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Foreword

Linda Collinge-Germain

The conference on The Image and the Short Story in English, organized by Laurent Lepaludier, Linda Collinge-Germain and Lauric Guillaud, members of the CRILA (Centre de Recherches Interdisciplinaires de Langue Anglaise), was held at the University of Angers March 19th and 20th, 2010. We were very pleased and honored to have as our keynote speaker Liliane Louvel, one of France’s most accomplished specialists in the field of text/image dynamics, and as our guest short-story writer Steven Millhauser, prize-winning author of numerous short-story collections including In the Penny Arcade, The Barnum Museum, The Knife Thrower and Dangerous Laughter. Additional attention was drawn to the dynamics between the visual arts and literature as the conference participants visited the medieval Tapestry of the Apocalypse displayed in the Château d’Angers, the same tapestry which two years earlier inspired Helen Simpson, a CRILA guest that year, in her writing of the short story entitled “The Boy and the Savage Star”, published in 2009.

The present issue of the Journal of the Short Story in English contains articles selected from the papers presented at the 2010 conference. Liliane Louvel’s keynote address is published here as it was presented in the opening session. As author of three major critical works on text/image dynamics (L’œil du texte (1998), Texte/image : Images à lire, textes à voir (2002)and Le tiers pictural, pour une critique intermédiale (2010), she provided an excellent theoretical introduction on intermedial criticism. Her aim was to draw a parallel between the short story and the pictorial in the single effect they produce, to examine the competition between and/or dynamic co-existence of word and image, and to propose tools from the visual arts for examining the short story. Different types of visual arts were then examined by the conference participants and will provide the structure for the first section of this issue, first photography, then cinema and painting. The second section is based on the image and its relationship to the unsaid, the inexpressible and then, more specifically, to the question of colonialism.
Photography/Cinema/Painting and the Short Story

Photography and cinema and the short story were examined by Shannon Wells-Lassagne, Ailsa Cox and Michelle Ryan-Sautour, studying respectively stories by Elizabeth Bowen and Angela Carter. In “‘Disjected snapshots’ : Photography in the Short Stories of Elizabeth Bowen”, Shannon Wells-Lassagne draws attention to Bowen’s own analogy of her short stories as “snapshots”. She shows how Bowen uses the photographic genre within her short stories and how photography is in fact “a prevalent example of one Modernist writer’s struggle to use other artistic forms to better extend the possibilities of language, and so to capture the fleeting nature of reality”, representing therefore “both the promise and the limitations of transartistic intertextuality.”

Ailsa Cox also looks at stories by Elizabeth Bowen, but especially at how one story, “Ivy Gripped the Steps”, deploys cinematic strategies, an approach which Cox justifies by once again referring to Bowen’s own comments on short-story writing in the twentieth century. Cox observes in the story a particularly striking use of scene-setting, lighting, framing, composition and a “seemingly depersonalised cinematic gaze”, but she also notes that “film narrative, like narrative in the modern short story, is elliptical and elusive; meaning often lies in the gaps between what is said and what is seen.”

Cinema’s influence on short-story writing is also observed by Michelle Ryan-Sautour in her analysis of Angela Carter’s “John Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore’, a story which “navigates between the cinematic representations of John Ford, the 20th century American film-maker, and the original drama of incest by John Ford, 17th century English dramatist […] for speculative and political ends”, says Ryan-Sautour. “Having written for the screen, the stage, and for the radio”, she continues, “Carter invests the aesthetic landscapes of her short fiction with a spirit of intermediality, revealing an extension of the generic layering that characterizes her writing.”

And indeed, Karima Thomas and Martine Hennard Dutheil also observe this “spirit of intermediality” in Carter’s writing as they analyse the influence of painting and engraving. Thomas looks closely at Carter’s story “Impressions : The Wrightsman Magdalene”, whose title announces the “pictorial project” of the short story in its reference to Georges de La Tour’s 17th century Baroque painting The Magdalene and Two Flames acquired by Mr and Mrs Charles Wrightsman. Thomas’ aim is to reveal the “the permanent construction and deconstruction of meaning out of existing cultural artifacts”, a process that implies “creative reading”.

Martine Hennard Dutheil studies both Martin Ware’s unconventional illustrations of Angela Carter’s translation of Charles Perrault’s “contes” (published in 1977 as The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault) and the influence of these illustrations on Carter’s subsequent fairy-tale rewritings collected in The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories. The elements integrated by Carter include “motifs and a modern treatment of the tale but, perhaps even more importantly, visual strategies that Carter adapts to the realm of writing.”

The image, the unsaid and the inexpressible

Peter Gibian takes us back to the 19th century, proposing in “The Image and its Discontents: Hawthorne in Dialogue with Poe” an in-depth reflexion on the place and
complex function of the image in self-reflexive stories by Hawthorne and Poe. “Hawthorne’s early tales often revolve around the mysterious power of a single image; characters and readers in these minimalist works come to focus their emotional energy on response to one monolithic visual symbol – a serpent appearing on a chest, a black veil worn by a minister, (“The Minister’s Black Veil”) a birthmark on a new wife’s face (“The Birthmark”). These are imagist works, then, but they speak at the same time for a powerful, fundamental ‘horror of the image.’” Gibian aims at highlighting the stakes in “The Birthmark” “through a recreation of its place in Hawthorne’s 1842-43 dialogue with Poe – as the two authors produced paired tales as a way of meditating on the bases of the ‘image drive.’”

Claude Maisonnat sees another Hawthorne story – “The Great Stone Face” – as a literary opposite of the Irish writer Daniel Corkery’s story “The Stones”. “The images that are at the heart of Corkery’s story are stone effigies which are believed to announce the death of the men who recognize them as their own. When an alleged breach of solidarity threatens the peace of the small community, the images begin to wreak havoc in the lives of the protagonists.” Unlike the benevolent stone face in Hawthorne’s story, the effigies in Corkery’s story “return the gaze and function as blind spots in the field of the visible,” says Maisonnat.

Lhorine François, in her article entitled “The image, the inexpressible and the shapeless in two short stories by Elizabeth Bishop” notes how “moments of revelation – of the self, of death, of the shapeless or the strange within the self – are most often connected with images in ‘Gwendolyn’ and ‘In the Village’: those moments are sometimes triggered by a picture or, when the revelation touches upon an inexpressible feeling, images come as a means to construe a specific atmosphere that puts the reader into contact with the strange, inexpressible reality in a more direct and efficient manner than the description of the feeling itself would do”.

The image and the question of colonialism

“An Outpost of Progress” by Joseph Conrad is the subject of M’hamed Bensemmane’s article in which he analyses how this African terra incognita for the Western protagonists resists the notion of progress brought by Europe. “The signifiers of a superior mode of existence are shown, under the writer’s critical gaze, to convey the illusion of progress where there is only brutishness. The de-familiarisation achieved through this structured irony, and the cumulative effects of gothic elements of depiction in this tale produce the image of a problematic intercultural relationship,” says Bensemmane.

The aim of Xavier Lachazette’s article entitled “Images and the Colonial Experience in W. Somerset Maugham’s The Casuarina Tree” is “to put Maugham’s art poetica (telling tales in as plain and image-free a style as possible, doing away with any unessential details or ornamented metaphors or personal and political comments) to the test by analysing the power of visual, verbal and reading images in The Casuarina Tree, and by trying to understand why Maugham’s best stories are usually those in which the metaphoric dimension of language and story-writing has not been entirely erased.” Indeed, as Lachazette remarks, “the Casuarina tree itself, supposedly a tree which ‘solidifies and fortifies the soil till it is ripe for a more varied and luxuriant growth,’ as
Maugham points out in the Preface, is an apt metaphor for the colonial experience, doomed as it is to come to an end when the local population takes over once again."

Steven Millhauser actively participated in the conference’s reflexion on the dynamics between word and image in the short story by choosing to read his story “Klassik Komix #1”, “composed entirely of images”. As Millhauser put it: “The story is a description, panel by panel, of an invented comic strip, i.e. a verbal description of an imaginary series of drawings (so an instance of ekphrasis) based themselves on a poem by T.S. Eliot: ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’. The process then is the transformation of a poem into painted images, and the further transformation of those images into a new set of verbal images which are sharp and clear but clearly distort the original verbal images.”

