of the places where I see an intersection has to do with how these stories belong to us. But there are some contingents between the public story and the personal story, and that usually happens in terms of what gets left out of the historical record. (Barnes Moffett)

L'image centrale de « Incident » est une croix qui se consume dans le jardin, « the cross trussed like a Christmas tree » (*NG* 41). Ce texte fait référence à un épisode de la vie de Trethewey à la fin des années 1960, lorsque des membres du Ku Klux Klan ont érigé puis brûlé une croix devant la maison familiale afin d'intimider les Trethewey et de manifester leur haine des couples mixtes. Ce poème est un pantoum de cinq quatrains : le deuxième et le quatrième vers d'une strophe sont donc repris par le premier et le troisième vers de la strophe suivante, le dernier vers du poème reprenant le vers initial. Cette forme permet de faire coexister des notions apparemment antinomiques, l'effroi et le traumatisme engendrés par ce spectacle, « We tell the story every year – / how we peered from the windows, shades drawn – […] » (*NG* 41), et la tentative de minimiser l'impact de cette expérience en la réduisant à sa dimension purement factuelle, « […] though nothing really happened, / the charred grass now green again […] » (*NG* 41). Cette ambivalence traduit le désarroi et l'incompréhension du sujet lyrique encore enfant, effet produit également par la référence au « sapin de Noël » pour décrire la croix et par la comparaison des membres du Ku Klux Klan à des anges, « a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns » (*NG* 41). Dans ce poème, tout comme dans « Southern Gothic », la menace est liée à l'espace extérieur, présenté ici sous deux jours différents. Lorsqu'il porte la marque de la haine humaine, le danger est immédiat ; face à lui, « The wicks trembled all night in their fonts of oil » (*NG* 41). Mais sa dimension naturelle est tout aussi dangereuse puisque l'espace recouvre le souvenir, éteint le feu de la mémoire : « the charred grass now green again ». En faisant débuter et se clore le poème par la même affirmation, « We tell the story every year », Trethewey énonce clairement son intention de lutter contre l'effacement historique. Le choix formel du pantoum participe intégralement de son projet :

> […] in this book, I used a lot of forms that had repetition or refrain, like the blues, the blues sonnet, or a pantoon, so that I could say the lines over and over again. It seemed to me that, in order to try to inscribe or to reinscribe what's been forgotten, I needed to say a thing and to say it again. And the repetition of form and poetry I thought was an elegant way to do that.[10]

C'est en effet avec élégance que Trethewey écrit pour réhabiliter ce qui a disparu des « registres historiques » et récupérer ce qui manque dans le paysage – une entreprise qui a d'autres implications spatiales.

Dans toutes les sections du recueil, les tropes liés aux notions de perte et d'oubli sont le vide et l'espace à combler. « Myth », consacré au décès de la mère de la poétesse, est constitué de six tercets en miroir, les trois derniers reprenant chaque vers des trois premières strophes, selon le principe du chiasme. Cette rigueur formelle permet de contenir l'émotion et de matérialiser sur la page la métaphore structurelle de l'interstice laissé par l'absence :

> I was asleep while you were dying.
> It's as if you slipped through some rift, a hollow
> I make between my slumber and my waking,
>
> the Erebus I keep you in, still trying
> not to let go. […] (*NG* 14)

L'être cher a été aspiré dans un gouffre, une « fissure » (« rift »), « un creux » (« hollow ») semblable à l'espace vide entre les deux tercets. La tentative désespérée du souvenir est d'abord exprimée par la référence à l'Erèbe, dieu grec des ténèbres et de l'obscurité changé en fleuve pour avoir aidé les Titans, et terme désignant la région transitoire des Enfers proche du monde des vivants. Elle est également rendue par l'illusion de contrôle du sujet lyrique, qui utilise la voix active (« I keep you in ») alors que cette région est hors de sa portée, comme le signifie l'enjambement « still trying / not to let go ». La voix poétique ne tente pas de combler l'espace vide pour recouvrir la perte de la mère ; au lieu de cela, elle joue sur le déplacement continuel du pronom « you » (ce que rend possible la disposition en miroir), sans parvenir pour autant à saisir le reflet fuyant, constamment menacé par le champ lexical de la disparition. Le poème se termine ainsi sur le même constat d'impuissance que celui qui constituait

10 « Pulitzer Prize Winner Trethewey Discusses Poetry Collection ».

son point de départ : « I was asleep while you were dying ». Cependant, une fois établie la métaphorisation de l'oubli comme un espace vide, plusieurs stratégies vont être mises en place dans le recueil pour inscrire la mémoire dans le paysage du Sud. Dans *Native Guard*, les références au besoin d'ériger des monuments commémoratifs sont nombreuses.

L'un des obstacles majeurs auxquels se trouve confrontée la poétesse est l'instabilité de la terre, de la nature du Sud. Quelques mois après que Trethewey eut rendu le manuscrit de *Native Guard* à son éditeur, l'ouragan Katrina frappa la côte nord-américaine du Golf du Mexique. Cette tragédie donne à certains poèmes du recueil, notamment à ceux inspirés par l'ouragan Camille, un sens plus littéral, et créent une nouvelle intersection entre l'histoire personnelle de Trethewey et celle de sa région. *Native Guard* est une élégie ainsi qu'un chant d'amour pour ce Sud sans cesse mis en péril. Chaque catastrophe rend plus urgente l'entreprise du souvenir et la décourage dans le même temps. Dans « Elegy for the Native Guards », le danger que fait planer la dimension naturelle de l'espace sur l'histoire est évoquée de manière directe lorsque les paroles du gardien assurant la visite du fort de Ship Island sont rapportées au style indirect : « […] He tells / of graves lost in the Gulf, the island split / in half when Hurricane Camille hit » (*NG* 44). Parallèlement à l'effacement de l'histoire, les faits sont sans cesse ré-écrits, qui plus est avec inexactitude. Avant de pouvoir ériger les marques du souvenir authentique, de combler le vide de l'oubli, il convient de dénoncer les fausses idoles, les artefacts qui bouchent, rapidement et dangereusement, les blancs laissés par l'histoire. Ainsi, dans la strophe où sont évoquées les tombes détruites par l'ouragan Camille, Trethewey mentionne le détour par la boutique de souvenirs qui a remplacé la visite du cimetière : « [He] shows us casemates, cannons, the store that sells / souvenirs, tokens of history long buried » (*NG* 44). Voir des morceaux artificiels d'histoire approximative (« souvenirs », « tokens ») remplacer les véritables réminiscences (« memories ») est un risque d'autant plus grand qu'il peut conduire à la réécriture d'un passé factice, comme l'évoque Trethewey dans « Southern History » :

> *Before the war, they were happy*, he said,
> quoting our textbook. (This was senior-year
>
> history class.) *The slaves were clothed, fed,*
> *and better off under a master's care*.
>
> I watched the words blur on the page. No one

raised a hand, disagreed. Not even me.

It was late; we still had Reconstruction
to cover before the test, and – luckily –

three hours of watching *Gone with the Wind*.
History, the teacher said, *of the old South* –

a true account of how things were back then. […] (*NG* 38)

L'adolescente reste silencieuse tandis que son professeur profite de l'absence de voix contradictoires pour déformer le passé et que, sous ses yeux, l'histoire devient floue. Ce phénomène que l'on pourrait qualifier de « blurring of history » est un trope récurrent de *Native Guard* et il semble bien que le moment narré dans « Southern History », cette incapacité à faire entendre sa voix face à la falsification du passé, appartienne à la genèse du projet mémoriel de *Native Guard*, au même titre que la perte de la mère et la visite du fort de Ship Island. Faire entendre les témoignages étouffés implique la mise en œuvre d'un véritable artisanat qui consiste non seulement à repriser le passé et le présent, mais aussi à détruire les cache-misères, à combler les interstices de l'oubli et à ériger des marqueurs de l'histoire qui incluent tous ceux qui l'ont faite, sans exception aucune :

The Daughters of the Confederacy
has placed a plaque here, at the fort's entrance –
each Confederate soldier's name raised hard
in bronze; no names carved for the Native Guards –
2nd Regiment, Union men, black phalanx.
What is monument to their legacy? (*NG* 44)

Dans ce sizain, l'espace alloué au souvenir des soldats confédérés blancs et à celui des « native guards » reproduit la reconnaissance inégale dont chacun a bénéficié. Le constat est si concis qu'il a presque valeur d'interdiction : « no names carved for the Native Guards ». L'individualisation marquée par le déterminant « each » ainsi que le rythme des trois premiers vers et de l'enjambement contrastent avec l'évocation saccadée et collective des soldats noirs, dont ne sont rappelés que les traits les plus objectifs, les plus impersonnels : « second Regiment », « Union men », « black phalanx ». Quant à la question à valeur d'interpellation posée en fin de strophe, « What is monument to their legacy? », procédé exceptionnel dans le recueil, elle semble apporter sa propre réponse puisque chaque poème constitue une pierre de l'édifice commémoratif que représente *Native Guard.* Comme

le dit Trethewey, « If we tell our stories, we might write ourselves into history » (Barnes Moffett).

« Monument » est à cet égard particulièrement emblématique. Le poème s'ouvre sur l'image du sujet lyrique en train d'observer des fourmis. Dès le premier quatrain, celles-ci incarnent l'artisanat de la mémoire de la parole poétique en unissant ses deux dimensions, à savoir le tissage et l'édification de « monuments » commémoratifs : « Today the ants are busy / beside my front steps, weaving / in and out of the hill they're building » (*NG* 43). Dans la deuxième strophe, les fourmis représentent plus que l'entreprise de rapiéçage et d'édification, plus que la métaphore de ce travail du souvenir, puisqu'elles deviennent de véritables réminiscences : « I watch them emerge and – // like everything I've forgotten – disappear / into the subterranean – a world made by displacement […] » (*NG* 43). Ces vers rappellent ceux de « Myth » et l'image de la mère conservée dans l'obscurité de l'Erèbe, mais ils y ajoutent la notion cruciale de « déplacement » (« displacement »). À la fin du second quatrain et au début du troisième, le sujet lyrique, qui n'a pas pris en charge ce travail de mémoire et reste passif devant le labeur des fourmis, est présenté comme un électron libre, un être sans amarres, à la dérive, trope que Trethewey utilise de façon récurrente pour parler de ceux qui ont été coupés de leur histoire : « […] In the cemetery / last June, I circled, lost – // […] the landscape blurred and waving » (*NG* 43). L'espace flou, brouillé, rappelle l'histoire approximative face à laquelle la poétesse était restée muette dans « Southern History », cette imprécision du souvenir qui menace l'identité du sujet ; cependant, dans « Monument », l'ajout du terme « waving » donne au paysage une connotation plus positive, comme si l'espace invitait le sujet lyrique à débuter les consolidations et le raccommodage de l'histoire autour de lui. Ce poème paraît dépeindre l'un des épisodes fondateurs de la mythologie du recueil, l'errance qui a précédé l'approfondissement du souvenir par l'écriture, tandis que les fourmis se chargent d'une autre signification, d'une autre intensité :

> […] At my mother's grave, ants streamed in
> and out like arteries, a tiny hill rising
>
> above her untended plot. […]
> […] I watched a long time
> the ant's determined work,
>
> how they brought up soil
> of which she will be part,
> and piled it before me. Believe me when I say
> I've tried not to degrudge them

> their industry, this reminder of what
> I haven't done. […] (*NG* 43)

Les fourmis sont la « langue du sang » mentionnée dans « Southern Gothic » ; leur fonction participe à la fois du domaine personnel, puisque les insectes raniment le souvenir de la mère, et du domaine public, puisqu'ils érigent une trace, édifient un « monument » commémoratif dans l'espace collectif qu'est le cimetière. Bien que l'exhumation du souvenir de la mère soit un événement douloureux, la peine du sujet, rendue plus vive encore par sa culpabilité, est l'étape fondatrice de l'exploration de la mémoire, à la fois privée et historique. Le glissement qui a cours à travers tout le poème finit par s'opérer entre les fourmis et le sujet lyrique, qui reçoit en sa chair la « langue du sang » : « […] Even now, / the mound is a blister on my heart, / a red and humming swarm » (*NG* 43). Ce déplacement symbolique de l'écriture poétique fait du sujet un gardien de la mémoire. Avec *Native Guard*, Trethewey contribue à préserver la pluralité du souvenir collectif et l'intensité des voix qui le composent en les tissant à l'espace du Sud.

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3. ESPACE ET TRADITION

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FORTITUDE IN FICTION BY FOUR SOUTHERN WOMEN NOVELISTS: MARY NOAILLES MURFREE, EDITH SUMMERS KELLEY, ELLEN GLASGOW AND ELIZABETH MADOX ROBERTS[1]

> To me, the meanest flower that blows can give
> thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.
> Wordsworth

The turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century abounds in fiction that deals with social and domestic life and reveals the struggle of individuals to escape the restrictions imposed on them by their environment. Mary Noailles Murfree, Edith Summers Kelley, Ellen Glasgow and Elizabeth Madox Roberts all drew upon their intimate knowledge and on their personal experiences to portray rural life from a sociological perspective.[2] My purpose is to point out the common features to be found in a selection of works by these four female writers: one short story, Murfree's "Drifting Down Lost Creek," included in her collection *In the Tennessee Mountains* (1884), and three novels, Kelley's *Weeds* (1923), Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1925) and Roberts's *The Time of Man* (1926).[3] I shall also study the intellectual, spiritual and emotional voyages of the protagonists, women who manage to overcome adversity and to reconcile with their environments.

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1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Elizabeth Madox Roberts Society Annual Conference in Harrodsburg, Kentucky, 18-20 April 2009.

2 Murfree was from Tennessee, Kelley and Roberts from Kentucky and Glasgow from Virginia.

3 References to these works will appear parenthetically in the body of the article, with the following abreviations: "Drifting Down Lost Creek" as DDLC, *Weeds* as *W*, *Barren Ground* as *BG*, and *The Time of Man* as *TM*.

The action of Murfree's "Drifting Down Lost Creek" is set in the remote mountains of East Tennessee. Cynthia Ware is in love with Evander Price, the blacksmith's apprentice. When he is wrongly accused of harboring stolen goods, his brother hits a deputy sheriff with a sledge hammer. In order to protect his brother, Evander pleads guilty and is sentenced to seven years in the valley penitentiary. Cynthia is the only one who believes in his innocence. She visits the wounded deputy to get his statement, each juror and even the governor. As far as she knows, all of this is to no avail. Then one day, long afterwards, a released convict returns from the valley and informs the mountaineers that Evander Price was pardoned and freed a year before. He is now married and has a job at the iron works. Cynthia accepts the order of things without bitterness, for she believes her life can be filled with humanitarian service to others.

Weeds focuses on Judy Pippinger, a bright tomboyish girl who dreams of owning a farm and who, unlike her two sisters, has no interest in domestic life; she enjoys doing farm chores and working with the animals. Although poverty and various hardships are part and parcel of her daily life, Judy's youth is a happy period that seems to herald a contented and productive adulthood. However, after she marries Jerry Blackford, a tenant boy, her exuberance and vitality soon ebb, because of repeated childbearing and the accumulation of financial problems (due among other things to drought, the death of their stock and the falling price of tobacco). In a desperate attempt at fighting off hopelessness, she engages in a brief extra-marital affair with an itinerant minister which results in unwanted pregnancy. After she almost dies from a self-induced abortion, she determines to exert control over her life and body and makes her peace with herself.