As Assistant Director of the “Pôle Nouvelle”, I would like to thank all of those who participated in the preparation of our two-day conference on The Image and the Short Story through their contributions during our preparatory seminars: Yannick Le Boulicaut for his theoretical introduction to photography, Emmanuel Vernadakis for his introductory presentations on the image, Laurent Lepaludier for his contribution on Katherine Mansfield’s “Miss Brill”, Noreen Doody for her study of Claire Keegan’s “The Ginger Rogers Sermon”, Héliane Ventura for her analysis of Alice Munro’s “I and the Village” and Liliane Louvel for her study of Gabriel Josipovici’s collection of stories Goldberg: Variations. I would also like to thank Joëlle Vinciguerra, our Research secretary, for her continued collaboration in preparing for the seminars, the conference and this issue of the Journal. Finally, this Special Issue of the Journal is dedicated to Laurent Lepaludier, Professor of English, Director of the “Centre de Recherches Interdisciplinaires en Langue Anglaise” and former Director of the “Pôle Nouvelle”, who will retire in September 2011. Laurent Lepaludier’s distinct contribution in the field of poetics of the short story (metatextuality, the implicit, orality, theatricality…), his constant endeavor to identify relevant theoretical questions for exploration by the research team and to promote a collective and democratic spirit of work have made a significant impact on the research conducted on the short story in English at the University of Angers over the past decade.

AUTHOR

LINDA COLLINGE-GERMAIN

Linda Collinge-Germain, Co-organizer of the Image and Short Story Conference, Co-editor of the Journal of the Short Story in English, Assistant Director of the “Pôle Nouvelle” du CRILA, Université d’Angers
“A Skilful Artist has Constructed a Tale”¹ Is the short story a good instance of “word/image”? Towards intermedial criticism²

Liliane Louvel

1 Here we find ourselves with two objects under scrutiny: the short story and image taken in a broad sense (such as painting but also photography and “substitutes of the pictorial”), a perfect subject for literary research and word/image theory, we must admit, as it has been remarked that the short story has often used the image in more ways than one, thus offering a case in point, a true combination of the two media, a hybrid object.

2 We may start with asking a question: is there a strong affinity and an analogy between the short story and the visual? Is the short story the perfect locus for “the infinite dialogue” between word and image? In terms of instant effect as defined by Poe, as a “detachable” piece entirely grasped as a whole as a painting or a photograph apparently are, it may be so. These are some of the traits that might liken one medium with the other and reopen the discussion about Lessing’s too neat cleavage between the arts of time and the arts of space. Is it possible then to envisage a formal analogy between short fiction and pictorial, photographic or any other form of image? I will try to explore how some short stories have materially realized the relationship between the visible and the legible. This will inevitably lead to a dual theoretical interrogation: one bearing on short-story writing and the other on image in a back-and-forth movement between the modalities of seeing and writing. Might the pictorially-saturated short story be a perfect instance of “word/image”, a hybrid form in between one medium and the other, neither one nor the other, but located at their meeting-point on the mode of oscillation which is its true mode of being? Examples will provide their pragmatic space to check this “idée de recherche” à la Barthes which finds its place in a wider field, that of intermedial studies.
After interrogating the possible analogies between the shape of image and of the story I will try to see what shapes it may take in terms of form and/or art history and propose a pictorial poetics at *pictura poesis* davvero. I will then try to propose a typology of some sort and see what happens when the image offers itself as a short story and the short story as an image. “The pictorial third”, a term I will define, will also be a leading thread.

1/ “Oh to be Silent ! Oh to be a Painter”, Virginia Woolf:

To start with, an instance of the visible combination of word and image and an illustration of the sisters’ arts: Virginia and Vanessa’s example of collaboration beyond the *paragone*. Vanessa did the illustration for “Kew Gardens”, her sister’s famous short story. It is an interesting instance in the manner of W. Blake where image and text are closely associated (see his *Laocöon*). The two sisters often took up similar topics, each one treating them in her own medium: thus they both elaborated a portrait of Roger Fry (a picture and a biography), and drew up historical pictures of their friends: Vanessa in her painting of *The Memoir Club*, (in which pictures appear on the wall behind the sitters, thus exemplifying the self-referentiality of painting). Virginia Woolf in *Orlando*, “painted” a portrait of Vita Sackville West and in her diary she composed “a gallery of little bright portraits hanging against the wall of my mind” (156).

Both sisters indulged in the still-life genre: the cover of “Walter Sickert: A Conversation” by Vanessa, represents a fruit-dish reminding one of a similar fruit-dish in *To the Lighthouse* held under the intense gaze of Mrs Ramsay. The lighthouse motif inspired Vanessa who painted it on the tile fireplace at Charleston. Each sister portrayed the other one: Vanessa appears under the guise of Lily Briscoe, the painter of *To the Lighthouse*, whereas Vanessa Bell painted several portraits of her sister.

Beyond this facile example, it is interesting to note that quite a number of writers have expressed a wish they could have been painters. This is commonly linked with the question of the limits of language. As Valerie Shaw remarks: “To try to express such sensations and forms is the aim of many writers who attempt to overcome the limitations of their prose medium” (15). I have had occasion to study how V. Woolf described Sickert’s paintings as being “full of pictures that might be stories”, but how also she expressed her awe in front of painting and its silence, what she called “the silent kingdom of paint”, how she thought that “not in our time will anyone write a life as Sickert can paint it. Words are an impure medium”*. Despairing about expressing colours, “the effects of those combinations of line and colour” (Shaw 16), she nonetheless reaffirmed the superiority of language.

Sherwood Anderson also recalled: “I had always wanted to be a painter, I was always having sensations and seeing forms that could perhaps have been expressed in paint and in no other way”. In the case of Anderson, it was his contact with modern art and Stieglitz as well as with modern painters which influenced him, in particular the compactness and quickness of photography. Hence the consequence V. Shaw comments upon: “Among certain writers there is a strong inclination to make compression an opportunity to push language to a limit where it begins to shed its literary qualities and seek non-verbal ways of communicating meaning” (Shaw 15).
2/ Is there an analogy between the form of the short story and that of an image?

Quickly first, if we consider ekphrasis and its shape, there is. Originally, ekphrasis was a vivid description putting the object under the reader’s eyes, it was a rhetorical exercise. In describing an object (the walls of a city, a ship, a shield...) the writer or orator managed to tell a story, to narrativise a description. Little by little, in modern times, it lost its original meaning for a more restricted one (at least in anglo-saxon literary criticism) and became the description of a work of art (see Murray Krieger’s famous book). Ekphrasis was and is a “detachable piece”, an autonomous piece, like the short story. It is compact and a unit.

Here it is important to examine a theoretical aspect of the word/image relationship: a kind of little drama as it were. When a dream is transposed into language, in a way similar to the one art historians speak of image, as Hubert Damisch shows it, and once the work of elucidation has been completed, the image seems to have disappeared: language has replaced the dream images.

On the contrary, for Jean Rousset, in transposition, it is descriptive language, ekphrasis for instance, which conjures up the image. Hence the text recedes in the background as if erased by the nascient image. For Rousset this is particularly difficult to theorize:

What happens in the head of the person reading a description? If he transposes the written words into (absent) things, he transforms them into a mental simulacrum, in other words: he visualizes them. So doing, he substitutes this mental simulacrum to the text, reduced to the role of support, which actually means erasing it, and eventually destroying it. Let us acknowledge this is a real risk.

It is of note that art historians and literary critics tend to give an account of what happens when text and image are pitted one against the other in totally opposed and apparently incompatible ways: if the text appears, the image disappears and vice versa... As for myself, I see things in a much less dual manner: word and image may coexist in a fruitful sort of oscillation, a kind of twinkling effect. J.L. Nancy also spoke of an oscillation and went as far as entitling one of his chapters of Au Fond des images: "The distinct oscillation" to account for what happens between text and image:

Entre texte et image la différence est flagrante. Le texte présente des significations, l'image présente des formes. Chacun montre quelque chose : la même chose et une autre. En montrant, chacun montre soi-même, donc montre aussi bien l'autre face de lui. Donc aussi se montre à lui : image se montre au texte qui se montre à elle. [...] Chacun tire l'autre vers soi ou se tire vers lui. C'est toujours en tension. Il y a du tirage, de la traction : pour tout dire, du trait. Ça tire et trace de part et d'autre de la
ligne invisible, non tracée, qui passe entre les deux sans passer nulle part. Ça tire et trace peut être rien d’autre que cette ligne impalpable... (121, 123)

Like in the work of dreams, an animated image plays once more a role in the theological discussion raging around the transubstantiation of species and the role of images in religious doctrine. The hallucination or the hysterizication of images is another way of envisaging the gaze. Hans Belting writes:

Images send us back our gaze, a fact signs are incapable of. Therefore there lies, inherent in images, an ambivalence between life and what pertains in them of their medial character: it differs from the readability of signs and addresses our capacity to animate things.

The doctrine of transubstantiation is also particularly fruitful for considering images. S. Tisseron recalls this when he insists on the role of the body in the visual process and its link with the Holy Trinity: “Like Christ who in Christian theology occupies an essential position as mediator between God and men, image is the essential mediation between bodies and words” (125-126). The reader’s body then will be the sieve (like that of enigma) through which this transmutation will be achieved, a fact or event pertaining to the "pictorial third" also.

Hence the link between the dream, the animated image (lifelike) and the fantastic which favours it, may be reaffirmed. A living painting, or tableau vivant of some sorts, we find in Le Fanu’s “Carmilla”, Poe’s “The Oval Portrait”, P. Dick’s “The Reaper’s Image” or even V. Woolf’s “The Lady in the Looking Glass”, something she probably recognized when she chose A Haunted House for the title of her collection. In “Carmilla”, the young lady who narrates the story announces: “I forget all my life preceding that event, and for some time after it is all obscure also; but the scenes I have just described stand out vivid as the isolated pictures of the phantasmagoria surrounded by darkness” (211). She then rediscovers a strange picture which has just been cleaned and thus is revealed in all its clarity:

I remembered it; it was a small picture, about a foot and a half high, and nearly square, without a frame; but it was so blackened by age that I had not been able to make it out.

The artist now produced it, with evident pride. It was quite beautiful; it was startling; it seemed to live. It was the effigy of Carmilla. (232)

For Belting, “Our imagination finds its place in the gaze we cast on images.” Image is perceived as rebellious, escaping forms of control, a feature she might share with the short story.

Poe’s stance:

And this is when, back to basics, the idea of unity brings us back to Poe’s seminal study, for it’s all there already. In 1842, reviewing Hawthorne’s Twice Told Tales, Poe defines the tale thanks to its “unity of effect or impression”; it must be “read at one sitting”, and “a certain unique or single effect [has] to be wrought out” (refce p 26). “Unique”, “single”, “wrought” are key terms for the short story for V. Shaw. For Poe then, already at the origin of the genre, a “desired effect” must be obtained and everything in the story must contribute to it. It is as if an image, a scene, got hold of a writer’s mind and that the narrative only came next as a means to recapture this first impression and communicate it to the reader as V. Shaw recalls:
So too does Poe’s insistence that only when the desired effect or impression is clear in the writer’s mind should he go on to invent incidents and arrange them in the order best calculated to establish this effect. Whatever the subject the aim is to pull the reader along towards a single moment when he finds impressed on his mind an effect identical to the one ‘preconceived’ by the writer. (9)

Poe resorts to a pictorial term to express this idea: the writer must “withhold the full impact of his design until it is complete” as well as when he defines the “Enjoyment for the reader who sees the image whole”:

And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable in the novel. (382, my emphasis).

For V. Shaw: “By means of careful contrivance, the idea has become an image, and reader and writer are brought into a rare state of intimacy as they share an identical perception” (10). This idea is close to John McGahern’s way of envisaging his work when a central image condenses the whole story, as he puts it in “The Image”:

When I reflect on the image two things from which it cannot be separated come: the rhythm and the vision. The vision, that still and private world which each of us possesses and which others cannot see, is brought to life in rhythm—rhythm being little more than the instinctive movements of the vision as it comes to life and begins its search for the image in a kind of grave, grave of the images of dead passions and their days.

Art is an attempt to create a world in which we can live: if not for long or forever, still a world of imagination over which we can reign, and by reign I mean to reflect purely on our situation though this created world of ours, this Medusa’s mirror allowing us to see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable. (McGahern 1991: 12)

This fine text perfectly applies to most of his stories and in particular to “Love of the World” or “Wheels” as we shall see. It holds before the reader’s eyes a Medusa’s mirror in which “the totally intolerable” is reflected. In this text he develops one of his favourite ideas, that of the link between image and imagination and how one strong image often triggers the writing of a story or a novel.

A short remark: Valerie Shaw analyzes the shape of the short story in its production context. Conditioned by the space allocated to it in newspapers, the short story had a limit of 2000 words. Compression then was necessary, what Kipling called “economy of implication” (Shaw 7). Valerie Shaw remarks that immediacy, compression, vitality, all those qualities are also shared with journalism, to which we could add the importance of the visual and of the image both in text and alongside of it. Wasn’t one of the XIXth and beginning of the XXth century’s favourite magazines entitled The Illustration? London Illustrated News? Leslie’s, a self-termed “Illustrated Weekly Magazine” Norman Rockwell worked for in 1917?

Its “single-minded concision” goes hand in hand with its quality as a hybrid genre. The short story has its own aesthetic. Could we see then its use of strong images as short cuts, as short-circuits to reach meaning more quickly and more efficiently? (cf the function of image) This is a topic I will address later on.

The analogy of “shape” between short story and image – a telling metaphor as it also pertains to the arts – and a particular shape at that, requiring density and tightly-knit effects, reveals the short story’s affinity with the unity of effect of the visual arts, that is, when an image has to be seized instantly. V. Shaw quotes Henry James who was keen
on visual analogy not only for thematic or metaphoric purposes but also for formal reasons:

Individually, each story might be self-contained and limited in representational power, but when accumulated these “illustrations” could make up a comprehensive survey, comparable to the inclusive though wandering vision afforded by a camera obscura. James himself drew the visual analogy when he wrote in 1888 to tell Stevenson that for the next years he planned to concentrate on short fiction: “I want to leave a multitude of pictures of my time, projecting my small circular frame upon as many different spots as possible.”

“[P]rojecting my small circular frame”, says James. The use of this small frame one now often sees riveted to the eye of film directors shows to what extent James would fragment the real in as many small vignettes and give birth to a short story. A story combined with another one and then another one would then constitute a montage resembling a panel or panorama, so popular in the late 19th century that Paris counts amongst its “passages” that of the Panoramas. Walter Benjamin will make great use of them as we know.

When Valerie Shaw insists on the parallel between painting and short story, she sees it as a working concept. “One of the aims of the present study is to suggest that such comparisons between the short story and the visual arts are not merely rhetorical” (12). She recalls that when James writes in his notes for “The Coxon Fund”: “The formula for the presentation of it in 20,000 words is to make an Impression – as one of Sargent’s pictures is an impression”\(^\text{(10)}\), he draws attention to the most significant aspect of the short story as distinct from the novel. “Impression” (in italics), the unity of which Poe recommended, reappears under James’s pen as a phenomenon typical of the double articulation between the textual and the visual. Finally, that James should evoke Sargent is in itself of primary import, for this fruitful word/image comparison springs from the writer’s fancy itself. It speaks volumes on his pictorial tastes but also on the way he conceived his work and its aesthetic mores. Sargent provides both a model and a reflection of what James was trying to do. And The Portrait of a Lady, be she in white or not, kept both artists busy. According to James, because of its sudden effect, the short story produces an impression of totality and triggers the need to grasp it all at one glimpse. Moreover, “impression” refers to a new mode of painting which was changing the way of looking at the world and consequently the way of writing it.

Critical discourse

So we can conclude that if the link between literature and painting is constantly reaffirmed in literature, the same goes with critical discourse as Valerie Shaw’s example among others, testifies to. Even though she too quickly assimilates Woolf’s or Mansfield’s writing to Impressionism, the links between pictura and poesis build up a theoretical standpoint from which to examine the text: “because it leaves a sense of something complete yet unfinished, a sensation which vibrates in the reader’s or spectator’s mind and demands that he participates in the aesthetic interchange between the artist and his subject” (Shaw 12), the interaction between the two arts is fruitful and the dialogue a neverending one.

In Valerie Shaw’s own discourse it is easy to pin down to what extent she resorts to the visual to speak of literature, not only by referring to schools of painting or to manners or styles, but also by tracing analogies resting on practice and pictorial techniques. We
have seen that she envisages a collection of stories as a series of illustrations which put together produce a cumulative effect. They project a complete vision of the subject she compares to the full although hazy vision offered by camera obscura, a contraption widely made use of by painters and probably by Vermeer. A variation on this kind of box used for perspective purposes is Hoogstraten’s box kept in the National Gallery of London. For painters it was a practical way of reducing three-dimensional space to two dimensions and to solve problems of perspective and illusionary space.

3/ So now has come the time to wonder how the use of the image in short story writing bears back upon intermedial studies?

If criticism has for a long time assimilated the image to a form of language going as far as saying that it had to be “read” in terms of its grammar, its lexicon, its syntax, can’t we now turn the topic upon its head and argue that we may apply ut pictura poesis davvero that is to say, see what kind of idiom pertaining to painting may be applied to the text to open the eye of the text? Asking this question we may notice that the vocabulary of literary criticism has made free use of painterly terms which we will find both in criticism and also in works.

I propose to distinguish among the analogies between the shape of the short story and that of images and the references to art history we may find in short stories building up a poetics of the pictorial and introducing intermedial criticism.

Technical analogies: formal approach: Pictorial Markers

Actually critical discourse has already used formal terms proper to painting or the image such as canvas, colour, the window and frames or framing effects, anamorphosis, perspective and so on. I will select a few examples.