When *Barren Ground* opens, twenty-year-old Dorinda Oakley is clerking at a general store in her rural community, waiting for life to happen. The arrival of Jason Greylock, a young doctor just returned to the area to care for his alcoholic father, seems to fulfill her expectations. They engage in a relationship but a few days before their wedding he marries another woman. Dorinda, disenchanted with romantic love and pregnant, leaves Virginia for New York. There, she is involved in a traffic accident and has a miscarriage; the doctor who attends to her injuries offers her a job in her office. After two years in the city, Dorinda returns to Pedlar's Mill with loaned capital and scientific know-how, determined to restore the family farm to fertility.

When the reader first meets Ellen in *The Time of Man*, she is traveling in a wagon with her parents, who are looking both for work as tenant farmers and for a place to live. Their spirit is broken because of years of suffering and deprivation and they have little hope left. Ellen, by contrast, has the hopeful aspirations of youth and a highly developed imagination, and she foresees great possibilities – a clean house to live in, pretty clothes to wear and books to read. However, she is confronted to the harsh realities of a tenant's life. She eventually finds peace by marrying Jasper Kent, a young tenant farmer. They work in various miserable places, but the situation deteriorates steadily. At the end of the novel, Ellen, in her late thirties, is on her way with her husband and their five children to find yet another place to live and work.

These plot summaries emphasize the hardships that these rural women are confronted to and against which they have to struggle, but it is not the only point they have in common. Indeed, a close study of the short story and the three novels reveals that the characters all have an affinity with nature and the cyclic patterns of life; they love their land, homes and families, nurture and sustain their communities and cultures, find solace in everyday tasks and the small pleasures of life, and survive their desperate condition. They all experience loneliness, loss and separation, and struggle against the subservient role the patriarchal system tries to maintain them in. Their conducts always go against the established rules of society, but it is precisely what enables them to become aware of who they are and where they stand, and from there to let beauty and order emerge in their lives.

All through their lives, Murfree, Kelley, Glasgow and Roberts suffered from a feeling of alienation that was probably due to a natural penchant for melancholy exacerbated by a miserable physical condition – permanent lameness for Murfree, frailty and an overall feeling of ill-being for Kelley, hearing problems for Glasgow and painful migraines for Roberts. As a result, they felt excluded from the rest of the world and sought refuge within themselves. All four knew from childhood that they would become writers and started sketching poems and inventing stories at an early age. They were intelligent and well-read; Murfree, Kelley and Roberts held college degrees, and Glasgow was largely self-taught. As intellectual and artistic women, they were aware of the literary currents of their time and of the social changes that were taking place, in particular where women were concerned.

Neither the plantation legend nor the domestic novel depicted the life of women realistically; as for regional fiction, it exposed the negative aspects of rural life – violence, brutality, lust, immorality, degeneration resulting from inbreeding, incest and illegitimacy – and emphasized female victimization. Progressively, however, the defeated female characters who submitted to their fate were replaced by enduring, proud and lively women with an indomitable spirit. Personal sacrifice did remain a major feature of their lives, but their relationships with their families and their inner lives highlighted their admirable qualities. The shift was hastened by the popularity of "soil novels" such as Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Ántonia* (1918), with their conquering, poetic heroines. Murfree, Kelley, Glasgow and Roberts also wrote so-called "agrarian" pieces, but with a view to indicting the social order that brutally exploited both the land and the people.

Mary Noailles Murfree came from a distinguished family in Tennessee. At the age of five, she contracted a fever that left her lame, an affliction which set her apart and developed her interest in books and sense of observation. During the family vacations in the Cumberland Mountains, she had the opportunity to learn about the lifestyles and mannerisms of the mountain folks. In her fiction, her rough, unlettered mountain characters have a level of dignity and pride based on self-sufficiency that is unmatched by their sophisticated urban counterparts. The titles of her numerous works usually refer to the landscape, and she invariably begins her narratives with long descriptions of the environment.

Edith Summers Kelley participated in the exciting social and intellectual life of Greenwich Village. After her first marriage ended, she lived for fifty years with Fred Kelley, an artist and a farmer. They moved to Scott County, Kentucky, where they managed a tobacco farm. When that experiment failed, they tried operating a boarding house in New Jersey and then raising chickens in California, but life never got easier. Kelley felt that her task was to write realistic fiction about ordinary working-class people and refused to be one of those "purveyors of roseate fiction" (*W* 120) whose romances "abounded in beautiful heroines with delicate hands that had never approached a dish rag or a hoe handle" (*W* 131). In *Weeds*, she fictionalized her first-hand understanding of the effects of poverty and uncontrolled childbearing. She was convinced that birth control was the only way for women to lead decent lives; the title itself suggests that unwanted children are like weeds in the lives of poor rural women. The subversive dimension of the novel did not

escape Harcourt and Brace, who agreed to publish the book only if the entire chapter on childbirth was deleted.

Ellen Glasgow first realized the plight of being a woman by looking at her mother's life, who bore thirteen children and silently endured her husband's unfaithfulness. Like Murfree and Roberts, she was emotionally and physically fragile as a child and read widely in her father's library. The successive deaths of beloved family members and friends, as well as that of the married man whom she met secretly for five years, accentuated her feeling of loneliness. Her relationship with a brilliant Richmond lawyer ended in bitterness and disappointment. Through all these trials, writing provided her with an outlet.

Elizabeth Madox Roberts's slow progression stems from a relentless personal effort that left little room for 20th-century literary innovation. She felt estranged from her contemporaries and that she had nothing to do with what she called the "flourishing cults in recent American letters."[4] She had planned to be a school teacher but her frail health prevented her from working on a regular basis. In 1915, her family and friends were surprised when she published two successive volumes of poems. In 1917, she enrolled at the University of Chicago to study English philosophy, an experience which encouraged her to continue writing in spite of her declining health. When she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, she determined to devote herself entirely to writing. Her first novel among seven, *The Time of Man*, was published in 1926 when she was 45 years old.

All four writers are far from being feminists in any political sense, yet their attitudes are liberal and challenging in so far as they deal realistically with female issues such as gender roles, domesticity, motherhood, and heterosexual relationships. What they most obviously have in common is their close, almost mythic relationship with the natural world – what Adrienne Rich calls "[the] power to bond with the natural order and the corporeal ground of women's intelligence" (21). Murfree proves profoundly attached to the beauty of her Tennessee mountains, which embody simple and noble virtues that contrast with the urban world, full of complexities and false attitudes. Kelley focuses on the urge to leave the city for a quieter life, closer to nature. For Roberts, love for her native State and the enchantment of

4 *The Elizabeth Madox Roberts Papers*. Henceforth in the text as EMRP.

nature are constant sources of joy. As for Glasgow, she believed in the regenerating powers of nature to find peace and serenity.

It may seem odd that Ellen Glasgow, a Virginian lady, should have chosen poor-white women as the heroines of some of her novels. But in fact her own "vein of iron" made her rebel against Southern sentimentality and condemn the sugary philosophy of a Thomas Nelson Page. Moreover, all her life she sided with the underdog. Using poor whites in fiction as the obvious contrast for the ruling class of Virginia was an effective means of criticizing the social order about her and of arguing in favor of social justice. The careful research (historical, sociological, geographical) she put into the writing of her novels is palpable in the opening pages of *Barren Ground*, with the description of the tenant system which came into being after the breaking up of the plantation system. That part of Virginia has thus become the "barren ground" of the title, the tangible proof of the stupidity, laziness and ignorance of men. The situation takes on a larger, universal dimension as Dorinda reflects, "That's what life is for most people, I reckon […]. Just barren ground where they have to struggle to make anything grow" (*BG* 150).

The fight that any individual must put up if he/she is to obtain a measure of success in his/her endeavors is a recurrent theme in the fiction of the four authors under study. What sustains all their female characters is their relation to nature. In the following passage from "Drifting Down Lost Creek," Cynthia gains strength from the beautiful scenery and the majestic mountains:

> They were weary hours before she came upon Lost Creek, loitering down the sunlit valley to vanish in the grewsome caverns beneath the range. The sumach leaves were crimsoning along its banks. The scarlet-oak emblazoned the mountain side. Above the encompassing heights the sky was blue, and the mountain air tasted like wine. Never a crag or chasm so sombre but flaunted some swaying vine or long tendriled moss, gilded and gleaming yellow. […] There [Pine Mountain] stood, solemn, majestic, mysterious, masked by its impenetrable growth, and hung about with duskier shadow wherever a ravine indented the slope. The spirit within it was chanting softly, softly. For the moment she felt the supreme exultation of the mountains. It lifted her heart. (DDLC 59-60)

Similarly, Kelley's protagonist finds well-being and spiritual content out of doors:

> She had always disliked the inside of houses. The gloom of little-windowed rooms, the dead chill or the heavy heat as the fires smouldered or blazed, the prim, set look of tables and cupboards that always stood in the same places engaged in the never-ending occupation of collecting dust above and beneath: these things stifled and depressed her. She was always glad to escape into the open where there was light, life, and motion and the sun and the wind kept things clean. (*W* 116)

Murfree's heroines are often described in terms that link them with the Arcadian ideal. The places where they live are of Edenic simplicity and could be compared to pastoral reservations, as this passage from "Drifting Down Lost Creek" shows:

> The wild grapes were blooming. Their fragrance, so delicate yet so pervasive, suggested some exquisite unseen presence – the dryads were surely abroad! The beech-trees stretched down their silver branches and green shadows. Through rifts in the foliage shimmered glimpses of a vast array of sunny parallel mountains, converging and converging, till they seemed to meet far away in one long, level line, so ideally blue that it looked less like earth than heaven. (DDLC 6-7)

Whereas Murfree merely argues that mountain life should be protected against industrialization and modernity, Kelley, Glasgow and Roberts take into account the economic factors that affect their characters' lives (though Roberts's scope is more limited, as she only focuses on the economic plight of tenants in the tobacco country of Kentucky). The inclusion of a domain in which, traditionally, only men have any expertise has repercussions on the characterization and the plot. Whereas Murfree's women are not in conflict with male figures of authority and merely exhibit individuality, courage and strength in the face of male indifference and criticism, the other three authors' heroines are involved in much more active fights; they therefore display a psychological depth and experience a complexity of suffering that Murfree's characters never go through. This is not to say that Murfree's understanding of human nature is less complete than that of Kelley, Glasgow and Roberts, for Murfree is just as committed as they are to a truthful and realistic depiction of the living conditions of women. All of them insist, each in her own way, that women must retain their faith, fortitude and dignity in the face of adverse circumstances. It thus appears that a closely knit relationship, based on admiration and love, binds the writers to their heroines.

The writers' personalities reverberate upon their artistic vision and find their expression in the choice and arrangement of words which best convey their ideas and intentions. Although each author has a distinctive style, they are very much products of their time; hence the classicism which pervades the books and the particular attention paid to the structure and logical organization of the narratives. In the four texts, the selection of images and symbols is decisive in the achievement of coherence and credibility and in the emphasis laid on the characters' symbiosis with nature.

In *The Time of Man*, for instance, Roberts strives to achieve "a common level of impression and reverie" (EMRP) as well as a shift in the character's perceptions of the world around her as she gets older. In her papers, she explains her design as follows: "As the book moves forward and the woman passes into mature life, the impressionism is replaced by contemplation. The sentences become longer and the sweep of the movement should touch the mind with more deliberation" (EMRP). Roberts is primarily interested in the way events and situations impinge upon her heroine's consciousness. This results in the extended treatment of events whose importance in the plot is negligible but whose psychological impact is significant. It also accounts for the fact that *The Time of Man* is more poetic and its background less harshly sordid than *Weeds,* for example. In order to convey Ellen's "hyper-sensitivity," to use Bessie C. Alvah's word (270), Roberts includes the episodes and elements which stimulate the child's imagination – the brawls, thieving escapades, yarn-telling, strange books, and marvelous sights. She also presents Kentuckian habits, speech and local folklore through specific dialect, songs and child speech. For example, when the Chessers move to Wakefield's farm, the gloom surrounding the family as they wait for the wagon metamorphoses into gaiety with the description of the "lilt" of the horses as they "jogged gaily" and "slopped merrily" through puddles, while "something about the wagon jingled" (*TM* 71). The musicality of the alliterations and assonances suggests cheerfulness and a carefree attitude to life.

Ellen Glasgow's use of rhythm in *Barren Ground* is slightly different, as she resorts to it mainly to emphasize the uselessness of man's attempts at leaving his mark on nature:

> Spring after spring, the cultivated ground appeared to shrink into the old fields, where scrub pine or oak succeeded broomsedge and sassafras as inevitably as autumn slipped into winter […]. Then, the forlorn roads, deep in mud, and the surrounding air of failure, which was as inescapable as drought, combined with the cutworm, the locust, and the tobacco-fly against the human invader. (*BG* 4)

As the novel progresses toward its end and Dorinda's bond with the land gains strength, the sense of never-ending doom and destruction gives way to more positive images. The cyclical pattern of the seasons becomes associated with the various phases of farming and its life-affirming nature is stressed: "While the soil endured, while the seasons bloomed and dropped, while the ancient, beneficent ritual of sowing and reaping moved in the fields […], she could never despair of contentment" (*BG* 408). The pastoral

landscape comes to represent a poetic metaphor for Dorinda's state of mind; her longing for a lost harmony, simplicity, stability and beauty is fulfilled at last: "The land which she had forgotten was waiting to take her back to its heart. Endurance. Fortitude. The spirit of the land was flowing into her, and her own spirit, strengthened and refreshed, was flowing out again toward life" (*BG* 408). In Tonette Bond's words, "Dorinda is invested with the artistic vision and the stamina to remake her world in the image of the mind's most ancient dream of perfection, the pastoral paradise" (565).

The pattern of spiritual death and rebirth on which *Barren Ground* is built is also recognizable in Murfree's story. She, too, uses the metaphor of the current to refer to the course of life:

> At length [Evander] was gone, and forever, and Cynthia's heart adjusted itself anew. Sometimes, to be sure, it seems to her that the years of her life are like the floating leaves drifting down Lost Creek, valueless and purposeless, and vaguely vanishing in the mountains. Then she remembers that the sequestered subterranean current is charged with its own inscrutable, imperative mission, and she ceases to question and regret, and bravely does the work nearest her hand, and has glimpses of its influence in the widening lives of others, and finds in these a placid content. (DDLC 78-79)

The heroine's sense of alienation and her ensuing psychological crisis have eventually opened onto her integration into the world – an adjustment that was made possible thanks to her instinctive understanding of nature.

Although these stories are all stamped with a definite sense of place – Tennessee, Virginia, Kentucky – they attain a universal dimension thanks to the female characters they portray. One can but agree with Wayne Lesser's statement in an essay on Glasgow that "We are encouraged to […] elevate Dorinda into a symbolic character who represents the universal principles of self-discovery and self-assertion at the core of both the human and aesthetic experience" (19) – an assertion that can easily be extended to Cynthia, Judy and Ellen. All four characters strive toward beauty and harmony and meet the obstacles on their paths with courage, fortitude and dignity, so that in the end they rescue life out of daily mediocrity and achieve serenity. The course of their lives is strongly reminiscent of those of their creators, though in their case solace and peace came mostly from the writing process – and only to a lesser degree from nature. In their fiction, Murfree, Kelley, Glasgow and Roberts provide an insight into the existences of women living in poverty-stricken rural areas at the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth

century which transcends traditional perceptions and descriptions, and prove that female strength and fortitude go a long way.