A. Informal borrowings:

i. The white square of canvas

In Karen Blixen’s “The Blank Page”, an analogy is established between a white canvas and a blank page that is the mystery of the unsaid which bears no trace, as silent and mysterious as Malevitch’s White square on white square. “The Blank Page” by Karen Blixen blends together the blank page and a white canvas. An old crone tells an age-old story transmitted from mother to daughter: in a convent in Portugal, a portrait gallery exhibits within heavy frames the names of young princesses together with a piece of the linen sheet cut off on the day following the royal wedding. “Within the faded markings of the canvases people of some imagination and sensibility may read all the signs of the zodiac […]. Or they may there find pictures from their own world of ideas: a rose, a heart, a sword—or even a heart pierced through with a sword” (Blixen 101). One of these pieces of linen sheet remains blank and blank is the frame deprived of the princess’s name. Faced with this absence, the befuddled spectators remain speechless but keep on furiously thinking whereas no explanation is provided. Thus is staged the process of interpretation, the sudden dazzling effect produced by the empty blank
“page” as meaning indefinitely wanders, is differed without ever being fixed. For if the stained sheets offer an opening onto the future, the blank sheet remains inviolable, mute and enigmatic because of the presence of the absence it exhibits. “What happened ?”, to quote Deleuze in his analysis of the difference between tale and short story.

**ii. Colour: a challenge.**

“What a poet you are in colour”, writes V. Woolf in 1940 to Vanessa about a portrait of Quentin.11 To which Vanessa answers : “I don’t see how you use colours in writing, but [...] perhaps you don’t really describe the looks but only the impression the looks made upon you” (Gillespie 277). Colour for Woolf will remain an enigma. Yet she will write stories close to the instant seizure of painting or of snapshots ; she will try to render colour in particular as in the very short story “Blue and Green”.

In this story, the two paragraphs stand as a diptych in which the two colours would stand facing one another each on their own panel. Once more the title Blue & Green, in italics overhangs the two subtitles GREEN BLUE (in block capitals) as in a diptych. This short story is a case in point as it develops the adventures of colour *per se* in the form of a series of tiny vignettes, —somewhat like in “Three Pictures” but on a smaller scale—, juxtaposing “views” cleanly separated by semi-colons and told in the present tense:

> All day long the ten fingers of the lustre drop green upon the marble. […] But the hard glass drips on to the marble ; the pools hover above the desert sand ; the camels lurch through them ; the pools settle on the marble ; rushes edge them ; weeds clog them ; here and there a white blossom ; the frog flops over ; at night the stars are set there unbroken. (Woolf 1989 : 142)

With the passage of time, blue takes precedence: “It’s night; the needles drip blots of blue. The green’s out” (142). A beginning, a middle and an ending ; a story has been told but its *tour de force* rests on the fact that its main characters are colours, the colours of a tale. So colour is another of the “pictorial markers” I offer as critical tools to open “the eye of the text”. Blue and green are the two colours typical of Woolf’s imagination and apparently favourites of hers. In the poem-like “piece” considered here, green is repeated six times in the text and twice in the title and subtitle ; blue, nine times and twice more as well. Blue and green figure in innumerable other instances in Woolf’s stories. In “The Fascination of the Pool”, “green [...] rippled from bank to bank” (226). In “Slater’s Pins”, Miss Craye wears “blue in winter, green in summer”. In “Nurse Lugton’s Curtain”, “the blue stuff turned to blue air” before reverting back to its material quality : “the air became blue stuff.” (160-161)

**iii. Frames and framing effects:**

Poe’s “The Oval Portrait”’s frame is an incomplete one. The first narrator arrives wounded at the castle ; he finds the book which contains the story of the portrait. But at the end of the story there is no return to the first narrative and the last words of the short story are “she was dead —” signalling at the same time the death of the narrator incapable of going beyond the stretch of the dash, bleeding to death in his turn after the last touch of the brush and of the pen. The story remains unclosed, unhinged. In the same way “The Fall of the House of Usher” opens and closes with the description of the house and of the tarn. From fissure to breaking apart, and their coincidence.
Circular frames are recurrent in McGahern’s short stories, a trait which is a kind of signature also pointing to his vision of life as a wheel, something already apparent in one of his early short stories, “Wheels”. This story begins with the evocation of “loose wheels rattling, and nothing but wait and watch and listen, and I listened to the story they were telling” (McGahern 1992: 3) and ends with a description of the countryside with “[...] all the vivid sections of the wheel we watched so slowly turn, impatient for the rich whole that never came but that all preparations promised” (11). “Like all Other Men” ends upon a variation on T. S. Eliot’s own phrase in “East Coker” as the chiasmus pinpoints the ineluctability of the death-trap life is : “In my end is my beginning, he recalled. In my beginning is my end, his and hers, mine and thine” (McGahern 1992: 280).

On the narrative level, Woolf’s short pieces often are very tightly held together by verbal clasps as it were. Like a picture frame, they play the part of a parergon, in between the reader’s world and the œuvre itself. In “Nurse Lugton’s Curtain”, order, disorder, return to order, are clearly indicated by the paragraphs’ setting, and the function of the “blue stuff” which undergoes the different metamorphoses of the blue fabric. Of course, an echo of Shakespeare’s The Tempest - “We are such stuff as dreams are made of” - cannot be ignored.

Structurally speaking, beginnings and endings often stand in an echo system, coupled together in the coda with general truths uttered by the narrator. In “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection”, the same sentence (“People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms...”) opens and closes the story. “It is impossible that one should not see pictures” is echoed by “What a picture it made!” in “Three Pictures”. In “Slater’s Pins Have No Points”, Miss Craye’s ambiguous opening question “Slater’s pins have no points—don’t you always find?” finds its answer in her final surrender when she affirms, laughing : “Slater’s pins have no points”. The second paragraph of “The Fascination of the Pool”, which opens with “pools have some curious fascination, one knows not what”, meets a possible answer in the explicit: “That perhaps is why one loves to sit and look into pools”.

The short “stories” often adopt the same kind of structure: as in “the Symbol”, a beautiful image is cruelly found to be deceptive. Illusion is opposed to reality in the very last lines of the story : this is the case with “The Lady in the Looking-Glass” or “The Fascination of the Pool”, among other very “visual” or “pictorial” stories. In “Three Pictures”, the cruel opposition between the euphoric first picture and the dysphoric last one is brought about by the text which voices the fragility inherent in human life : “All was as quiet, as safe [as] could be. Yet, one kept thinking, a cry had rent it ; [...] This goodness, this safety were only on the surface” (Woolf 1989 : 230).

K. Mansfield too favoured this kind of neat framing effect. “At The Bay” for instance opens as an overture with “Very early morning. The sun was not yet risen” (201) and ends up with “A cloud small, serene, floated across the moon. In that moment of darkness the sea sounded deep, troubled. Then the cloud sailed away, and the sound of the sea was a vague murmur, as though it waked out of a dark dream. All was still” (236). The enclosure technique follows the plot from dawn to dusk and brings unity to the different fragments.

Besides the narrative level, framing effects may be found within the diegesis itself. In Woolf’s “The Fascination of the Pool”, the vision is framed and darkened by the neighbouring rushes : “Round the edge was so thick a fringe of rushes that their
reflections made a darkness like the darkness of very deep water” (Woolf 1989 : 226). Frames are also referred to under the guise of windows, door frames or thresholds “framing” characters. Two fine examples can be analysed.

iv. The window

41 The window is reminiscent of Alberti’s famous prescription: “to make a picture one has to draw a quadrangolo which is like a window open onto composition (la storia)”. A window may be seen as a metaphor of creation and may substitute for the pictorial.

42 S. Milhauser’s “Snowmen” opens with a description of a scene as already framed and divided into smaller rectangles by a window. This very pictorial description, as I have defined them elsewhere, has its pictorial quality confirmed by the oncoming reference to prints.

One sunny morning I woke and pushed aside a corner of the blinds. Above the frosted, sun-dazzled bottom of the glass I saw a brilliant blue sky, divided into luminous rectangles by the orderly white strips of wood in my window. Down below, the back yard had vanished. In its place was a dazzling white sea, whose lifted and immobile waves would surely have toppled if I had not looked at them just then. [...] [the icicles] reminded me of glossy and matte prints in my father’s albums. (my emphasis)

43 In “Slater’s Pins Have No Points”, after Fanny Wilmot has eventually found the lost pin on the carpet, she has a glimpse of a new Miss Craye lost in ecstasy:

She sat there, half turned away from the piano, with her hands clasped in her lap holding the carnation upright, while behind her was the sharp square of the window, uncurtained, purple in the evening, intensely purple after the brilliant lights which burnt unshaded in the bare music room (Woolf 1989: 220)

44 Miss Craye’s figure is delineated by the “sharp square of the window” behind her. She clearly stands as the portrait of a lady while her true nature is revealed in the equation between the intensely purple London night and her passionate self: the purple colour of the background, that is red mixed with blue, suggests the erotic undertone of the evening revelation. In “Three Pictures”, a door frame explicitly plays the same framing role as the window: “We cannot possibly break out of the frame of the picture by speaking natural words. You see me leaning against the door of the smithy with a horseshoe in my hand and you think as you go by ‘How picturesque!’” (Woolf 1989 : 229). “How picturesque!” This metapictorial comment finds its counterpart in “The First Picture” in which “picture” is repeated fourteen times on one single page. The self-reflexive nature of the story is “mis en abyme” thanks to the hall of mirrors of the different frames: that of the main title: “Three Pictures”, that of the three subtitles: “The First (Second then Third) Picture” and that of the sub-subtitle: “The Sailor’s Homecoming” embedded in “The First Picture”.

45 As we have seen, this list of informal borrowings, by literary writers or critics, of terms proper to painting or the image could also include anamorphosis, perspective, collage...

B. Art History: endless borrowings.

46 Of note: References may figure in an overt or a covert way.

47 Phrases like “a Van Dyke beard”, “a Tiepolo ceiling” are very compact and offer a great advantage in terms of economy of means, of compression. They achieve what we may call a “shortcircuit effect”: that is they dispense the narrator with long descriptions
and thanks to an adjective they condense in one formula a pictorial effect that would be
time-consuming. If the reader has the necessary referent, he will immediately “see”
what figure this man cuts, what kind of a ceiling this house displays. Of course if he/she
does not... this is one of the risks of allusion.

48 “Medusa’s Ankles”, A. Byatt’s story, clearly refers to one of the founding myths of
representation and painting as L. Marin clearly showed. Byatt’s collection The Matisse
Stories is itself a tribute to Matisse whose oeuvre is visibly present in the book.

49 In Melville’s “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids”¹³, it is a canonical
figure of painting, that of Veronica’s veils, which appears. The power of this image,
which also plays the part of a screen, is ambiguous and enigmatic. Guided by Cupid, a
shady sort of guide in the paper mill, the narrator is initiated to the making of the pulp.
He discovers different kinds of impressions such as “an impress of a wreath of roses”,
in relief, then urged on by Cupid he inscribes the latter’s name which is then processed
through the machine before its “rebirth”:

I saw a sort of paper-fall, not wholly unlike a water-fall; a scissory sound smote my
ear, as of some cord being snapped, and down dropped an unfolded sheet of perfect
foolscap, with my “Cupid” half faded out of it, and still moist and warm.

50 His reverie leads him to think that “all sorts of writings would be writ on those now
vacant things”. The projection of these future writings on “vacant” paper would turn
these “vacant things” into objects: letters, signs indicating the writing of still unborn
things. Then contemplating the pulp, he hallucinates the faces of the young girls in
pictorial manner:

I seemed to see, glued to the pallid incipience of the pulp, the yet more pallid faces
of all the pallid girls I had eyed that heavy day. Slowly, mournfully, beseechingly,
yet unresistingly, they gleamed along, their agony dimly outlined on the imperfect
paper, like the print of the tormented face on the handkerchief of Saint Veronica.

51 The pulp emprisons (“dimly outlined”) the print of the pain of the young girls and their
flesh the pulp is made of, as well as the consequences of the process: “So, through
consumptive pallors of this blank, raggy life, go these white girls to death”. The
spectral apparition projects the face par excellence and Woedolor, the name of the
mountain, redoubles the signifier (woe and dolor) as when at the foot of the cross on
Mount Golgotha (meaning skull) a death head rests (Adam’s). We find again the
classical exchange between eros and thanatos, model/painting as in “The Oval Portrait”
and the emergence of the paper is described as a birth:

when, suddenly I saw a sort of paper-fall not wholly unlike a water-fall; a scissory
sound smote my ear, as of some cord being snapped and down dropped an unfolded
sheet of perfect foolscap, with my “Cupid” half faded out of it, and still moist and
warm [...] ‘Ay, foolscap’ handling the piles of moist, warm sheets, which continually were
being delivered into the woman’s waiting hands (37-38).

52 Titles may also directly indicate their visual origins. Some of the titles of Mansfield’s
stories (“Feuille d’album”, “Pictures”) or of V. Woolf’s (“Three Pictures”, “The Lady in
the Looking Glass : A Reflection”, “Portraits”, “Scenes of the Life of a Naval Officer”,
“Nurse Lugton’s Curtain”) are closely linked to the visual in a metareflexive way.
“Three Pictures” even includes three subtitles in keeping with its nature as it adopts
the form of a polyptych and more precisely that of a triptych. Within “the first picture”
of the triptych another subtitle is mentioned reinforcing the visual trend: “So now at
the turn of the road I saw one of these pictures. It might have been called ‘The Sailor’s Homecoming’ or some such title” (Woolf 1989 : 229).

Genres:

53 **Still life or aesthetic arrangement:** Bertha’s glass fruit bowl in Mansfield’s “Bliss” is an example, as is the image of the pear tree delineated against the window-frame: “The windows of the drawing-room opened overlooking the garden. At the far end, against the wall, there was a tall, slender pear tree in fullest, richest bloom; it stood perfect, as though becalmed against the jade-green sky”. Genres such as portrait, as seascape, as still-life painting also may serve as patterns to a short story. “The Lady in the Looking Glass”, “Flesh and the Mirror” and “The Oval Portrait” build up portraits for example.

54 In this category, the short story moulding itself onto the ancient pictorial form of a polyptych was adopted for V. Woolf’s “Portraits”, although this group of nine “sketches” was partially arranged according to the editor’s choice and guesses (Dick, ed. 307). V. Woolf’s “Blue and Green” may be seen as a diptych as we have already seen. Another diptych we have met is Melville’s story: “The Paradise of Bachelors and The Tartarus of Maids” with its two panels, one dedicated to the bachelors in Temple Bar, and the other one to the poor exploited maids.

55 **The picture gallery** may appear, as in “The Blank Page”, or the collection of short stories may take up the form of a picture gallery: examples might be found reading S. Anderson, R. Carver, H. James, E. Welty…

56 **“Substitutes of the pictorial”** as I have defined them e.g. mirrors, water (ponds, tarns, pools), miniatures, tapestries, maps, photographs etc. The visual is not restricted to painting but it also includes “semiotic mediators” as as many variations of/on the pictorial. Woolf makes great use of mirrors, tapestries and optical devices or instruments fulfilling a variety of textual or narrative functions such as telescopes, “The Searchlight”, magnifying glasses, lenses and other camera obscura….

57 Given these various devices used by writers, I will venture to offer a typology of pictorial short story according to two types.

4/ A typology of the “pictorial” short story:

58 **The image as story**, that is the image as described in the short story constitutes the narrative and the body of the story: “The Blank Page” or blank canvas, “The Oval Portrait”, Murray Bail’s “The Drover’s Wife”, Byatt’s *TheMatisse Stories*, just to give a few examples. In those stories, the image stands at the origin of the story and generates the telling. The fantastic may animate the description of the image (link with ekphrasis and narrativisation) which constitutes the body of the story which is moulded on the metamorphoses or anamorphoses of the image. “Snowmen” by S. Milhauser can be read as a description and a narrative, that of the three-day metamorphosis of sculpted images, their story: their emergence, their becoming snow sculptures even more splendid and inventive and then their vanishing after a fantastic episode. Like a story of styles also with a childish stage then a realistic one and then a mannerist even ghoulish one.

Yet even those visions of the morning partook of the world they longed to supplant, and it was not until the afternoon that our snowmen began to achieve freedoms so
dangerous that they threatened to burn our eyes of beholders. It was then that distorted, elongated, disturbingly supple figures began to replace our punctilious imitations. And yet I sensed they were not distortions, those ungraspable figures, but direct expressions of shadowy inner realms.

59 Another instance of the narrativisation of the description in true ekphrastic manner might be “At the Bay” by K. Mansfield. One last example, M.R. James’s “The Mezzotint” follows the metamorphosis of a mezzotint on a fantastic mode.

60 The short story as image (la nouvelle-image). There the telling engenders an image, the short story itself works as an image (or a mirror) and leaves the imprint of one on the reader’s inner screen, an instance of what I call “the pictorial third”. In “The Fascination of the Pool”, the story provokes an image–effect. It may read as a long narrative on the theme of contemplation. A character lying by a pool little by little lets his/her fancy evoke events and characters as well as the forgotten voices of the past. It is in and by the gaze that the hypnotic effect of water conjures up those fanciful figures. The sale of the farm of Romford Mill together with its cattle, tools and implements represents the abrupt end of a family. The selling bill is reflected in the water: “One could trace the big red letters in which Romford Mill was printed in the water. A tinge of red was in the green that rippled from bank to bank” (Woolf 1989: 226). The very visual impression literally shows that the red letters are “printed in the water” and make up an image. The very materiality of the minimal signifier, the letter, is foregrounded although at the same time it is inscribed in a ceaselessly animated fluid element. The tinge of red has brewed and seeped into the green sleeping water.