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A WORLD IN A BLOCK OF WOOD: HARRIETTE ARNOW'S *THE DOLLMAKER*

> O waste of loss, in the hot mazes, lost, among bright stars on this most weary unbright cinder, lost!
>
> Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* (2)

The third and most famous in Kentuckian Harriette Arnow's series of novels on mountain life, *The Dollmaker*[1] (1954) is about the end of the traditional hill communities of the Appalachians caused by the migration of the farmers to Northern industrial areas. As its original title, *Dissolution*, suggested, it also explores the suffering experienced by the migrants, focusing on the Nevels, a mountain family, who move to Detroit during World War II. Although homesick Gertie manages to preserve an "inner South" in her daily activities, the home space that she tries to maintain undergoes a process of devastation: she loses domestic competence and the city claims those she loves. In her introduction to *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation*, Doris Betts comments that many Southern women authors show the world from what she calls "the smaller 'woman's place' still located within them." "Larger issues of race, poverty, politics, violence and religion are often viewed from parlor windows," writes Betts, citing Shirley Ann Grau's *The Keepers of the House*, "or in the end brought home by a mob that invades home property" (Betts 4). In *The Dollmaker*, all the changes are viewed from a "woman's place" – through Gertie's eyes; they invade her private space and, in the end, Detroit seems to break down the meager defenses she has put up by her constant care. With its simple style and its focus on the home, *The Dollmaker* can be seen as a variation

1 All references to the novel will be to the Perennial edition published in 2003.

on what Ann Romines has called "the home plot," or the Hestian narrative, after Hestia, the goddess of the hearth – stories of housekeeping and domestic ritual (Romines 9, 107).[2]

In this paper, I will show through a few examples the pertinence of the Hestian form to communicate Gertie's feeling of having been uprooted from the South. The laying to waste of her domestic sphere reveals a degradation of the values by which she used to abide. When Gertie destroys the block of cherry wood she has been carving, she also destroys the last token of a world in which harmony was attainable by her competence, a reminder of the spiritual dimension accessible to her in the South; she thereby makes the destruction of her inner space complete. However, if we consider the Hestian vision which informs the novel, we need not read Gertie's losses as morally annihilating.

"Faculty" in Kentucky

In the backhills of Kentucky, Gertie, a sharecropper and mother of five, has what nineteenth-century American housekeepers called "faculty," the domestic competence to manage the endless rounds of cooking, cleaning, sewing, pickling and preserving, as well as tending to animals, fields, and children. Up at the crack of dawn every morning, Gertie communes with nature while fetching water from the spring, and in the "little rattletrap renter's shanty" where they live, she enjoys "the goodness of wakening to the stars or the night sound of rain on the shake roof" (*TD* 74). Her connection with the environment gives her satisfaction in her daily tasks, which she accomplishes with ease. Domestic rituals and objects, such as her grandmother's old cedar bucket, provide her with a sense of community and continuity. Arnow shows Gertie's life to be not dull routine; she is able to experience renewed delight every time she sees the beauty of her familiar surroundings: "[S]he stopped and shifted the bucket to her other hand, looking straight above her through the pine branches to the stars. Little of the blue-black sky could be seen, and the pine boughs were mixed

2 Some of the texts Romines studies are Sarah Orne Jewett's *Deephaven* (1877) and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), and Eudora Welty's "Circe" (*The Bride of Innisfallen*, 1955).

in with the stars, as if the trees carried stars instead of cones. A pine tree was a pretty thing" (*TD* 75).

Gertie combines the talents of a teacher (she educates her children, the schools having shut because of the war) and those of a surgeon (she practices an emergency tracheotomy on her three-year-old), and is an excellent manager as well: from the sale of her produce, and from money left to her by her brother Henley, who has died in the war, she has hoarded enough cash to buy a farm, the Tipton Place. She does not tell her husband Clovis about her ownership plans: he would just buy a truck. Overjoyed, she mentally compares herself to the virtuous woman of the biblical proverbs [31:16]: "She considereth a field and buyeth it; with the fruit of her own hands she planteth a vineyard" (*TD* 107). Another of Gertie's talents is whittling. She has been saving one great block of cherry wood for a long time. The whorls in the grain have made her youngest daughter, Cassie, imagine that a girl with long hair, Callie Lou, lives in the wood; as for Gertie, she thinks she might bring out a Judas figure seeking to give back the money he made by betraying Christ. But when she inherits her brother's money she decides that she will carve a Christ she has seen "walken over th hill – he jist looked like a good-turned man" (*TD* 71 *[sic]*); it will be "the laughing Christ, a Christ for Henley" (*TD* 76). Gertie is confident she will finish this Christ her brother would have loved when she is settled on her farm.

Gertie is not the stereotypical perfect housekeeper. She makes people stare because she is "a huge and ugly woman, flat-cheeked, straight-lipped" (*TD* 147), "large beyond any woman most had ever seen" (*TD* 23); for all her competence as a housewife, she feels "smothered" in most houses (*TD* 99). Her size and features, as well as her masculine hobby, complexify her character and suggest not an earth-mother type but what Patricia Yaeger would call a "Southern gargantua," a character giving the reader "hyperbolic visions of the systemic crises within [the] heroine's social milieu" (Yaeger 127)[3]; her unwieldy bulk conveys the drama of regional devastation in the Appalachians during World War II and the displacement of entire

3 In "Beyond the Hummingbird," Yaeger centers on gender and race relations, but she points to a bloated body in Welty's "A Memory" which is central to *A Curtain of Green*'s dramatization of the defamiliarization of the American dream during the Great Depression (Yaeger 137-138). This is similar to the context of impoverishment in *The Dollmaker*.

populations to the North. As Mary Billips Turner has shown in "The Demise of Mountain Life: Harriette Arnow's Analysis," the Nevels could not have lived on long as farmers in Kentucky. Gertie's size may also point to the monstrous imposition that she will not try to fight—a woman must do her husband's bidding, for his honor's sake. Gertie may be bigger and stronger than most men, but she has never openly defied her mother or her husband. Her submissiveness will cost her her farm and her attuned competence.

Gertie buys her "little piece of heaven right here on earth" (*TD* 71) while her husband is away working in a factory in Detroit. However, before she and the children even move in, her mother, a religious zealot, convinces the owner and Gertie to undo their deal, arguing that Clovis would not want Gertie to spend all their money on a farm, and to "leave all else and cleave to [her] husband," as the Bible teaches, to prevent "th whole country a talken about [her]" (*TD* 135-136). Gertie and the children must follow him to Detroit. Gertie appears to relinquish her dream of independence on her own farm instantly, along with her hope of carving a benevolent Christ: "It came to her that maybe she had always known those other trees would never be her own […] just as she had always known that Christ would never come out of the cherry wood" (*TD* 139). But the farm and the figure in the wood will remain strong presences in Detroit, sustaining Gertie in her trials.

Dislocation in Detroit

Harriette Arnow, who moved from Kentucky to a Detroit housing project with her family in 1945, said *The Dollmaker* had its roots in a housekeeper's considerations – imagining what a hillswoman would experience on arriving North: using new appliances, coping with electricity or gas instead of wood or coal, besides seeking to understand a nearly foreign form of English (Chung 266). Gertie does not acclimatize to the city, and Arnow, following the pattern of a true Hestian tale, shows her degradation through her loss of "faculty": in Detroit, her children no longer see her as a knowledgeable mother and she is no longer an able homemaker. Now Gertie admires, but cannot rival with, women like Mrs. Schultz, "the best housekeeper in the alley," who with five children manages her own sewing, marketing and cooking perfectly well (*TD* 395). In the tiny, flimsy house Clovis was lucky to obtain for them, Gertie's more adjusted children now

"sass" her, call her "stingy" when she will not allow them to go to the movies and tease her when she is cheated by tradesmen. To quote one exchange:

> Enoch cried, disgust and derision in his tone, "Mom's tryen to feed us rotten bananas." "She didn't know they was rotten," Clovis said with some sharpness, and then in a kinder tone toward Gertie's discouraged back: "But, Gert, you've got to watch what you buy. That sandwich meat you put in my lunch hardly had th taste a meat. More like corn meal an taters mashed an colored to look like meat." (*TD* 350)

The eldest boy, Reuben, goes missing. Gertie blames herself for not helping the child adapt to Detroit. The miseries she has already experienced there have left their mark on her self-esteem, and she links her deficiency as a mother to her deficiency as a buyer: "She could raise bushels of sweet potatoes, fatten a pig, kill it, and make good sausage meat, but she didn't know how to buy. She could born a fine and laughing boy baby and make him grow up big and strong, but inside him all his laughter died" (*TD* 351). Gertie also suffers from a loss of authority. She "keeps shut" because she feels she has no identity as a housewife in Detroit; although her husband does not want her to work in a factory, she attributes the fact that he speaks to her "as if she were a mule to be ordered around" to her lack of earning power. "It wasn't the way it had used to be back home when she had done her share, maybe more than her share of feeding and fending for the family […]. Here everything, even to the kindling wood, came from Clovis" (*TD* 339-340).

Arnow portrays Gertie as struggling daily to see that the family's basic needs are met, no matter how shaken she may be by devastating punctual events: Reuben runs away, her daughter Cassie is killed by a train, and her husband takes part in strikes. Yet household realities are never forgotten. When strikes are discussed at the table, Gertie worries because milk is fast becoming a luxury; while she is having a breakdown after her youngest daughter's death, a neighbor reminds her that laundry must be washed. This aspect has led one commentator, Glenda Hobbs, to complain that the reader feels inundated with trivial information on budgets and meals: "While repeatedly documenting these facts of Gertie's life makes vivid her daily trials and failures, the reader may crave a more structured, foreshortened vision of Gertie's world rather than a recreation of it" (Hobbs 179). Yet the insistence on the recurrence of daily needs and on domestic rituals is not a defect in *The Dollmaker* – it is the mode in which the book is written. Arnow thus ensures that the reader never forgets how uncomfortable Gertie's "woman's place" has become, in spite of her best efforts. To be fair,

all fictional texts are repetitive, for this contributes to their construction (Todorov 42); but Arnow seldom gives us a foreshortened vision of Gertie's world, to use Hobbs's term. On the contrary, by repeating the details and the new elements that enter Gertie's troubled consciousness as she goes about her day's work and sits at her nightly whittling, the author deepens the perspective on Gertie's sense of loss.

The Nevels encounter prejudice on arriving in Detroit – "hillbillies" are held responsible for overcrowding and competition for jobs. Their Catholic neighbors treat them with arrogance and Gertie's husband and friends report their abuse in the factory; everywhere, the insult "commie" is bandied. Gertie also learns about social conditions and realizes that factory workers do not make as good a living as Clovis had indicated and must labor strenuously in an automated, taylorized, and dangerous workplace. The men talk of unions, informants, lost jobs, union men getting beaten up before strikes. So as not to be labeled a scab, Clovis must go on factory walk-outs, wildcat strikes, and finally on a major strike, modelled on the General Motors strike of 1945. News of the war is regularly relayed in their homes and alley; although Gertie's family and neighbours are almost oblivious to international affairs, they are anxious about losing their jobs after the war. Thus VE-day and what Gertie hears about the two atom bombs dropped on Japan bring very personal concerns: how to make a living for her family with Clovis out of work.

In this way, a picture of the outside world is provided "from the hearth." It sends Gertie back to Ballew and the Tipton Place all the more often in spirit as the malevolence of the North has been suggested repeatedly from the first step she took in Detroit. In teeming Merry Hill, set between rattling trains carrying "monstrous" tanks, a roaring foundry glowing red like "a piece of hell," and the "bone-shattering" screech of planes taking off from the nearby airport (*TD* 162-163), the all-consuming sterility of industrialism is epitomized by the Nevels' Icy Heart refrigerator, which ruins the vegetables. At the end of the novel, we see the family, silent at the table, eating another scant strikers' meal. To Gertie, Detroit is like a "many-voiced beast out there, hungry, waiting for them all" (*TD* 577).

Visions of Kentucky: An Ambivalent Alternative Space

In "'Adjustments an What It Means': The Tragedy of Space in *The Dollmaker*," Roger Cunningham makes a compelling study of the cramped, confusing spaces in Detroit which show Gertie's disorientation. Yet Cunningham does not mention the added dimension of the imaginary South that opens up to her in her misery. The South is like a phantom limb to Gertie, who mistakenly rises to milk the cow in the train going North and can remember the soft earth of home under her feet when she walks on the cement of the alley. Arnow shows Kentucky superimposing itself on the housing project at different times of the day:

> The steamy, nasty smell of the drying, half rotten reused wool mingled with the gas smell, the chlorine water smell, the supper-getting smell, and became one smell, a stink telling her it was the time of day she had learned to hate most. The time she had loved back home […].
> Stooping over the too low gas stove, frying strange fish […], she saw herself back home. The red ball of the winter's sun was going down behind the hills across the river. The cedar trees above the creek whispered among themselves in a rising night wind. The new milk was cooling on the porch shelf […]. She was cutting up the soap she'd made that day from the guts of her big fattened hog. (*TD* 261)

After a year in Detroit, she still escapes back to a Ballew where no harm has come to any of them: "She thought of hills and of home where the yellow poplar leaves would be drifted knee-deep on the ridge sides; the children, Cassie among them, would come running home from school, for with the war over there was school" (*TD* 564).

At first, the prospect of a return to Kentucky and to farming is always on Gertie's mind, and all the money she manages to hoard is thought of in terms of what it will buy there – simply outfitting the children for winter costs her her livestock. She does carving work for neighbors with Ballew in mind: "she would save the crucifix money; fifteen dollars would buy a sow" (*TD* 270). But as time passes, she realizes the plan is unworkable: "They couldn't live back home unless she farmed – at least a little. If they went back in the late summer or fall, they'd starve […]. Another year – a whole year in this place" (*TD* 378). When her youngest daughter is run over by a train, Gertie, distraught with grief, yields up all her savings from her secret pocket, expecting Clovis to take them all home to Ballew to bury Cassie in the family graveyard. But the police and undertakers divide all the money between themselves, and the Nevels cannot afford to go back. Still Gertie thinks in terms of Kentucky: when Clovis is on strike, she reckons she owes

the grocer close to a hundred dollars, "more than she had got back home for both Dock and Betsy," her mule and cow (*TD* 558-559).