61 Many details are minutely strung together as if the narrator were using a magnifying glass and almost obsessively noted in only one paragraph:

Round the edge was so thick a fringe of rushes that their reflections made a darkness like the darkness of very deep water. However in the middle was something white […] the centre of the water reflected the white placard, and when the wind blew the centre of the pool seemed to flow and ripple like a piece of washing. One could trace the big red letters in which Romford Mill was printed in the water. A tinge of red was in the green that rippled from bank to bank. (226, my emphasis)

62 These details and the recurring visual apparatus offered by the story also concur with what I call “pictorial markers”, that is, textual markers clearly encoding the presence of the visual, of the pictorial (meaning picture in a more restricted sense). The literary text will not only mimic but work along the same lines as painting, image or “the visual” broadly speaking. Let us remember Woolf often wondered “how she could write as a painter would paint” (Lee 370).

63 The text leaves the imprint of an image on the reader’s mind: it is the case with McGahern’s “Love of the World” or again with the “Fall of the House of Usher”. The latter works on a series of mirror effects: the tarn sends back an inverted image of the house which eventually collapses into it. And oral equivalents of the visual, that is to say echoes, also pervade and structure the story: the Mad Trist (128) read by Roderick echoes Madeline’s slow progression, “the echo” is a “counterpart” figure in the text. Madeline and Roderick are twins and so are Roderick and the narrator to a certain extent. The imprint left by such images as conveyed by texts provoke what I call the effect of “the Pictorial Third”, neither here nor there, neither text nor image but in-between on the reader’s interior screen.
I will argue that this twofold phenomenon - image triggering short story (discourse) and short story conveying an image - is most readily achieved in short-story writing. The brevity of the form may encapsulate or radiate an image as a whole in a much easier way than the longer form, i.e. the novel. This is not the case of the poem, a fact Poe saw very well, for he envisaged the short story as an in-between form half-way between the poem and the longer form. V. Woolf would also have agreed with this fact as she strove to find a new form, a playpoem, in The Waves or Between the Acts. The Picture of Dorian Gray is an in-between example, a kind of limit of the genre (just as a novella is) as it started as a tale and ended as a novel after the rewriting and the two Lipincott’s editions. Longer novels would require more work on the part of the reader (and of the writer) to maintain the link between its “shape” and an image. Thus the image is more often embedded in a novel whereas it can take up the whole space of a short story. Therefore this could account for the novel’s affinity with series of paintings as in D.M. Thomas’s Pictures at an Exhibition, or with painterly procedures, for example in Urquhart’s The Underpainter. Most often if an image runs through a novel it works on the intermittent mode, that of oscillation between word and image, the twinkling blinking eye of the text, as is the case with To the Lighthouse where Lily Briscoe’s painting runs through the novel and ends it up with the famous “I have had my vision”. In Girl with a Pearl Earring, if the painting is the backbone of the novel it also works alongside other instances of Vermeer’s paintings. This is also the case with J. Coe’s The Rain before it Falls which starts its chapters with the ekphrasis of a photograph described to a blind girl as part of her inheritance, and the novel reads as a film reel or series of “exposures”, the title of a short story by V. O’Sullivan.

So I think we may decidedly conclude that there is a strong affinity between the short story and the image and the rest of this conference will amply prove it I expect, enabling all of us to indulge in the pleasure of making the most of both media, of enjoying both word and image, to our hearts’ content. If a “skilful artist has contructed a tale”, he/she also has conveyed a fine image, a fine instance of word/image event.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

2. Editor’s note: Liliane Louvel’s keynote address is published here as it was presented in the opening session of the CRILA Conference on The Image and the Short Story, held at the University of Angers in March 2010.
3. I have already tried to approach the question of the sisters’ arts in “‘Oh to be Silent! Oh to be a Painter’ ‘the sisters’ arts’: Virginia and Vanessa”. Virginia Woolf, le pur et l’impur.
6. “(les images) nous renvoient le regard que nous portons sur elles, ce dont les signes sont incapables. Il existe donc, inhérente aux images, une ambivalence entre la vie et ce qui relève en elles de leur caractère médial: elle différe de la lisibilité des signes et s’adresse à notre capacité d’animation.” (167).
7. The Pictorial Third as developed in Liliane Louvel, Le tiers pictural, pour une critique intermédial.
8. “Notre propre imagination vient se nichier dans le regard que nous posons sur les images” (167).
12. We know that this story was called by Woolf her “little sapphist story” in a letter to Vita Sackville-West. See S. Dick, ed. (306-307). The text is clear enough in this respect.
13. I have studied this text at further length in “La capture de l’ombre: questions posées à la vera icona. Du miroir obscur à l’écran.”, L’obscur.

ABSTRACTS

Y a-t-il une affinité entre la nouvelle et le visuel ? Instantanéité d’effet, un morceau détachable, saisie d’emblée de l’ensemble comme un tableau. Autant de traits qui communément semblent le confirmer. Y aurait-il alors une analogie de forme entre la forme brève et l’image picturale photographique ou autre ? On pourra tenter de voir comment les nouvelles ont pu mettre en scène ce rapport entre visible et lisible, ce qui mènera à interroger et la théorie de la nouvelle et celle de l’image dans ce chassé-croisé entre les deux modalités du voir et de l’écrire. La nouvelle à fort coefficient pictural serait-elle alors un parfait exemple de « texte/image » forme hybride entre l’un et l’autre, ni l’un ni l’autre, mais point de rencontre des deux sur le mode de
l'oscillation constitutive de son mode à être ? Les exemples viendront offrir leur espace pragmatique pour vérifier cette « idée de recherche » qui s’inscrit dans une recherche plus large, celui des études intermédiales.

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Liliane Louvel is Professor of British literature at the University of Poitiers and specializes in contemporary British literature and word/image relationship. She has written numerous articles on this particular subject and published five books on the interrelationship between word and image: L'œil du texte (Toulouse PUM 1998), The Picture of Dorian Gray, Le double miroir de l’art (Ellipses, 2000), Texte/image, images à lire et textes à voir (Rennes PUR 2002), Le tiers pictural (PUR 2010). She has also published three collections of essays on the subject published in EJES, La licorne and PURennes II. Word/image, EJES, ŠLike Painting, La licorne et aux PURennes II les Actes du colloque de Cerisy : Texte/image nouveaux problèmes with Henri Scepi. Poetics of the Iconotext, a translation of L. Louvel’s former works by Laurence Petit (University of Montpellier) edited by Pr. Karen Jacobs (Boulder University USA), will be published in August 2011 by Ashgate Publications.
“Disjected Snapshots”: Photography in the Short Stories of Elizabeth Bowen

Shannon Wells-Lassagne

Elizabeth Bowen wrote a vast array of critical articles, notably on the short story, and her comments are often highly revealing of the elements that she herself considers as important to the genre. Thus, in her preface to her wartime short stories, she refers to her work as a series of photographs: “Taken singly, they [the short stories] are disjected snapshots – snapshots taken from close up, too close up, in the middle of the mêlée of a battle”. (Bowen 1986: 99) This simultaneous acknowledging and belittling of the photographic influence on Bowen’s work was typical of the author’s critical commentary: thus, for example, she referred to her stories as visual sketches, but also emphasized that this visual component was often detrimental to the narrative nature of the short story. This quote can perhaps be put into perspective by comparing it with another where the visual arts are used to describe the short story; in another of her prefaces to a collection of short stories she edited, she comments: “The story should be as composed, in the plastic sense, and as visual as a picture.” (Bowen 1950: 42-43)

When such statements are juxtaposed with the recurrent appearance of the photograph in the plots of several of her short stories, the reader must wonder as to the relationship between her general statement and her particular practice: to what extent does photographic composition figure in her short stories? Clearly, Bowen considered not only that the descriptive image is carefully composed to express the artist’s vision, but also that this composition, and the heightened significance that it creates, are necessary elements of the short story. Thus, the photographic composition that I will be focusing on will be not just the way in which Bowen describes the careful structuring of each of the photographs, but essentially how the use of the genre allows the author to compose her own stories.

As is apparent from this first quote, Bowen was an author who considered her writing in very visual terms; she had initially wanted to be a painter, and her critical writing is filled with statements associating writing with painting, photography, or the cinema.
Moreover, the influence of the sister arts on her literature was not by any means limited to a simple critical metaphor; one of the particularities of her writing, both in her novels and her short stories, is the emphasis placed on the visual aspects of her texts: description, unspoken visual communication between characters, or the way in which appearance and reality are complex yet inextricably linked. Visual imagery appears to be especially important in Bowen’s short stories, as she makes clear in the notes to a lecture at Wellesley College, “The Experience of Writing”, included in Phyllis Lassner’s book on Bowen’s short texts:

The short story was good for me in two ways. 1) visual 2) the poetic stress on the moment. The impression for its own sake – spotlit, isolated – only slight need for rationalization and explanation. All my short stories have departed from a visual impression to which some poetic sign attached. (Lassner 122)

As we can see in the final phrase of this passage, the inspiration for her short stories is always visual. To relate this passage more clearly back to the idea of the photograph, it is interesting that both of the characteristic elements that for Bowen define the short story genre as she uses it, the visual and momentary nature of the medium, can also be related to photography: thus, beyond the simple idea that vision is the impetus behind the short stories, the use of the photo as the key element in the short stories discussed here heightens the prevalence of this visual element. As such, the recurrence of photographs in her short stories is a means by which to make concrete the relationship between language and vision in these texts.

The significance of the photographs in their plots is above all structural. Each of the stories basically uses the same sequence of events: it opens with a rather traditional visual description before introducing the conflict (of which the photograph is generally a part). Thus, the visual imagery that is present in the exposition of the story is both symbolized and justified by the photograph which follows it. An example from “Daffodils” should allow us to clarify this point:

Today the houses seemed taller and farther apart; the street wider and full of a bright, clear light that cast no shadows and was never sunshine. Under archways and between houses the distances had a curious transparency, as though they had been painted on glass. Against the luminous and indeterminate sky the Abbey tower rose distinct and delicate. (“Daffodils” 21)

In the story, Miss Murcheson, an unmarried schoolteacher trying to teach her students the value of small pleasures (like the flowers of the title), gains their esteem when they erroneously interpret a photograph of her as being proof of a romantic relationship. What is interesting in this introductory passage is the clear comparison made between the fictional world of visual imagery that the reader discovers and its artistic nature: the distances have been painted on glass, and the tower is described not as existing independently, but as an effect of contrast with the sky behind it. Thus, the reader is faced not with a description, but with an image, composed so as to give weight to certain elements of the landscape (the importance of contrasts, the unique nature of the light), but also so as to emphasize the aestheticism of the “reality” described. When photographs are introduced into the story, the visual nature of the composition becomes even more clear. Miss Murcheson goes home, and she is surrounded by photos. By moving them, she then becomes the subject of a photograph herself:

Quickly she entered the sitting-room and flung open the window, which [...] clanked the little pictures on the walls. The window embrasure was so deep that there was little light in the corners of the room [...]. The square of daylight by the window was blocked by a bamboo table groaning under an array of photographs.
her sweeping mood she deposed the photographs, thrust the table to one side, and pulled her chair up into the window. “I can’t correct my essays in the dark,” she asserted, though she had done so every evening of the year. (“Daffodils” 22)

6 For once, Miss Murcheson has decided to take the place of the photos, and work by the light outside. As such, she is “framed” by the window, which itself displays the painted background already discussed in the exposition of the short story: she has become a portrait. Indeed, the image created here by the author is echoed throughout the rest of the story, which is in fact the discussion of her actual photograph, seen and misinterpreted. The use of this medium allows the author to emphasize previous elements in the story (notably the visual nature of her exposition, and the character’s status as subject and object of the beholder’s gaze – here the reader’s, later that of the other characters examining her snapshot) so as to relate it thematically to the short story as a whole. Likewise, by using the photograph as a principle element in the plot, Bowen manages to better assimilate the idea of the visual into a language art, avoiding the idea of the reification that could occur with an over-abundant use of hypotyposis possible especially in the descriptive incipit, by relating this description to the narrative use of photos.

7 However, it should not be assumed that Bowen wishes all visual description to be assimilated directly to all the characteristics of the photographic medium. Indeed, in the introductory passage of “Daffodils” we have just examined, there seems to be an express desire to accentuate the textual and artistic nature of the scene described. The fact that it appears to be “painted on glass” is a clear reminder that though the author may be using the photographic medium to clarify its visual nature, here the description can be more closely associated with painting, all the while emphasizing that what we are reading is carefully created and composed to give the maximum effect with a minimum number of elements. It is not the picture, but the author’s word painting that is composed. Thus, the visual imagery created through language is fictional. Photography, on the other hand, is characterized in Bowen’s texts by its necessarily referential and mimetic nature. As Roland Barthes makes clear in his seminal work on photography, La Chambre claire (or Camera Lucida in English), language and photography are opposites, in the sense that language is always fictional, without the means to authenticate itself, whereas photography is necessarily authentic, referring back to a subject which must have been present in order for the photograph to exist.

8 In the first passage, the confusion of the subjects with the photographs representing them is such that the reader is at first presented with imagery reminiscent of Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland: the stack of relatives cannot fail to recall the playing-card royalty of the children’s tale. In the second passage, Cicely asks her brother to search not for the portrait of his fiancée, but for his fiancée herself, which is then described as if it were itself acting as the character would no doubt do: “the portrait of his beloved [was]
looking out coyly at him”. As such, the photograph is apparently presented in Bowen’s short stories as the ultimate tool for mimetic representation, where reality and representation are literally indistinguishable, an attribute that may seem at odds with the author’s own association with Modernist experimentation. However, the use made of photography in another story, “Recent Photograph”, may allow us to re-examine the referential nature of the visual genre.

In “Recent Photograph”, the protagonist, Bertram Lukin, is an ambitious newspaper reporter sent to investigate a grisly murder-suicide in the London suburbs. While interrogating the neighbours of the husband who killed his wife and then himself, Lukin is faced with two separate interpretations of the couple’s relationship. The appearance of the second witness makes it clear that the reporter is not interested in truth, but in clarity:

He didn’t want two stories, after all, and he knew perfectly well that Verbena was only going to contradict her mother’s. He had the stuff half-written in his mind already; it was beginning to rise in his brain like a cake in an oven. The whole truth was, for the purposes of his profession, a thing of too various dimensions to be easily encompassed. (“Recent Photograph” 217)

Here language is clearly a fictional medium in which truth is, if not impossible, at least always complex (too much so for a newspaper). In the end, the second story is heard only because Verbena has a recent photograph of the couple, and it is this visual document which supposedly holds truth. However, at the conclusion of the story, the reader is still not clear on which story is going to be reported, or to what extent it will be an amalgamation of the accounts, or even an outright fabrication. Nonetheless, the photograph is “proof” of the story told, whatever that story may be. Though the visual medium is strongly mimetic and referential, the truth it contains is always subject to the interpretation of others. Therefore, the proof it gives is never final, except as a proof of existence; the mimesis it affords is limited by the linguistic context in which it is ensconced.

Likewise, the mimesis so characteristic of the photograph is shown consistently in Bowen’s short stories as being uninteresting, even senseless, without the context of the story to give it meaning. Pure mimesis therefore needs the fictional shape that language imposes on it. For example, in “The Needlecase”, a threadbare bourgeois family hires a seamstress, Miss Fox, to give them an appearance of wealth (or at least, new upholstery) to impress the newest rich fiancée of the currently absent eldest son Arthur. Miss Fox is a source of much interest to the family: her fees are accessible because she is less than respectable with an illegitimate child whose picture is hidden in the needlecase of the title. The photograph is viewed twice, and it is significant that only the second glance is of any interest to the family. When a family member first views the photograph, without a context, it is simply the image of a child like any other; upon its second appearance, two other family members view it while the seamstress recounts her meeting with Arthur. This second viewing, described once Miss Fox has told of her encounter with the family’s eldest son, constitutes the climax of the story:

[Angela] and Frank both stared at the photograph of the child. They saw, as Toddy had seen, its curls and collar. Like Arthur’s curls and collar in old photographs downstairs. And between the collar and curls, Arthur’s face stared back again at the uncle and aunt. (“The Needlecase” 460)
The purely mimetic representation of the photograph is insignificant until it is accompanied by the story that allows the characters (and the reader, by the same occasion) to unlock its meaning. Bowen seeks to show that any visual aspects of the short story are dependent on language. Thus the short story emphasizes the limitations of each genre (the static nature of the photograph that in truth only mimics but cannot signify, as well as that of visual description, which can easily stop the flow of the narration, the mimetic representation the photograph offers that could in fact overwhelm its aesthetic meaning), and then shows how the juxtaposition of two arts can help overcome these limitations. The photograph is both a descriptive and a narrative element that often becomes the impetus or even the climax of the story, whereas the story gives (often ironic) meaning to the photograph itself.