Gertie's feeling of loss in Detroit is thus forcefully conveyed through details of housekeeping. Moreover, as well as a dissolution of Gertie's erstwhile authority upon her children, Arnow shows there is little satisfaction to be gained from married life. On moving to the city it has become an effort for her not to quarrel with Clovis: she "[tries] not to remember, as always, and hold it against him, that it was he who made her live like this" (*TD* 263). The bitterest blow comes when Clovis takes to telling Gertie he is sure she could have bought the Tipton Place and elaborates on how happy they would have been there, basking in the happy fantasy as things get worse. Gertie never tells him she had the farm and gave it up, but the loss festers: none of their troubles would have occurred, then. By turns blaming her husband and blaming herself for not standing up to her mother and Clovis, she comes to realize that by not fighting for her dream of a homestead in Ballew she has, to use her expression, sold "th birthright fer th mess a pottage": "'I guess', she said, speaking with difficulty, thinking of the Tipton Place with Cassie, 'we all sell our own – but allus it's easier to say somebody stole it" (*TD* 440). The reader must imbue Gertie's imaginary returns to the South with a remorse that compounds the pain brought by a disorienting reality. She oscillates between her fantasies and the realization of the present desolation: "If she tore herself from Cassie, there was Reuben waiting, and if from Reuben, the lost land called, and then became a lost life with lost children" (*TD* 460). A barren space is left within her by the long-desired farm and the two children who were so like her. The alternative South Gertie can conjure up within herself is not reliable as a restorative space. Arnow suggests that it can be an accusatory reminder that she is not blessed as is the woman in the biblical proverbs, that the Gertie who planned "to plant her own vines, set her own trees, and know that come thirty years from now she'd gather fruit from the trees and grapes from the vines" (*TD* 107) has been found lacking – by herself. Gertie is devastated by this realization as well as by an awareness of her family's moral decline; but the block of cherry wood functions as another link to her foundations, one which sustains her when she most needs it.

The Block of Wood: A Restorative Space

Throughout the novel, Gertie's progress on the block of cherry wood is mentioned repeatedly, along with her new home craft of making dolls to sell in the neighborhood. Her husband has set her to work, cutting cheap dolls with a jigsaw and pretending that they are hand-carved. He begrudges every moment she spends carving details on crucifixes or toys others pay her to make, so she works on her cherry wood at night. The block of wood dates from a time when Gertie was satisfied, competent and hopeful. In its origin, beauty, and the quality of work Gertie puts into it, it effectively represents her losses, as has often been pointed out. Linda Wagner-Martin has said: "[Gertie] finds it impossible to forget her beloved hills and farmlands (her whittling is one means back to that life)" (82), and Kathleen Walsh has remarked that "The carving is an incarnation of Gertie's regret […], the wood a tactile remnant of Kentucky and also a reminder of Cassie" (197). The cherry is associated with the community in Ballew who used to make locks out of the hard wood ("She's too fine fer door locks, th old man said to Granpa, such fine wild cherry wood" *TD* 43). It is also a reminder of their past contact with nature, of nights and mornings spent looking at familiar stars (*TD* 75), a token of lost purity and natural piety in a city where "there [are] no stars" and where even the birds are "ugly-voiced and dirty looking" (*TD* 204, 271).

The Christ/Judas duality of the figure she carves finds a parallel in Gertie: she has been the virtuous woman of the Proverbs, faithful to the Lord and blessed in turn; conversely, she sees herself as the betrayer of her own children, for she feels that she might have prevented Cassie's accident and Reuben's departure. Making the wood into Christ was a sign of hope, when she was self-sufficient and confident she would provide for her household well; turning it into Judas is a sign of discouragement, most of all with herself. For much of the novel, then, the block of wood serves as a correlative of Gertie's inner world, and her Judas bowed down with grief confirms an unhappiness which Arnow shows in direct ways in the novel. Nevertheless, working with the wood is a great comfort to Gertie, and she turns to it with fingers itching whenever she is troubled. The block of cherry wood, her only remaining memento of the South, seems to open up a fully restorative space, especially when Gertie starts having doubts about her family's values. She and the boys now peddle cheap machine-made dolls, claiming they are hand-made and the toxic paint is safe for babies. Her

eldest daughter has soon adapted to city ways and now laughs about men who are "wolves." Her husband, who has taken part in union-related beatings, is consumed with hatred and a desire to take personal vengeance on an Italian assailant should their paths ever cross. Their moral dissolution, a further effect of their displacement, causes Gertie pangs that working on the cherry wood abates: "she could find cleanliness and strength and truth, too, seemed like in […] the man in the wood" (*TD* 521); "…the sneaking, the hiding, the fear. She felt clean working on the block of wood" (*TD* 543). The Hestian viewpoint should be borne in mind when considering the restorative aspect of her carving: Arnow does not imply that art can elevate the soul by virtue of an abstract truth or beauty, but that Gertie's obsession with a motif and her longing to return to her knife are artistic traits that are enriched by her organic, affective and spiritual appreciation of the cherry wood. Carving points back to complete domestic fulfilment and gives access to the past and the future, to connectedness and hope, as did Gertie's ritual activities and plans in Ballew. The block of wood is a world in miniature in which she can, and does, take refuge. Yet Gertie describes her craft as "whittlen foolishness" or "a little foolishness" (*TD* 254, 255), opposing it to the real business of keeping house for her family – and making a safe home for them is her principal concern.

At the end of the novel, she suspects Clovis of murdering the Italian fruit and vegetable seller's assistant whom she happened to lead to her husband, although she knew that Clovis was bent on revenge for a union frame-up. But relations between them are such that she dares not accuse him to his face. She feels she could have prevented the murder and is ashamed. While trying to work on the block of wood she moans, "I stood still fer it – I kept shut – I could ha spoke up" (*TD* 585). A moment after this outburst, she gets an order for figurines carved out of good wood, and the next day sees her chopping up her Christ/Judas figure to re-use the wood, in order to secure the largest profit from the job. One possible reading is that Gertie's conscience troubles her so much for not denouncing the murder that she no longer feels worthy enough to work on the wood. She is, at any rate, denying herself the only thing that gave her comfort and pleasure and finally giving up her share of the South by destroying her "man in the wood." The violent dismemberment of the cherry wood strikes the reader as an irrecoverable loss, for it is not made explicit in *The Dollmaker* where Gertie will now find satisfaction in creative and competent craftsmanship, or turn for spiritual solace. As the Detroit part of the Hestian

narrative has made clear, the future will only bring recurring demands of the same type of sacrifice in the name of housekeeping. If Gertie can let such a beloved token go, the family's dissolution in the city, one feels, cannot be prevented.

Joyce Carol Oates saw in this work a typically American tragedy and paid tribute to Arnow in David Madden's *Rediscoveries* (1971). She responded to the Hestian plot's emphasis on the recurrence of daily needs that must be met when she said, "The beauty of *The Dollmaker* is its author's absolute commitment to a vision of life as cyclical tragedy – as constant struggle" (602). Admittedly, *The Dollmaker*, bespeaking Gertie's ache for the South, shows so much from the hearth that it crosses subgeneric lines. Oates felt it was a masterful rendition of the dehumanizing power of capitalistic industrial society, and it has since been hailed as the paradigmatic proletarian novel, a cross between a "ghetto pastoral" and "migration epic" (Denning 264, 467). With two-thirds of the novel set in Detroit, it earned its author fame for more than "regional writing" after two earlier novels set in her native Cumberland (Chung 265). Perhaps it is best described as a work that encompasses enough concerns and longings to be in a class of its own. However, the Hestian strain is very strong, and if we consider the novel on those terms, it also posits a recovery. It is true that in spite of Gertie's cyclic domestic concerns, events leading into one another (what Todorov calls the mythic elements of the narrative) shatter her world; and the sense of loss is poignant. But at the end of the novel Gertie is setting off to recover her self-respect and her authority. Arnow imagined the destruction of the "man in the wood" that Gertie loved and all her neighbors admired as a bid for Gertie's return to harmony and competence. She reminded an interviewer that Gertie believed Clovis treated her with respect back home because she did her work there so well. By working again, "[Gertie] felt that once again she would be helping her family. She'd be getting money to buy them something better than – she was feeding them beef hearts, can you imagine? They were cheap then" (Chung 267-268). Gertie still has hope for a better future thanks to her labor; indeed, there is a possibility that she will get orders for more "good" wood carvings in the future through the patroness who has asked for her most recent figures and thinks highly of her. The prospect of becoming once again a provider whose actions are worthy and who is given respect may be as motivating as knowing "that come thirty years from now she'd

gather fruit from the trees and grapes from the vines" of her trees in Ballew (*TD* 107).

Obscure as this motive may be on first reading, if we consider the full function of the block of wood at the narrative's end, we may see that the transformation effected in this novel is not simply from competence to disarray, or from satisfaction to hard times, and therefore a chronicle of loss alone. It is also the story of a transformation of knowledge, or what Todorov calls a gnoseological development (31-33), where the character is the richer for the experience he/she goes through. Practically all of the Hestian narratives that Romines studies affirm, and end by reaffirming, the value of the community that a woman is, happily or unhappily, a part of. And the dawning of such a recognition is suggested at the close of *The Dollmaker*. Before Gertie gives up the wood, Arnow shows instances of bonding between her and her neighbors, and within the community in the alley. For instance, Gertie helps a young woman leave the husband she has grown to hate; "I wish you'd been my people," the girl tells her, and Gertie answers, "But honey, we're kin, close kin" (*TD* 464). After the second bomb on Japan, all the women put aside their differences and ask Gertie for flowers from her yard to show their support to the Japanese woman in the alley. Also, in spite of her ambivalent feelings about her husband's union and striking, Gertie begins to realize that Clovis must strike so that conditions may improve for all.

The affective, spiritual and artistic dimensions are not, therefore, completely eliminated from Gertie's life along with the block of wood. It takes the innocent question of the owner of the scrap-wood lot to jolt her to this realization: when she takes an axe to the figure he thinks is Christ, he asks her whether she is destroying it because she couldn't find a face for it. Her answer is the last line in the book: "She pondered […] and wonder seemed mixed in with the pain. 'Why, some a my neighbors down there in th alley – they would ha done'" (*TD* 600). It is a small start, but on giving up the last remnant of her old world, Gertie has discovered the spiritual depth of her new community: connectedness, that basic aspect of Hestian plots, has been lost and found. The first signs of it have registered in the space that has been laid bare in Gertie. Earlier in the novel, the close bonds between the Ballew villagers were underlined when Gertie helped spade a potato patch beneath the timbered peaks and waited with her people for the mail to arrive. The reader hopes that some day, looking at the faces of her

Detroit neighbors instead of that of her "man in the wood," Gertie may find a measure of the sustenance she felt moving among her kin or gazing at the rows of blue hills. Arnow seems to have felt that her character deserved to recover domestic satisfactions, too, in the end. In her next novel, *The Weedkiller's Daughter* (1970), Gertie is saved in an intertextual, Hestian manner. A Mrs. Nevels appears briefly in this story about an unhappy teenager; going by the name of "the Primitive," she owns a farm that she bought thanks to money earned in a trial against crooked policemen and undertakers after her daughter's death in Detroit. One can imagine that she is as satisfied on her little pocket of land in an affluent Detroit suburb as ever in Ballew, and quite as able a mistress of her household.

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EUDORA WELTY ET L'ESPACE CHAMANIQUE : RELECTURE DE LA NOUVELLE « A CURTAIN OF GREEN »

> Life *is* strange. Stories hardly make it more so; with all they are able to tell and surmise, they make it more believably, more inevitably so.
>
> Eudora Welty, *Eye* (128)

> L'universel a son lieu. L'universel est en chaque lieu dans le regard qu'on en prend, l'usage qu'on peut en faire. Je pense à la formule grecque du *vrai lieu*, détournée de son sens, offerte à cette idée qu'en certains horizons je puis apercevoir la vérité vigilante, et qu'ils sont les chemins de mon retour. Le vrai lieu est celui d'une conversion profonde. […] Qu'était-ce d'autre anciennement que l'oracle, et qu'est-ce d'autre qu'une patrie ?
>
> Yves Bonnefoy (21-22)

Eudora Welty (1909-2001) appartient à ces écrivains qui projettent de manière constitutive leur fiction dans l'espace. À la qualité, à l'importance qu'elle lui donne, on voit bien qu'il s'agit d'un élément fondamental de son imaginaire qui informe une préoccupation philosophique autant qu'esthétique : « Place absorbs our earlier notice and attention, it bestows on us our original awareness; and our critical powers spring up from the study of it and the growth of experience inside it » (*Eye* 128).

Dans l'important essai « Place in Fiction », Welty définit comme essentiel le rapport critique entre paysage, au sens de perception construite de l'espace, et lucidité de l'écrivain : « I think the sense of place is as essential to good and honest writing as a logical mind; surely they are somewhere related. It is by knowing where you stand that you grow able to judge where you are » (*Eye* 128). Par le même détour de la pensée, dans la fiction et les

essais critiques elle associe étroitement à l'espace écriture et réflexion sur sa pratique. Qu'il s'agisse de représentations métaphoriques dans les romans et nouvelles, ou d'interrogations sur l'art d'autres écrivains, Welty a recours à des images spatiales pour représenter la condition humaine, l'acte d'écrire, ou l'exaltante et périlleuse entreprise de l'artiste : « Anything I imagine in what I read or write, I see it », dit-elle (Prenshaw, 1984 : 53-54). Elle ajoute ainsi à l'espace physique – lieux de la vie quotidienne, paysages familiers ou non – une valeur symbolique. Cette insistance sur le visuel invite à déchiffrer l'espace pour en comprendre la signification et la valeur comme le font l'archéologue face à une série de strates et le philosophe contemporain devant quelque chose qui se dérobe, la présence d'une absence. Cette double lecture est proposée ici pour élucider les points de résistance d'un texte encore peu lu mais qui interroge le critique par le caractère expérimental du traitement de l'espace, et par sa fonction de creuset pour ce qui sera, des années plus tard, la plus belle métaphore de Welty sur sa venue à l'écriture.

Parue dans le premier recueil de nouvelles publié en 1941, « A Curtain of Green » donne son titre au volume. Ce ne fut pas le choix de l'écrivain, mais celui de l'*editor* John Woodburn avec l'approbation de Diarmuid Russell, l'agent littéraire qui venait d'offrir ses services à Welty, et qui, on le verra, pressentait la profondeur de ce texte de rupture, emblématique d'une œuvre encore à ses débuts (Prenshaw, 1984 : 41, 1996 : 18). « A Curtain of Green » porte la marque de fabrique de l'œuvre audacieuse de Welty, qui ne cessera de s'appuyer sur l'art et la pensée de son temps pour innover, transgresser et souvent devancer la production contemporaine. Cet article se propose de lire la nouvelle comme l'une des expérimentations les plus hardies du jeune écrivain, qui reprend un sujet dont on parlait à l'époque, le chamanisme, pour le traiter sur le mode fictionnel. L'écriture étrange et poétique invite en effet à lire cette nouvelle à la manière dont on déchiffre les tableaux engagés vers l'abstraction (abstraits expressionnistes) comme ceux que peignait Jackson Pollock à la fin des années 1930. Par son sujet, la crise violente et rédemptrice que traverse Mrs Larkin, la nouvelle rappelle le chamanisme qui inspirait les peintres contemporains ; par l'écriture, le traitement insolite de l'espace, le texte évoque un tableau moderne. Indissociables, espace et sujet sont traités sur le mode de la déconstruction, et, témoignant de l'avant-gardisme de Welty, ils constituent un *ars poetica*. La déconstruction constitue un indice pour lire dans ce texte le chamanisme comme motif.

« A Curtain of Green » s'élabore sur la tension entre le nécessaire ancrage dans la réalité de l'expérience (l'exubérance de l'espace naturel dans le Sud soumis aux pluies subtropicales en été) et la nécessité esthétique de transcender le visible pour dire l'invisible (les forces que les découvertes scientifiques, anthropologiques et esthétiques avec l'intérêt pour les arts premiers ont mises en évidence). Il s'agit là d'une tentative très neuve par la forme : représenter le territoire de l'artiste – le jardin de Mrs Larkin – à la fois comme ce qui puise aux sources archaïques de l'art et ce qui s'inspire des nouveaux modes de pensée. En redéfinissant le rôle ambigu de l'artiste par l'espace, le jeune écrivain s'aventure plus loin que ses prédécesseurs modernes. On replacera d'abord Eudora Welty dans le contexte de la première moitié du XX^e^ siècle ; l'étude portera ensuite sur la dimension chamanique de la nouvelle ; enfin, la réflexion s'élargira sur la représentation de la figure de l'artiste dans la nouvelle et dans des textes postérieurs.

Eudora Welty, « the inspired child of [her] times »

Grande lectrice depuis l'enfance, d'une curiosité ouverte sur toutes les cultures présentes et passées, Eudora Welty s'intéressait à toutes les formes d'art contemporain. L'attention qu'elle portait aux arts visuels, peinture, sculpture, photographie, l'a conduite à fréquenter galeries, expositions et musées à New York [1] pendant son année d'étude à Columbia puis lors de ses fréquents séjours, et à pratiquer la photographie en amateur éclairé. Cette prédominance du visuel informe la fiction de Welty, où l'on traque des convergences plutôt que des influences, une certaine simultanéité ou contemporanéité des procédés entre son écriture et la peinture ou la sculpture de son temps. Et la formule remarquable, « the inspired child of his times », qu'elle utilise pour qualifier le risque de l'invention chez deux

1 Eudora Welty connaissait certainement l'influente fresque du muraliste mexicain Diego Rivera au Rockefeller Center, peinte en 1933, aujourd'hui disparue, et devait avoir parcouru le Museum of American Art à New York qui se trouvait alors dans la 155^e^ rue. Par ailleurs, les publications sur l'ethnologie américaine du Smithsonian mentionnaient souvent le chamanisme dans leurs articles. Ces épais rapports étaient lus dans le monde entier, au moins par les surréalistes. Dans les années 1930 l'American Museum of Natural History publia des études sur la vie amérindienne et présenta une exposition sur le rituel chamanique, particulièrement celui du Nord-Ouest, comme étant à l'origine des objets et de l'art exposés dans l'établissement (Polcari, 2008 : 25).

écrivains qu'elle admire, Mark Twain et Willa Cather, peut s'appliquer à elle-même, avide comme eux d'explorer un espace nouveau, au propre comme au figuré : celui de la frontière pour Cather et Twain mais aussi celui qu'ils ouvraient par leur vision neuve du roman américain ; espace du Sud (Welty écrit *avec* le Sud plutôt que *sur* le Sud), et aussi espace mental en résonance avec son époque :

> Who can move best but the inspired child of his times? Whose story should better be told than that of the youth who has contrived to cut loose from ties and go flinging himself might and main, in every bit of his daring, in joy of life not to be denied, to vaunt himself in the love of vaunting, in the marvelous curiosity to find out everything, over the preposterous length and breadth of an opening new world, and in so doing to be one with it? (*Eye* 51-52)

La fiction de Welty participe de la révolution artistique qui a marqué l'avènement du XX^e^ siècle, période caractérisée par de grands changements dans les sciences et les arts qui, par une attitude philosophique radicalement autre, ont apporté une perception neuve de l'homme et du monde, et par conséquent des modes de représentations. Welty est contemporaine du développement remarquable des arts visuels : révolution dans les arts anciens de la peinture et de la danse, épanouissement de la photographie et surtout invention du cinéma. L'art prend une fonction politique : aider un public toujours plus large à mieux comprendre l'impact des événements historiques, l'importance des grands courants politiques, sociaux, psychologiques.

Le contexte historique et le contexte culturel sont indissociables par les modes esthétiques qu'ils ont engendrés. Le contexte historique du début du XX^e^ siècle (crise économique et première guerre mondiale) influence l'engagement politique qui est l'un des traits marquants de cette révolution artistique commencée en Europe avec l'expressionnisme et le surréalisme. Plus tard, il se retrouve dans les grandes fresques peintes pour le peuple par les muralistes mexicains tels que David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Clemente Orozco et Diego Rivera. Welty connaissait leurs œuvres par son mentor et amie, Katherine Anne Porter, et par des photographies, avant d'aller les voir au Mexique. Le contexte culturel (intérêt soudain pour les civilisations dites « primitives », leur culture et leur art, découverte de l'inconscient par Freud, travaux de Jung sur l'inconscient collectif) suscite de nouveaux modes de représentation et bouleverse la relation de l'homme à l'univers. Les découvertes scientifiques des physiciens et astrophysiciens corroborent

étrangement ces vues. On sait par une lettre de 1934 [2] que Welty a été marquée par la lecture de *The Nature of the Physical World* (1928) de Sir Arthur Eddington, un livre qui expliquait la théorie de la relativité d'Einstein en insistant sur l'aspect philosophique : le schisme radical entre perception et réalité, qu'il illustrait avec l'exemple des deux tables [3]. Deux points fascinent Welty. L'un relève du travail de l'écrivain. Le défi posé par la science moderne (comment réconcilier expérience et compréhension de l'univers quand elles paraissent s'opposer) est aussi le défi que pose l'écriture à l'écrivain : il n'y a pas de norme référentielle privilégiée qui offrirait une compréhension plus claire, plus affinée ou plus vraie de la nature du monde qui nous entoure ; à l'écrivain de faire valoir chaque point de vue. Le second point, celui qui nous intéresse ici, est la présence dans l'univers de forces puissantes et invisibles.

« A Curtain of Green » : une expérience chamanique

En six pages et demie dans l'édition de The Library of America, cette nouvelle expérimentale condense la vision de l'écriture et de l'artiste que Welty travaille à définir avec ses premiers textes. Tout en leur empruntant la structure fondée sur une épiphanie, un moment de révélation, Welty devance ici les écrivains modernistes parce qu'elle fait du visuel et du pictural non pas le sujet de la nouvelle, mais la matière, la substance de son texte fondé sur la déconstruction. « A Curtain of Green » est l'équivalent scriptural des tableaux que produisaient les peintres à la même époque.

La nouvelle résiste à toute présentation réductrice tant le foisonnement narratif, la multiplicité des sens et le non-dit désorientent au premier abord. Vivant seule depuis la mort de son mari tué par la chute d'un arbre alors qu'il arrivait en voiture chez lui, Mrs Larkin s'absorbe dans son jardin et son chagrin : tandis qu'elle bêche, plante et taille du matin au soir, dans sa mémoire repasse le film tragique de l'instant où de vivant son mari est entré dans la mort. Elle accumule fleurs et plantes sans rien rejeter, ou si peu, et

2 Voir Saye ATKINSON, "Frames of Reference: Remarks on Eudora Welty and Sir Arthur Eddington," *Eudora Welty Newsletter* 32.1 (Winter 2008): 7-10.

3 Deux tables : l'une matérielle et visible sur laquelle il écrit, l'autre à côté de lui, dont il sait qu'elle est un espace presque entièrement vide, d'une façon sans plus de substance que la fumée, et pourtant substantielle grâce à des forces puissantes et invisibles.

vient à créer une véritable jungle, où elle se perd chaque jour, indifférente à ses voisines autant qu'elles le sont à son égard, bien que par une perversion de l'ordre social elles lui en veulent de ne pas leur donner les belles fleurs qu'elle cultive. Un jour où la pluie quotidienne tarde à tomber, l'attente, la douleur de l'irrémédiable et de la vengeance impossible deviennent, sous l'effet d'une terreur soudaine causée par des forces obscures qui semblent surgir de la haie, une fureur meurtrière face au visage de son jardinier noir absorbé dans un rêve où elle n'a pas de part. Elle lève sa houe pour le frapper, et à l'instant où elle va le tuer, la pluie arrive et interrompt son geste. Mrs Larkin, apaisée, tombe dans un évanouissement dont Jamey la sort avant de s'enfuir. Ainsi résumée, l'intrigue est banale, et la nouvelle pourrait être lue comme un paysage du Sud, à la fois physique et sociologique : un jardin trop luxuriant, des arbres qui s'abattent sans prévenir, et la présence du racisme dans les rapports de la femme blanche avec son jardinier noir. On pourrait réduire le personnage à l'un des grotesques de Sherwood Anderson apparus sur la scène littéraire des années plus tôt. Mais le texte déborde l'analyse psychologique, l'espace du jardin se transforme en expérience mystérieuse, des phénomènes insolites se superposent au phénomène naturel de la pluie. Une lecture serrée de l'écriture, de la construction et des points de résistance permet de voir autre chose qu'une crise de folie causée par le retard de la pluie, de voir que sous une forme déconstruite le texte de Welty offre tous les éléments d'une expérience chamanique [4].

Pourquoi parler d'expérience chamanique ? Parce que la nouvelle met en scène un exorcisme, une thérapie par la violence avec l'intervention de forces supérieures venues de la nature. Mrs Larkin en sort guérie de son aliénation par la douleur, et retrouve la tendresse humaine : « Then, as if it had swelled and broken over a daily levee, tenderness tore and spun through her sagging body » (135). Une toile de Jackson Pollock, « Untitled (Bald Woman with Skeleton) », peinte dans les années 1938-1940, et par conséquent postérieure à la publication de la nouvelle de Welty, permet de comprendre ce que tente ici l'écrivain avec, par exemple, l'invention de

4 Cette lecture s'inspire de la thèse de l'historien d'art américain Stephen Polcari sur Jackson Pollock et le chamanisme, et de l'exposition qui s'est tenue à la Pinacothèque de Paris entre le 15 octobre 2008 et le 15 février 2009. Voir également l'ouvrage édité par Marc RESTELLINI, *Jackson Pollock et le chamanisme*, Paris : Pinacothèque de Paris, 2008.

l'indice textuel, troublant parce qu'irréductible, du doigt qui pointe dans la haie.

Sur le plan symbolique, le texte présente un sacrifice rituel et la promesse d'une renaissance. Les éléments d'une cure chamanique sont là : chaos, transe, sacrifice et guérison. Pour les identifier, il faut dépasser l'ancrage dans le réel toujours présent chez Welty et la tentation de s'arrêter à une première explication rationnelle, car, comme cela se produit entre un tableau moderne et son spectateur, le texte exige ici du lecteur une traversée de l'apparence, le désir d'entrer dans un espace psychique où l'artiste fait vibrer le spirituel pour une saisie du monde encore inexplorée. Il faut lire/voir autrement pour (re)prendre possession de ce qui touche au plus profond des rapports qu'entretient l'inconscient avec le monde, et, partant, avec la créativité.

Le chaos, c'est l'accident imprévisible, injustifiable, qui tue le jeune mari et provoque la névrose de sa jeune épouse, qui se replie sur son jardin, dont l'excessif enchevêtrement d'une végétation laissée à la prolifération sans aucun contrôle, ou presque, devient le signe visible du chaos de la mort et du désordre psychique.

La transe est inscrite dans le texte par le procédé de la déconstruction, qui l'évoque en trois temps. Elle affecte d'abord l'espace, lorsque dans les quelques minutes qui précèdent la pluie tout se fige autour de Mrs Larkin. Il s'agit d'un phénomène naturel observé, mais Welty lui donne une ampleur et des échos par des figures de rhétorique qui le font entrer dans un autre ordre et rejoindre une expérience psychique. C'est tout le jardin avec sa végétation et ses oiseaux qui tombe dans une transe :

> Presently she became aware that hers was the only motion to continue in the whole slackened place. There was no wind at all now. The cries of the birds had hushed. The sun seemed clamped to the side of the sky. Everything had stopped once again, the stillness had mesmerized the stems of the plants, and all the leaves went suddenly into thickness. The shadow of the pear tree in the center of the garden lay callous on the ground. (133)

Un oxymore, « the stillness had mesmerized the stems of the plants », ouvre à un espace autre, que le terme « mesmerized » associe au magnétisme animal et à un phénomène d'état second, quand l'immobilité ou arrêt du temps joue le rôle d'un hypnotiseur/chaman. Un premier hypallage, « the shadow of the pear tree […] lay callous on the ground », évoque un corps prostré inconscient ; un second confirme l'arrêt du soleil dans sa course :

« the sun seemed clamped to the side of the sky ». La brutalité du terme « clamped » évoque, en écho à l'expression « flashing sky », un peu plus haut, la présence dominante, dangereuse et purificatrice du feu, autre élément chamanique, que l'on voit s'élever au-dessus du tableau de Pollock « Bald Woman with Skeleton ». Ainsi, ce jardin, que des forces supérieures investissent de l'énergie qui imprègne tous les éléments de l'univers, et lui-même dans une transe hypnotique, devient-il une scène chamanique, où va se jouer une crise psychique par le moyen de visions, de transes, et de rêves transférés sur Jamey, suivis par la libération de pulsions animales, pour conduire à la guérison.

La transe saisit Mrs Larkin à son tour, mais d'abord au sens archaïque de terreur, de peur extrême, lorsqu'il lui semble entrer en communication avec des forces surnaturelles :

> She felt all at once terrified, as though her loneliness had been pointed out by some outside force whose finger parted the hedge. She drew her hand for an instant to her breast. An obscure fluttering there frightened her, as though the force babbled to her. The bird that flies within your heart could not divide this cloudy air… (133)

Ces forces ont un pouvoir de révélation : faire resurgir de l'inconscient ce que la névrose a enfoui. Dès l'instant où elles mettent en mots la souffrance de la jeune femme, celle-ci, devenue objet de compassion et non plus de réprobation, s'humanise. Enfin sortie de son enfermement narcissique, elle peut littéralement voir les autres, Jamey en particulier. Et le magnifique portrait de l'Autre, que découvre Mrs Larkin, devient hymne à la vie :

> She forced herself to look at him, and noticed him closely for the first time – the way he looked like a child. As he turned his head a little to one side and negligently stirred the dirt with his yellow finger, she saw, with a sort of helpless suspicion and hunger, a soft, rather deprecating smile on his face; he was lost in some impossible dream of his own while he was transplanting the little shoots. He was not even whistling; even that sound was gone.
>
> She walked nearer to him – he must have been deaf! – almost stealthily bearing down upon his laxity and his absorption, as if that glimpse of the side of his face, that turned-away smile, were a teasing, innocent, flickering and beautiful vision – some mirage to her strained and wandering eyes. (133-34)

Troisième étape : le sacrifice. À cet instant, le récit prend un virage pour mettre en scène l'épisode le plus surprenant de la nouvelle, la fureur meurtrière qui saisit Mrs Larkin, et la houe levée pour tuer Jamey. Ce geste obéit à une nécessité esthétique du texte qui se construit en écho au chamanisme : indissociable de l'intervention du doigt dans la haie, le bras levé pour tuer fonctionne comme l'équivalent du sacrifice, élément fort de la

cure chamanique : « Le chamanisme exige que l'Initié sacrifie son « moi » profane au cours d'un rituel simulant la violence du chaos et de la mort » (Polcari 109). De même, Mrs Larkin sacrifie son altérité (désir de vengeance, refus de l'autre, narcissisme). Il ne s'agit pas d'un meurtre, ce qui ferait de la nouvelle un fait divers, mais seulement de mimer un sacrifice et d'évoquer par la forme, au sens où l'entend Welty, et par les mots, comme le fait le peintre expressionniste abstrait par la couleur et la composition, l'atmosphère et le sens d'une cure chamanique. L'emploi du terme « mesmerized » un peu plus haut constitue un indice textuel important pour comprendre le « sacrifice », ici la libération de pulsions meurtrières, puisqu'il évoque le magnétisme animal découvert par le Docteur Messmer pour guérir ou soulager ses patients névrosés – magnétisme animal repris par les poètes surréalistes, eux aussi très au fait du chamanisme, lorsqu'ils parlaient de la nécessité de « libérer l'animal blessé en nous » (cité par Polcari 110).

Quatrième étape : la guérison après l'exorcisme que constitue le mime du meurtre. Par une symbiose entre l'humain et la nature, la pluie, principe de vie vénéré par les Indiens, est investie du rôle symbolique de guérisseur. Une image audacieuse empruntée au Mississippi dit la violence de la cure et de la crue, dans un élargissement de l'espace qui entre alors dans le rôle légendaire du fleuve nourricier et violent :

> The rain fell steadily. A wind of deep wet fragrance beat against her.
> Then as if it had swelled and broken over a daily levee, tenderness tore and spun through her sagging body. (135)

S'effondrant d'un seul coup sur le sol, Mrs Larkin entre alors dans une deuxième forme de transe, celle de l'hypnose réparatrice telle que la définit Webster : « a somnolent state such as that of deep hypnosis appearing also in hysteria and some spiritualistic mediums and characterized by limited sensory and motor contact with the surroundings and subsequent lack of recall ». Pour le lecteur qui douterait encore de la nature du phénomène qui vient de se produire dans ce jardin, le narrateur ajoute :

> Then [Jamey] became quiet, and stood back at a little distance and looked in awe at the unknowing face, white and rested under its bombardment. He remembered how something had filled him with stillness when he felt her standing there behind him looking down at him, and he would not have turned around at that moment for anything in the world. (136)

Le jardin de Mrs Larkin : territoire de l'artiste

> « This slanting, tangled garden, more and more over-abundant and confusing » (130)

On vient de voir comment l'écrivain crée un espace apparemment naturel, un jardin dans le Mississippi, pour l'investir d'une valeur métaphorique qui le transforme en scène où se joue une dramatique guérison psychique dont les éléments évoquent le chamanisme. Cette lecture, suscitée par le caractère insolite du texte, appelle une interprétation plus large dès lors qu'on replace ce dernier dans l'ensemble de l'œuvre. Il est remarquable, en effet, que dès 1936 Welty ait écrit l'espace comme territoire de l'artiste, comme métaphore du travail de l'écrivain, qu'elle ne cessera de creuser. C'est cet aspect métaphorique du jardin de Mrs Larkin que l'on va examiner.

Au départ, le jardin de Mrs Larkin est un espace physique dont l'incroyable enchevêtrement de fleurs, plantes, arbres et arbustes dit la démesure, la force du végétal, face au refus de contrôler. Il évoque cet autre espace, à la fois réel, historique et mythique, la Natchez Trace, où la luxuriance du végétal fabrique des labyrinthes, sculpte de fantastiques architectures gothiques, qui entre à la même époque dans la fiction de Welty comme scène d'une vision politique et esthétique. Plus encore, cet espace trouve un contrepoint remarquable avec une photographie intitulée « Camellia House, Jackson », prise après 1936 et récemment publiée pour la première fois par Pearl McHaney (2009 : 51). On se demande lequel précède l'autre, le texte ou la photographie, tant celle-ci fait voir l'esprit du jardin et l'intérêt de Welty pour une représentation non figurative. Le croisement et l'enchevêtrement des lignes dûs à des effets d'ombre et l'impression de mystère qui en résulte évoquent immédiatement la peinture moderne, comme les grilles de Mondrian ou les lignes verticales de Pollock, mais aussi l'espace textuel de la nouvelle, « l'idée » du jardin de Mrs Larkin. Faire voir la beauté plastique des ombres portées qui aliènent la perception ordinaire d'un objet quotidien afin d'entrouvrir sur la complexité de la matière, l'étrangeté du monde, et susciter chez le spectateur « a sense of wonder », tel est le projet du photographe, puis de l'écrivain, dont l'imagination créatrice transcende le vu pour faire naître un sentiment d'inquiétante étrangeté.

La résistance qu'impose le texte au lecteur par l'insolite des images et la maîtrise du jeu sur les registres sémantiques incite à lire le jardin de Mrs

Larkin comme une métaphore du territoire de l'artiste – à la fois espace et démarche. La construction moderniste sur le principe de l'épiphanie conduit à une révélation : la correspondance mystérieuse entre la nature et le cœur humain, entre des forces obscures pressenties (l'autre monde) et l'homme. Dès lors, ce jardin enchevêtré et le « rideau de verdure » entrouvert un instant sont chargés d'une signification symbolique qui invite à les voir comme métaphores, l'une du domaine de l'artiste – la vie dans son foisonnement et sa diversité, acceptée sans exclusion – et l'autre de ce qui oblitère la vision commune mais qui s'écarte pour l'artiste seulement, lorsque chargé d'un pouvoir de vision exceptionnel il transgresse les limites ordinaires afin de révéler la tragédie de la condition humaine marquée par la mort. Parce que son rôle est de percer les blessures secrètes du cœur humain, de montrer le mal et l'horreur, et d'apporter par son art la transcendance nécessaire pour surmonter la souffrance, l'artiste agit, comme ici dans ce texte, à la manière d'un chaman dans les sociétés primitives, en guérisseur.

Dans une perspective chamanique, la référence à des forces mystérieuses est justifiée par l'animisme qui fonde cette religion de certaines peuplades de la Sibérie et de la Mongolie, caractérisée par le culte de la nature, la croyance aux esprits. Pour Welty, il s'agit de rester en conformité esthétique avec ses choix narratifs. Sans que l'on puisse parler de mysticisme, comme le fait Michael Kreyling (1991 : 27-30), ils sont toutefois confortés par l'intérêt que portait Welty au transcendantalisme et aux convictions de l'intellectuel irlandais A. E. [5] sur la correspondance entre l'homme et la nature, et d'une certaine façon aussi par la découverte de la relativité et de l'existence d'un monde qui échappe à la perception ordinaire.

Cette lecture de l'écriture réflexive de la nouvelle mettant en scène le travail de l'écrivain est corroborée par la reprise, des années plus tard (1971), des deux images insolites du doigt pointé et du rideau qui s'écarte, lorsque Welty parle de sa venue à l'écriture dans « One Time, One Place ». Cet admirable essai sert de préface à *One Time, One Place* (1971) quand à la fin de sa carrière d'écrivain Welty accepte de publier pour la première fois des photographies, de Noirs surtout, prises dans les années 1930 alors qu'elle parcourait et découvrait l'état le plus pauvre des États-Unis – le Mississippi – pour le WPA. Elle devait écrire des rapports, mais son œil et

5 Son fils Diarmuid Russell allait devenir l'agent littéraire de Welty.

sa sensibilité d'artiste surent très vite qu'il lui fallait aussi capter et fixer par l'image des moments exceptionnels. D'où ces photographies émouvantes et uniques qui vont la conduire à mettre en fiction ce que son imagination créatrice avait pressenti :

> In my own case, a fuller awareness of what I needed to find out about people and their lives had to be sought for through another way, through writing stories. But away off one day up in Tishomingo County, I knew this, anyway: that my wish, indeed my continuing passion, would be not to point the finger in judgment, but to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight. (*Eye* 354-355)

Reste la question de l'artiste : qui est-il dans « A Curtain of Green », que fait-il ? J'avancerai qu'il est ici en trois « personnes » : Mrs Larkin, Jamey, et le jardin. C'est là qu'est le caractère scandaleux du texte.

On l'a vu, le jardin entouré d'une haie haute comme un mur tombe en transe comme une personne. Il est la part de l'écrivain qui accède par l'intuition à la vérité du cœur. C'est la Nature, qui, selon Emerson, fait intuitivement connaître la vérité. Investi du pouvoir de faire comprendre le cœur humain, le jardin/artiste est ce doigt dans la haie qui révèle personnellement à la jeune femme son malheur et sa souffrance, cette voix qui murmure et fait battre son cœur jusqu'ici fermé au fond d'elle-même pour la ramener vers la vie : « She drew her hand for an instant to her breast. An obscure fluttering there frightened her, as though the force babbled to her » (133). Lorsque Welty reprend la double métaphore du doigt et du rideau de verdure pour définir sa venue à l'écriture, elle ne dit rien de plus.

Jamey est l'Autre de l'écrivain, celui qu'il comprend et devient dans l'acte de création, à l'instant où il dit le monde sans exclusion : « To imagine yourself inside another person […] is what a storywriter does in every piece of work; it is his first step, and his last too, I suppose » (*OWB* 90). Ici, comme souvent dans les premières nouvelles qui émanent des belles photographies que Welty prenait en découvrant ce qui deviendra son propre territoire (le Mississippi), cet Autre est un Noir. Et le rêve qui l'habite, « a teasing, innocent, flickering and beautiful vision », est le secret de chaque individu, insaisissable et magnifique comme un mirage.

Beaucoup plus ambiguë, Mrs Larkin est la figure de l'artiste qu'il ne faut pas être, celui qui se laisse entraîner par ses passions personnelles au lieu de s'élever au-dessus de son moi pour atteindre à la transcendance de l'œuvre d'art. Elle représente le danger qui menace l'artiste lorsqu'il ne

parvient pas à maîtriser l'abondance de matériaux, qu'il s'agisse de surmonter des problèmes personnels comme le deuil, ce que Welty avait su faire après la mort de son père, ou de trier et rejeter dans ce que propose la vie afin d'imposer l'ordre de l'œuvre d'art. Dans la métaphore du jardin, cet excès de matériaux, personnels et autres, devient l'excès de végétation que la jeune femme ne contrôle plus. En creux, le narrateur suggère ce que l'écrivain/jardinier doit faire et ne pas faire :

> Only by ceaseless activity could she cope with the rich blackness of this soil. Only by cutting, separating, thinning and tying back in the clumps of flowers and bushes and vines could she have kept them from overreaching their boundaries and multiplying out of all reason. The daily summer rains could only increase her vigilance and her already excessive energy. And yet, Mrs Larkin rarely cut, separated, tied back….To a certain extent, she seemed not to seek for order, but to allow an overflowering, as if she consciously ventured forever a little farther, a little deeper, into her life in the garden. (131)

Enfoncement de l'artiste dans son territoire, qui devient territoire de la mort, lorsqu'à l'instar des écrivains qui règlent leurs comptes personnels par le déplacement de la fiction, Mrs Larkin déplace sur Jamey son désir de se venger du destin. Un second déplacement transforme le meurtre en simulacre de sacrifice, par la force salvatrice de la nature.

Eudora Welty n'a cessé de s'interroger sur l'essence et la production de l'art, sur le rapport que celui-ci entretient avec le Mal, la vie et la mort, et d'une certaine façon avec l'espace. Dès cette première configuration de l'artiste et de la création en trois « personnes », Welty place la mort au centre du territoire. « A Curtain of Green » met en scène l'ambiguïté de l'artiste, qui est à la fois l'Autre et celui qui a le pouvoir de guérir et de tuer. Parce que le travail de l'écrivain se fonde sur le refus de juger (« to point the finger not in judgement »), sur le désir d'accueillir tous les points de vue, et sur la remise en question du donné (« et si c'était l'inverse ? »), il ouvre un espace de vie à ses lecteurs, espace proprement chamanique dans la mesure où il permet de sortir de soi et de s'ouvrir aux autres, où il panse les blessures du cœur par le sentiment d'appartenir à un univers immense et invisible où le principe de causalité n'a plus cours.

Au début de 1942, dans « A Still Moment », Welty poursuit la réflexion de l'écrivain sur l'Autre et sur le visible lorsqu'il est affecté par la présence d'une absence, sur la nécessité de la déconstruction dans la représentation. Elle propose une remarquable construction de l'artiste et de l'acte créateur, qu'elle situe dans ce haut lieu pour elle de la créativité en Amérique : la

Piste des Natchez [6]. Au centre, une triple figure d'artiste : Audubon, l'artiste officiel, naturaliste et peintre, et deux autres figures qui représentent les côtés ténébreux de l'artiste, ses démons : Murrell, le brigand dévoré par l'ambition de dominer et d'arracher le secret de la vie à ses victimes expirantes, qui annonce la figure dominante de Méduse dans l'œuvre de Welty, et Lorenzo Dow, le prédicateur convaincu, dans sa vision téléologique du monde, que son destin est de sauver les âmes. La passion qui les dévore tous les trois vise à posséder l'objet au point de lui ravir son âme ou sa vie. C'est ce que fait Audubon lorsqu'il tue le beau héron blanc pour pouvoir le peindre. La méditation du peintre sur la représentation pose la déconstruction comme nécessité esthétique, ce que Welty avait déjà pratiqué dans « A Curtain of Green » pour représenter le chamanisme : « He knew that the best he could make would be, after it was apart from his hand, a dead thing and not a live thing, never the essence, only a sum of parts » (239). Devant ce « meurtre » indissociablement lié à la création (d'Audubon), il revient à Lorenzo, celui qui incarne la pensée philosophique de l'artiste, de formuler les interrogations des postmodernes :

> He could understand God's giving Separateness first and then giving Love to follow and heal in its wonder; but God had reversed this, and given Love first and then Separateness, as though it did not matter to Him which came first. Perhaps it was that God never counted the moments of Time […]. Time did not occur to God. (239)

Si le temps ne domine plus, l'organisation logique de la séquence narrative n'a plus d'importance. Et de fait le texte porte sur « un moment immobile ». De plus, dans la mesure où disparaissent les nécessités de ressemblance ou de dissemblance, la représentation peut s'éloigner davantage de l'original. Elle devient, effectivement, réflexion sur le pouvoir déformant de l'absence sur la présence; l'absence est alors une sorte d'écho, mais non la chose elle-même.

La souffrance d'Audubon et de Lorenzo est celle de l'artiste écartelé par cet Autre de lui-même qu'est Murrell/Méduse. Parce qu'un mythe est en dehors du temps séquentiel et fonctionne sur la répétition, il donne l'image même de ce qui échappe au principe de causalité. C'est pourquoi, dans la dernière nouvelle du recueil *The Golden Apples* (1949), sept textes qui

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6 Sur la figure de l'artiste dans « A Still Moment », voir les trois articles de Danièle PITAVY-SOUQUES, « A Blazing Butterfly: The Modernity of Eudora Welty » (1987), « La Piste des Natchez : espace historique, espace mythique » (1992), et « Poétique/ Politique de la Piste des Natchez chez Eudora Welty » (2010).

exaltent la création littéraire, Welty a recours à un grand mythe grec, ambigu et riche de développements complexes, pour représenter la figure de l'artiste : Persée tuant Méduse : « In Virgie's reach of memory a melody softly lifted, lifted of itself. Every time Perseus struck off the Medusa's head, there was the beat of time, and the melody. Endless the Medusa, and Perseus endless » (555). Figure ternaire encore : « The central myth of the artist is surely not Narcissus but Perseus – with the artist in all roles, Perseus and Medusa and the mirror-shield », écrit Reynolds Price (8), songeant, semble-t-il, à la fiction de Welty, qui elle-même songeait au Persée de Benvenuto Cellini. Avec cette clef magnifique pour déchiffrer son œuvre, Welty dit que l'artiste est à la fois le héros vainqueur et triomphant, la réciprocité de l'horreur dans le Mal avec Méduse, et la sophistication de la technique avec le miroir qu'il faut lire aussi comme le champ spatial de la création.

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LEE SMITH'S APPALACHIAN *FAIR AND TENDER LADIES*

The title of this essay might appear somewhat oxymoronic to readers familiar with the fiction written about Southern mountain women in the greater part of the 20th century. Far from being presented as a fair damsel, the Appalachian woman has been mostly portrayed as a victim of dire social and economic conditions, a woman old before her age, the sister of another social type, the sharecropper's wife depicted in several Southern novels published in the 1920s and afterwards, such as Edith Summers Kelley's *Weeds* (1923) or Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *The Time of Man* (1926). One of the first writers to point out the misery of these mountain women was Thomas Wolfe, who wrote to his mother about his play, *The Mountaineer*, in 1921,

> The hopelessness of their lot is summed up in the last speech by May the mountain woman. I daresay you have seen May a thousand times, skinny, sallow, ugly, toil-worn and with a dead dull sullen look on her face, chewing a snuff-stick, and with her hair pulled back in a tight, painful knot. The point of this play, Mamma, grows out of my indignation at the idea most people have of mountain life by such writers as Mr. John Fox Jr. and others. You and I know this is not the truth… (113)

Wolfe is here referring to the picturesque depictions to be found in local color novels romanticizing the lives of Anglo-Saxon people whose crude manners and violent customs were ruled by a fierce sense of honor and whose culture was inherited from the first Scotch-Irish settlers. His criticism of Fox and other writers is validated by several studies on the conditions of life of Southern mountaineers: by the end of the 1920s, it was well established that Appalachia was one of the worst pockets of poverty in the nation. Its inhabitants either stayed and lived in misery and isolation or were lured away by the promise of work. Some departed for mining districts, such as Harlan County – the mere name of which conjures up the worst imaginable picture of exploitation and violence. Others went to Georgia or

the Carolinas to work in cotton mills. With the advent of the Second World War, some even moved to Detroit or other industrial centers.[1]

Such a dramatic situation inspired several writers over the years. Proletarian novelist Grace Lumpkin fictionalized the plight of these mountain people coaxed into going to work in the cotton mills in *To Make my Bread* (1932), where she uses the Gastonia strikes in 1929 as a context. Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker* (1954) tells of the life of a mountain family in Detroit during the war. Though they are extremely different, both novels focus on mothers who try to keep their family together in an environment which turns out to be worse than the mountain places they left; they experience the loss of some of their autonomy, of the support of their community and of their closeness to nature. Other works of fiction by female authors giving a realistic picture of the difficult living conditions of women in the mountains include Anne Armstrong's *This Day and Time* (1930) and Harriette Arnow's debut novel, *Mountain Path* (1936). Arnow's *Hunter's Horn* (1949) probably gives the best comprehensive picture of that kind of life.

Hunter's Horn can be read as a beautiful hunting story, a sort of down-sized *Moby Dick*, as the main character is a mountain farmer who sacrifices everything to catch a red fox that has been eluding him and other hunters for years. But it is above all a vivid dramatization of the life of a family in which the father, like all the male characters in the novel, rules everything in spite of his many shortcomings, causing the unhappiness of his family and especially that of his eldest daughter, whom he casts out because she gets pregnant out of wedlock. The book gives a convincing picture of a world condemned to disappear mainly because of the beneficent action of outside forces of progress like the A.A.A. It also draws an endearing – though absolutely not idealized – picture of the courage of women who accept their fate and are able to provide for the spiritual and everyday needs of their family.[2] Great emphasis is put on women's capacity to live in harmony with nature in spite of its harshness, and on the strength they derive from traditional customs. Contrary to Grace Lumpkin, Arnow is no militant social reformer, and she therefore portrays her mountaineers with their qualities

1 It is estimated that a quarter of the Appalachian population migrated to Detroit in the 1920s and another quarter during the war.

2 The mother, in particular, is portrayed as the family's mainstay, docile yet strong, protecting her children, working hard and not complaining.

and shortcomings without expressing any open political or moral judgment. The same kind of empathy can be found in Lee Smith's novels, especially in *Fair and Tender Ladies*, published in 1988, which will be the primary focus of this essay.[3]

Lee Smith[4] was born in 1944 in Grundy, a small mining town in the western part of Virginia, next to Kentucky. This part of Appalachia is the setting for most of her novels and short stories. Her first novel, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* (1968), was her M.A. thesis, which she wrote when she attended Hollins College. Since then she has published ten novels and a great many short stories. After experimenting with different themes and reading Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor, she realized that she was at her best when she wrote about what she knew, that is to say the families, daily life, and small towns of her native background.

Smith's work involves women who seek their own identities and their own voices within – and often away from – a constraining environment, that of a small town surrounded by mountains and hollows scarred by the mining and logging industries. Family ties, rituals, tradition, poverty, ignorance and religion either entrap them in the hopeless acceptation of a life made up of ceaseless work, unwanted pregnancies and blind obedience to prejudice, or lead them to refuse these constraints and rebel against them. For this reason, most of the female characters have a fragmented self: they try to escape the pressure of a community which they perceive as either hostile or overprotective, but in the process become aware that their identities are grounded in the past. Sometimes, the discovery leads to a tragic ending, as in *Black Mountain Breakdown* (1980): the heroine ends up living as a recluse in her mother's house, in a catatonic state, after a trivial incident has activated the long-repressed memory of her rape by a slow-witted uncle. At other times, as in *The Devil's Dream* (1992), the end is more hopeful: as the novel draws to a close, the last member of the singing family realizes that she must reclaim the folk music of her childhood in her search for authenticity.

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3 All references to the novel will be to the Ballantine edition published in 1991.

4 Curiously enough, Lee Smith is not well known in France although she is considered a major Southern novelist. A very thorough and perceptive reading of *Fair and Tender Ladies* can be found in Elizabeth Pell Broadwell's essay.

A strong sense of place pervades all of Smith's novels, be it *Black Mountain Breakdown*, *Family Linen* (1985), *The Devil's Dream* or *Saving Grace* (1995), with particular emphasis on the natural beauty of the Appalachian mountains and valleys, with their streams, trees and flowers. The author is also excellent at depicting the day-to-day life of a small town, with its soda fountain, beautician, gas station, as well as its ordinary people and their talk, binding family ties and lasting friendships born in school or in the neighborhood. Most of her characters live in the present but are strongly conditioned by their past or the past of their families. The passing of time is another of Smith's main concerns. It is broached through the depiction of its consequences on the community: economic and ecological changes brought about by new means of communication, the shortening of distances, the advent of radio and television, the building of shopping malls, as well as by the growth and demise of the logging and mining industries and the devastation of natural riches and sites. Smith's fiction is seriously documented, whether she portrays a community of snake-handlers or of miners or uses folklore, legends, music and ballads and mountain customs, but she blends the hard facts so craftily with the story and the portrayal of the characters that they become an integral part of the narrative.

Lee Smith has experimented with different narrative genres, using first-person narrators, multiple points of view and even the detective story form, as in *Family Linen.* Her most original narrative techniques are to be found in *Oral History* (1983) and *Fair and Tender Ladies*. Steeped in the tradition of legends and ballads, *Oral History* tells the story of a line of women doomed to tragic death as a malefic pair of gold earrings passes from mother to daughter. The reader follows the points of view of different narrators: two outsiders who are unable to understand a world that is completely foreign to them, and several insiders, both witnesses and actors who, like the characters in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), give an interpretation of the facts that reveals a lot about themselves. These insiders all believe in the reality of the curse; the legend acquires credibility because their accounts are not marred by an obvious incapacity to relate to the doomed heroines and their environment. What matters is not so much the story as the story telling, which carries the modern reader into the world of legend, that of the traditional mountain ballad.

Although *Fair and Tender Ladies* is different in form – it is an epistolary novel – stories play an important role. The title of the novel is taken from a poem by Kathryn Stripling Byer, quoted on the first page, "Weep-Willow," which ends with the following lines:

> Come down among the willow
> shade and weep, you fair
> and tender ladies left to lie alone,
> the sheets so cold,
> the nights so long.

The letters written by the heroine, Ivy Rowe, between the age of twelve and her old age, tell the story of her life, spent mostly in Sugar Fork, a secluded spot in the Virginia mountains – a life of dire poverty and trials. Though Smith does not depart from the traditional depiction of those mountain women, there is nothing ironical in the title as Ivy remains a fair lady throughout her life.

The opening letter tells about Ivy's mother: how she fell madly in love at fifteen with John Arthur Rowe, a mountaineer much older than she; how her father, a rich Virginian, refused to give her away to a man of no account; how they eloped in the dead of night, rode away to Sugar Fork and settled on John Arthur's family farm to a life of toil and poverty. Through the ensuing letters, the reader learns about the life of the Rowes and their eight children. Daily hardships are their lot but the love within the family, the neighbors' presence and the steadfast solidarity among the mountaineers sustain them all. The eldest brother, Babe, is killed; his twin sister, Silvaney, is taken to an institution, to Ivy's great indignation and suffering; Ivy's other sister Beulah gets pregnant before marriage. After John Arthur dies of a bad heart, Maude, the mother, takes her family to the neighboring town of Majestic and they all live with Geneva, her childhood friend, who runs a boarding house. Ivy gets pregnant but refuses to marry her boyfriend before he goes to war in Europe. Following her mother's death, she goes to live with Beulah, who is now married and lives in Diamond, a booming mining town which attracts mountaineers in search of work; her husband is a minor official in the mining company. Ivy gives birth to a girl, Joli, whom she raises by herself. She has an affair with the son of the mine superintendent but eventually marries Oakley Fox, whom she has known since childhood. After he escapes from the terrible blast that devastates the mine, they go back to Sugar Fork to live on Ivy's parents' farm. They have several children. Oakley is a very patient and sturdy man, with a gift for carving beautiful objects in

wood; although he is deeply religious, he does not impose his beliefs on Ivy. Several years later, tired of the drudgery of her monotonous life, Ivy, now forty, is seduced by Honey, an itinerant bee-man, and leaves her home. When she comes back after several weeks, she finds that her daughter Lulda has died. Her husband forgives her and life goes on until his premature death. Ivy stays on in Sugar Fork; she keeps in touch with her children, especially Joli, who becomes a successful writer, marries and then divorces. She takes care of Joli's adolescent son for a while, fights against land developers threatening to desecrate the beauty of the mountain. Now an old woman, she resents being taken care of by one of her nieces and eventually dies, alone on her beloved place.

Although the picture Ivy draws of her childhood in Sugar Fork at the beginning of the 20th century is one of poverty and lack, it is not tinged with self-pity. The descriptions of her mother's fading beauty, her father's ill health, the constant drudgery of farm work, her frustrated desire for an education, and her craving for friendship and the outer world are counterbalanced by the evocation of simple pleasures, her games with her brothers and sisters and the beauty of Sugar Fork and its surroundings. The sense of strong family and community ties, the joy brought by family or friend gatherings, pervade the text. Stories play an important part in Ivy's life and in that of her community; the best story tellers are a couple of old maids who live by themselves in an isolated cabin and make a point of visiting the Rowes every Christmas, whatever the weather. One year they have a special story for Ivy, that of Whitebear Whittington, a prince cursed to become a bear who is eventually redeemed by the heroine's love. The fact that they single out the twelve-year-old girl shows that they recognize her as being particularly sensitive to legend and poetry. To Ivy, this is "the bestest story [she] ha[s] ever heerd" (*FTL* 31), and it will stay with her as a token of the presence of the supernatural, of the superiority of the spirit over materialistic constraints and moralistic codes ruling everyday life. Life in the mountains is not ruled by the clock but by an observance of customs and natural phenomena. For instance, Granny Rowe, the old woman who serves as midwife and healer, turns up in Diamond when she knows the time has come for Ivy to give birth; later, she passes on to her her knowledge of plants, so that her mission to heal and help others is carried on. Time is different, and Ivy will always remember her father saying as he gave her "that birch bark to lick": "Slow down now, slow down now Ivy. This is the taste of spring" (*FTL* 316).

The outside world is present in the narrative through what Ivy imagines life in Europe or on the East Coast is like from pictures and the McGuffey Reader. Her account of life in Majestic and Diamond and of their inhabitants is perceptive, satirical even. Her description of the rows of houses in Diamond, with the abodes of those high up in the hierarchy of the mine on the top level, shows her awareness of the miners' social condition and of their exploitation by the management, but she remains untouched and rejects any imposition on her freedom, be it from the church or from the demands of respectability. Fate prevents her from going away, as when she must refuse Miss Torrington's offer to take her to Boston to study because of her pregnancy. Once she returns to Sugar Fork with Oakley, however, her decision to remain there is steadfast: Sugar Fork is where she wants to die; she belongs there, for it holds her memories of her life as a child, a wife and mother and an aging woman; it is also the place where she lives her true love with Oakley, the man who understands her and is able to simply say to her, "Get up, Ivy, and take care of your children" (*FTL* 240), when she comes back from her adventure with Honey. Sugar Fork is the place where she finds happiness and her true identity, but this comes only after she has experienced life elsewhere.

The discovery of her womanhood and of her beauty occurs in Majestic, after she and Beulah come out of the shop where their uncle has taken them to buy them each a nice dress – their first:

> And when we was walking back around the square to the courthouse, everybody was smiling at us, all the men and the boys, and some several of them whistled. I felt crazy like I was drunk.
> Now who is that? I thoght to myself as we turned the corner and waited in front of the pharmacy to cross the street. And Molly, it was us! Us in the winder looking like movie stars, me too. It was such a surprise I like to have got run over crossing the street. (*FTL* 70)

At Geneva's boarding house, she is aware of the way men look at her body. Her getting pregnant is symbolical of her fate and of that of all young women yielding to their first sexual impulses. She is attracted to Lonnie although she knows that she can never love him, and prefers her status of "fallen woman" to getting married: "I am glad I am ruint, and don't have to worry over such as that [i.e. behaving like a lady]" (*FTL* 160). She has an affair with the degenerate son of the mine superintendent but refuses to lose her freedom. She only marries Oakley when she realizes that she loves him. Her adventure with Honey is her last act of rebellion and affirmation of

her self, but it is a kind of parenthesis in her life as a wife, for it is thanks to Oakley's help that she manages to bear the contempt of her family and neighbors upon her return. Contrary to the other mountain women who become old before their age, Ivy remains indomitable and fair because she is true to her nature when she is in her mountains.

Her love life is representative of her dual personality. "I take a intrest in Love because I want to be in Love one day and write poems about it, do you? But I do not want to have a lot of babys thogh and get tittys as big as the moon" (*FTL* 7), she writes in her first letter, when she is twelve. This first statement about the opposition between babies and Love, between the drudgery of a mother's life and poetry, stories, and her desire to write, defines and anticipates the essence of her whole life. Naturally, her perception of love and sex evolves through different stages. During the age of innocence love is seen as a beautiful, romantic story, that of her parents or of Whitebear Whittington, and it is associated with the beauty of the mountains. But Ivy is also aware of the darker side of love and its consequences. Her mother rapidly loses her looks and passionate nature and becomes one of those women mentioned by Thomas Wolfe. Ivy's favorite uncle, Revel, though full of gusto, is always on the run for fear of the law or jealous husbands. He is involved in a passionate and tragic affair with one of Ivy's respected benefactresses, Mrs. Brown, the wife of the minister. Her account of it in her letters to Molly, Mrs. Brown's niece, who is her age, is full of colorful details, interrogations and awe about the strength of passion. This episode is one in a series of events that mark the end of Ivy's childhood and of her happy years in Sugar Fork: her father's death, the decision by Mr. and Mrs. Brown and other figures of authority to send her beloved Silvaney to an institution for the feeble-minded, the killing of her "bad" brother, Babe, and her first kiss.

Although the episode of the kiss seems of secondary importance when compared to the rest of the narrative, it contains many elements – some symbolical, some trite – that have a proleptic value as regards her whole life. Ivy, her sisters Ethel and Silvaney, three boys and Oakley go berry picking in the mountain. On their way up, they see a snake and Silvaney runs away (she is afraid of snakes, just as she is of her twin, who is associated with snakes and has probably imposed an incestuous relation upon her). Later on, Ivy goes to the top of the mountain by herself and

experiences a moment of sheer happiness which announces the blissful time she will have with Honey many years later:

> The air felt so good up ther Molly, a little breeze come along and cooled me off. It is the highest up I have ever been on Blue Star Mountain so far, I aint never gone plum to the top. I took off my bonnet and looked around. All the leaves was that deep dark shiny green they get rigt at the end of summer, like they are putting on the last act of a show wich in a way they are, I reckon. I had brung a handfull of berrys along and I was eating them one by one, ever time I ate one it was like a reglar explosion in my mouth. (*FTL* 52)

There she discovers a cave and ventures into it. She is joined by Oakley, who wants her to go back with him and the others. And then:

> […] before I had any inkling what he was up to, he was kissing me. It may be that Oakley did not know what he was up to nether.
> Well Molly I just stood ther with my mouth open while he was kissing me and did not close my eyes, and Oakley Fox did not close his eyes nether. Do you rember how we wonderd where you wuld put your tonge, I do not know the anser to this questin yet. We did not get to the tonge part. This kiss was not a bit bad nor was it good ether as I said, and it was not a thing like anything else that has ever happend to me before, I will say that. […] When he was done kissing me, Oakley kind of stumbled back out in the sun like he was drunk and I came too […]. We walked that ridge with nary a word, but I seed that somehow I had got berry juice all over my skirt and on Oakleys shirt too, I gess I had squashed them in my hand when we was kissing. (*FTL* 53)

Refreshing innocence is tinged with curiosity and with a detachment that will stay with Ivy even when her sexuality rules her life as a more mature young woman. She has the same attitude when she makes love for the first time, with Lonnie, aware that she does not love him. Yet she yields to her sexual instinct willingly, an instinct whose existence had been announced by the berry stains on her skirt. Similarly, when she sees herself naked for the first time in a full-length mirror, in the house of her lover's parents, in Diamond, she marvels at her own beauty.

The scene of the kiss in the cave foreshadows her future relationship with Oakley. It takes place in a dark, closed place, as opposed to the openness of the top of the mountain where she feels an exhilaration that announces her amorous sojourn with Honey. The two of them spend five weeks on the top of the mountain, lying naked in the sun and sheltering in a cave at night, living on berries, while she tells all the stories and poems she knows. Oakley's coming after her in the cave is meant to bring her back to the real world, it is a sign of his concern. As for his apparently spontaneous kiss, it is a token of his love for her which he cannot repress. Yet to Ivy, Oakley is a serious boy, "he is not Lochinvar […] so daring in love, and so

dauntless in war" (*FTL* 53) and she asserts, in terms that echo what she writes about love in her first letter: "I am going to mary somebody that makes me feel like a poem thats for sartin, not Oakley Fox" (*FTL* 53-54). Yet she remarks: "Oakley finished drinking and grinned like he allus grinned, then I knowed he never wuld mention that kiss agin in this world, nor wuld I, it was like a streak of lightning or like nothing, like something that did not happen" (*FTL* 54). Oakley's grin is a mark of his calm confidence, a quality which Ivy will cherish later, during her married life, once she has discovered her true love for him. She will also realize after his death that he was an artist and had poetry in him. Thanks to him, she experienced real love during most of her life as a woman, but the reason why this happiness and self-fulfillment could grow is that both Oakley and she lived in the place where they had their roots, to the point that they never left Sugar Fork, even to attend Joli's wedding in the East.

The attitude of observer-chronicler that Ivy often assumes in her letters leads her to compare her lot and behaviour to those of other women, especially women outside the mountain community who could become role models for her, such as Mrs. Brown and Miss Torrington. But both women unwillingly show their weakness – Mrs. Brown with her passionate affair with Revel, Miss Torrington when she cannot refrain from making a pass at Ivy. Another example of a free woman is Geneva, with her numerous lovers. When Geneva discovers that Ivy is pregnant she arranges for her to have an abortion, a decision with which Ivy, not realizing what is happening to her, is ready to comply. But her mother adamantly refuses, thus imposing on her daughter the course of her future life, far from her dreams of escape and freedom and self-realization through poetry and Love. And yet bearing a child fills Ivy with happiness: "My little baby Joli Rowe was born September 10, 1918. She is all mine, I have never had a thing of my own before. She is the most beautiful baby in the world" (*FTL* 138). There is more in this statement than the expression of a young woman's maternal instinct. It is an assertion of her freedom to govern her life as she chooses and of her refusal to yield to the external pressure of morality or poverty. The fate of two of her sisters vindicates her choice of life. Beulah, who yearned for respectability and material comfort, first tries to stop having children, in vain, and once she has achieved a high position in society drinks herself to death. Plain Ethel, who chose the kind of life that suited her and paid no mind to what people might think, finds happiness in becoming a successful businesswoman after marrying an aged widower. Ivy's Joli, however, in spite

of the sexual and social freedom afforded women of her generation and in spite of her success as an intellectual and a writer, does not achieve happiness. As for Ivy, far from living a life of resigned acceptation once she has come to terms with reality, she remains indomitable, finding her true self in her love for her children, her husband, and Sugar Fork. Only once, with Honey, does she feel the need to escape and live the dreams of her adolescence, but she knows the episode to be only a parenthesis in her true life. After Oakley's death, she could leave the farm, but she steadfastly remains in the place where she has found her integrity.

The book rings true because of the authenticity of Ivy's voice. Her letters are grouped in five sections: first, those written in Sugar Fork before her father's death; secondly, those written in Majestic; thirdly, those written in Diamond; the last two groups contain letters written in Sugar Fork before and after Oakley's death. Some are dated, others are not, but the chronology is obvious. The first three letters set the pattern of the novel: in the first one, Ivy writes to a pen friend that her teacher, Mrs. Brown, has found for her; she tells her about her life at Sugar Fork and her mother's elopement. It is an unbridled, very spontaneous narrative. The second letter is addressed to Mrs. Brown; amid news of her family, Ivy writes:

> […] I have wanted a Pen Friend always ever since I learned of them and I do not understand what you mean that my letter is too long and not approprite. I did not know you wuld read my letter ether. So I have written another letter to send to Miss Hanneke Van Veldt I will send it to you also by Victor, it is very short. (*FTL* 13)

Indeed, this letter is very short, and it lacks the full flavor of the first one. In this letter to Mrs. Brown, whom she loves very much, Ivy respectfully protests against being imposed rules that curb her freedom, and this anticipates her constant, instinctive, fight for freedom. She also resents Mrs. Brown's breach of confidence and from then on the tone and contents of her letters become attuned to the personality of her numerous correspondents. There are many addressees and the reader gathers that very few of the letters, if any, get answers – in fact, most of them are never sent. Ivy's more intimate letters are written to cherished people, like her dead father, or her beloved sister Silvaney, who dies young. Quite often, the account of events she gives to a correspondent is echoed by a more sincere and intimate version to Silvaney. In her last letter to Joli, Ivy explains why she has burnt all her letters:

> The letters didn't mean anything.
> Not to the dead girl Silvaney, of course – <u>nor to me.</u>
> Nor had they ever.

> It was the writing of them, that signified. (*FTL* 314)

It is in the letters to Silvaney that the true Ivy is revealed, for Silvaney is Ivy's other self. It is thus no surprise that Ivy's very last letter should be addressed to her dead sister:

> My dear Silvaney,
> I know you have not heard from me in a long time. I am so sorry for it. I have been sick. Today I am better thogh. All throgh my sickness I have been thinking, thinking, and now I am dying to write I am dying to oh Silvaney, today is the lastest snow! (*FTL* 314)

In that letter, Ivy mentions the little particulars of her life on that very day as well as the main events of her life and the people she loved – both real people and heroes of stories – haltingly, the way a dying person would, and her letter ends:

> I do not want any bacon. I do not, I am too busy there is a time for every purpose under heaven The hawk flys round and round, the sky is so blue. I think I can hear the old bell ringing like I rang it to call them home oh I was young then, and I walked in my body like a Queen (*FTL* 317)

"It was the writing of them, that signified": indeed, it is in this writing that Ivy expresses her love of stories and her need to dream, and thus reconciles the two poles of her personality: poetry and dream on the one hand, full womanhood on the other. She remains to the end a fair lady.

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Urszula Niewiadomska-Flís is Assistant Professor in the Institute of English Studies at John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland. Her scholarly interests hover around the fiction of regional America, especially the literature of the American South, women's writing, the American short story, and more recently the ethnic/immigrant literatures of the USA. She is a member of the Polish Association for American Studies (PAAS), the Southern Studies Forum (SSF) and the Society for the Study of American Women Writers (SSAWW). Her current research project aims to explore the intersections of gender, ethnicity, class and sexuality in the context of foodways and domesticity in twentieth-century American female writing.

Nicole Ollier, professeure de littérature américaine et de traductologie à l'Université Michel de Montaigne, Bordeaux 3, assure notamment un séminaire de Master sur les études de genre intitulé « Femme écrivain, femme écrite », ainsi que des séances sur « Mythe et mystique du féminin ». Auteure d'une thèse sur Mark Twain, puis d'une thèse d'état comparatiste sur la littérature grecque-américaine, elle s'est intéressée aux écritures ethniques, postcoloniales, de genre, au théâtre et à la poésie. Elle pratique et enseigne la traduction et dirige un collectif qui a traduit des œuvres de Walcott, Daaood, Akpan. L'Irlande, la Grèce, le Sud, les Suds, leurs femmes, font partie de ses centres d'intérêt majeurs pour la recherche.

Danièle Pitavy-Souques, professeur émérite à l'Université de Bourgogne, a publié tant en Europe qu'aux États-Unis de nombreux articles sur les écrivains du Sud des États-Unis et du Canada anglophone, organisé et participé à un grand nombre de colloques en France et à l'étranger. Internationalement reconnue pour ses travaux novateurs sur l'œuvre de Eudora Welty (Phoenix Award pour les années 2000 et 2001), elle a publié deux livres en France : *La Mort de Méduse : l'art de la nouvelle chez Eudora Welty* (Lyon, PUL 1991) et *Eudora Welty : les sortilèges du conteur* (Paris : Belin, « Voix américaines », 1999), et récemment, aux États-Unis : "Eudora Welty and the Merlin Principle: Aspects of Story-Telling in *The Golden Apples*" (*Mississippi Quarterly*, Eudora Welty Centennial, April 2009, 101-124), et "'The Inspired Child of [Her] Times,' Eudora Welty as a Twentieth Century Writer" (*Eudora Welty Review*, vol. 2, 2010, 25-48).

Gérald Préher est maître de conférences à l'Institut Catholique de Lille et membre du laboratoire *Suds d'Amériques* de l'Université de Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines. Sa thèse de doctorat, « L'intemporalité du passé dans l'œuvre de quatre écrivains du Sud : Walker Percy, Peter Taylor, Shirley Ann Grau et Reynolds Price », a été publiée par le Centre « Écritures » de l'Université Paul Verlaine – Metz en 2009. Il a par ailleurs écrit divers articles sur la littérature américaine et co-édité plusieurs ouvrages dont *Nouvelles du Sud* : *Hearing Voices, Reading Stories* avec Marie Liénard-Yeterian (Presses de l'École Polytechnique, 2007), *Les Péchés innombrables de Richard Ford et quelques autres* (Centre « Écritures », 2008) et *L'Amérique d'Est en Ouest :* The Grapes of Wrath *de John Steinbeck et* A Multitude of Sins *de Richard Ford*, avec Brigitte Zaugg (Centre de recherches « Écritures », 2009). Il travaille actuellement à un

ouvrage collectif sur les nouvelles d'Elizabeth Spencer et poursuit ses recherches sur la littérature du Sud.

Yvette Rivière est maître de conférences honoraire à l'Université Paris-Val-de Marne Créteil. Elle est l'auteure de plusieurs articles consacrés aux grands thèmes que couvre l'œuvre de Carson McCullers et a également écrit sur *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* d'Edward Albee.

Gisèle Sigal est maître de conférences à l'Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour (IUT de Bayonne) où elle enseigne l'anglais des affaires depuis 1992. Son activité de recherche vise principalement à réhabiliter l'œuvre d'Elizabeth Madox Roberts (1886-1941) ainsi que celle d'autres romancières américaines méconnues du tournant du XIX^{e}/XX^{e} siècles. Elle est l'auteur d'une thèse de doctorat et de plusieurs articles sur Roberts publiés en France et aux États-Unis.

Youli Theodosiadou is Associate Professor of American Literature and Culture in the School of English at Aristotle University, Greece. Her research interests focus on Southern literature and culture and women's studies. Her articles on Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Harriet Jacobs, Shay Youngblood, Toni Morrison and others have appeared in various literary journals and collections. She has edited *Southern Ethnicities* (2008) and co-edited two collections of essays titled *Histories and Myth-Histories: Made in the U.S.A.* (2000) and *Gramma: A Journal of Theory and Criticism* (1995). She has served as secretary, treasurer, and vice-president of the Hellenic Association for American Studies and is currently a board member of the Southern Studies Forum.

Brigitte Zaugg est maître de conférences à l'Université de Lorraine, où elle enseigne la littérature américaine et la traduction. Elle s'intéresse à l'écriture féminine, en particulier aux auteures du Sud des États-Unis de la fin du XIX^{e} et du début du XX^{e} siècles. Elle est l'auteur d'une thèse et de plusieurs articles sur Ellen Glasgow et a édité deux ouvrages avec Gérald Préher, *Les Péchés innombrables de Richard Ford et quelques autres* (Metz : Centre « Écritures », 2008), et *L'Amérique d'Est en Ouest :* The Grapes of Wrath *de John Steinbeck et* A Multitude of Sins *de Richard Ford* (Centre « Écritures », 2009). Ses travaux portent également sur Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton et Bobbie Ann Mason. Actuellement sa recherche est orientée vers le gothique dans la littérature du Sud et la notion d'espace.

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