The idea of the story giving meaning to the photographic medium is also apparent in the use of frames in the various short stories in which the genre appears. In this tug-of-war between the mimetism of the photograph itself and the aesthetic that it lends to the story by heightening the reader's awareness of the visual in the texts, the frame holds a place of choice. Indeed, as Derrida tells us in his work *La Vérité en peinture* (The Truth in Painting), it is the frame that separates visual art from its surroundings, thus giving it aesthetic value,3 emphasizing its nature as a representation, and diminishing the purely mimetic nature of the photographic medium. Indeed, when we examine the frames appearing in the texts, there is systematically the idea of aesthetic importance implicit in their presence. The passage from “Daffodils”, where the window frame serves to clarify the image of Miss Murcheson as the subject of the photo, is clearly an example. The frame shows not only the aesthetic nature of this image, but of the other visual images throughout the story. Framed photographs tend to appear in the Bowen stories in which the composition of the pictures themselves is emphasized, thus confirming the link between the artistic nature of the medium and the frame which emphasizes the representational nature of the image. Likewise, the distance that the frame imposes between the mimetic image and the viewer is often examined in Bowen’s texts. For example, in “Joining Charles”, Louise had kept a framed portrait of her husband on her mantelpiece, not out of affection for the subject, but as a symbol of his status:

> It would have been terrible if Louise had forgotten, as she so nearly had, to pack Charles’s photograph. There it had stood these three months, propped up on the mantelpiece, a handsome convention in sepia, becomingly framed, from which the young wife, falling asleep or waking, had turned away her face instinctively. She folded back a layer of tissue paper before shutting her suitcase and poked down a finger to feel the edge of the frame and reassure herself. (“Joining Charles” 223)

Here it is not the photograph as the representation of its subject, but the photograph as pure object that is presented to the reader; the image is voluntarily put aside to focus on the purely aesthetic aspects of the image (whether it be the frame or the sepia ink). The frame creates distance between the representation and what is being represented by literally restricting its field. Likewise, in “The Return”, there is a clear contrast made between two photographs, one framed, the other unframed: an unhappily married woman, Mrs Tottenham, receives a letter from a long-lost lover and decides not to see him again when she compares a framed photograph of herself as a young woman to her current appearance, and then looks at an unframed photograph she has kept of her lover. The photograph under glass is clearly put at a distance from the present, and is no longer relevant to it except as an aesthetic object, contained in a plush velvet frame.
However, the image of her lover is unframed, and her reaction to it is a physical reaction to the presence of the subject himself: "Mrs Tottenham made no answer; she was staring at the photograph. Her eyes dilated, and she licked her lips." ("The Return" 34)

Of course, as has been discussed, in a sense these photos are all framed, as they all exist only within the framework of the stories. As such, the stories themselves become framing *parergon*, making both the photographs and the stories themselves into works of art by increasing the aesthetic nature of each of these. This desire to reduce the mimetic nature of the representation and heighten its artistic nature is of course a major Modernist preoccupation and highlights the way in which the photograph operates as a crystallisation of Bowen's allegiance both to Modernist experimentation and to the Victorian desire for realism.

Beyond this interaction between the photograph and the story in Bowen's texts, it is also interesting to note the way in which the visual medium becomes an allegory for the genre itself. Indeed, to return to the quote that inspired the title of this article, the idea that short stories are conceived of as "disjected snapshots" makes clear that the link between the photograph and the short story in the author's mind is the emphasis on the particular, on the detail, and that as a result the genre is necessarily fragmentary. However, another text from her critical essays gives these characteristics new meaning:

*The plot, whether or not it be ingenious or remarkable, for however short a way it is to be pursued, ought to raise some issue, so that it may continue in the mind. The art of the short story permits a break at what in the novel would be the crux of the plot: the short story, free from the *longueurs* of the novel is also exempt from the novel's conclusiveness – too often forced and false: it may thus more nearly than the novel approach aesthetic and moral truth. It can, while remaining rightly prosaic and circumstantial, give scene, action, event, character a poetic new actuality.* (Bowen 1950: 43)

In and of itself, the fragmentary nature of the short story does not condemn it to being ineffective; on the contrary, it encourages reader participation and interpretation, thus coming closer to what the author sees as the goal of fiction: aesthetic and moral truth. In this view, the use of photographs in Bowen's short stories is not just a means by which to comment on her style of transartistic experimentation, but is also a comment on the very genre she is using: the relationship between text and image in these stories, where the photograph only acquires meaning through interpretation, is in fact an allegory for the short story itself, which is meaningless unless the reader gives significance to the text by subjecting it to critical analysis. Thus the photographs in "The Happy Autumn Fields", one of Bowen's short story masterpieces, are symbolic of the fundamental changes in literary representation. In the story, a woman in a bombed-out apartment in World War II London, Mary, is transported back in dreams to a Victorian scene, where the close relationship between two sisters is threatened by a possible lover. The photographs and letters later found in the apartment by Mary's lover allow him to piece together the past story and to guess at its conclusion. The text has a persistent back-and-forth movement between past and present, between dreams and reality, and once again the mimetic nature of the photograph is confirmed, as it is one of the agents allowing Travis (her lover) to reconstruct the story. However, the core meaning of the text seems to be that the fully coherent Victorian narrative in which the sequences taking place in the past are framed can no longer exist. All that is
now possible are fragments of the narrative, and more specifically visual fragments (like the photographs that Travis finds, or the short story itself), that can then be pieced back together into some new kind of whole, through analysis and interpretation. As I allowed Bowen’s words to open this analysis, I hope these words will allow me to conclude on the importance of photography to the literary status of short stories as a whole: “The future lies, as in all arts, not with the artist only: the reader and critic have a share in it.” (Bowen 1950 : 45) By showing just how important critical reading and interpretation are to the photograph, the author seeks to emphasize the importance of these same acts for the short story, and to induce the reader not just to enjoy the story, but to participate in it.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. All short stories by Elizabeth Bowen quoted in this article are from the Ecco Press edition of *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen,* and will be referred to by title and page number.

2. “C’est le malheur (mais aussi peut-être la volupté) du langage, de ne pouvoir s’authentifier lui-même (...). Le langage est, par nature, fictionnel (...) ; mais la Photographie, elle, (...) est l’authentification même (...). C’est une prophétie à l’envers : comme Cassandre, mais les yeux fixés sur le passé, elle ne ment jamais ou plutôt, elle peut mentir sur le sens de la chose, étant par nature tendancieuse, jamais sur son existence.” (barthes 134-135) “It is language’s downfall (but perhaps also its voluptuousness), to not be able to authenticate itself (...) backwards prophecy: like Cassandra, but with its eyes riveted on the past, it never lies, or rather, it can lie about the meaning of the thing, being by nature tendentious, but never about its existence.” (translation mine)

3. “Le parergon se détache à la fois de l’ergon (de l’œuvre) et du milieu (...) Le parergon (...) peut augmenter le plaisir du goût (...), contribuer à la représention propre et intrinsèquement esthétique s’il intervient par sa forme.
(...) et seulement par sa forme. ” (Derrida 73-74) “The parergon detaches itself both form the ergon of the work and from its surroundings (...) The parergon can increase the pleasure of taste, contribute to the representation itself and its intrinsic aestheticism if it contributes by its form and only by its form.” (translation mine)

ABSTRACTS
Dans la préface de son recueil de nouvelles parues pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale, Bowen parle de son œuvre comme d’une séries de photographies: “Taken singly, they [the short stories] are disjected snapshots – snapshots taken from close up, too close up, in the middle of the mêlée of a battle”. Que Bowen assume et minimise l’influence de la photographie sur son œuvre simultanément est typique de son commentaire critique ; ainsi, par exemple, elle parle de ses nouvelles comme des esquisses visuelles, mais met aussi l’accent sur le fait que cet aspect visuel existe souvent au détriment de la nature narrative de la nouvelle. Toutefois, dans un certain nombre de ses nouvelles, la photographie est l’élément central de la trame, la source et l’incarnation de l’écriture elle-même ; elle ne retire rien de l’écriture, mais crée un cadre pour la narration, dont elle devient ainsi un élément structurant essentiel. Les clichés donnent une forme concrète au principe visuel caractéristique de l’écriture de Bowen, et inspirent la trame de ses nouvelles, tout en fonctionnant comme un symbole de la réification possible de la forme littéraire de la nouvelle dans le cas d’un usage abusif de l’hypotypose, où les "clichés" prennent la place de véritables histoires. Dans cet article, je tente de montrer comment Bowen utilise la photographie dans ses nouvelles, et dans quelle mesure la nature paradoxale de sa présence correspond à une meilleure compréhension de ses buts artistiques. La photographie dans les nouvelles de Bowen est de fait un exemple intéressant d’un écrivain moderniste et ses tentatives d’étendre les possibilités du langage, et par conséquent de mieux cerner la nature éphémère de la réalité : elle représente à la fois la promesse et les limites de l’intertextualité transartistique.

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“Sight Unseen” – The Visual and Cinematic in “Ivy Gripped the Steps”

Ailsa Cox

1 In her Introduction to The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories, Elizabeth Bowen draws a number of parallels between the short story in the twentieth century and cinematic art, writing that “the new literature, whether written or visual, is an affair of reflexes, of immediate susceptibility, of associations not examined by reason” (Bowen 1937: 7). Bowen’s emphasis on instantaneous identifies the short story’s chronotopic affinity with the boundless present, an affinity shared with cinematic form, in which narrative unfolds in the moment of becoming. Despite her insistence elsewhere that “it is not as a writer that I go to the cinema” (Bowen 2010: 193), her insights into these shared properties extended to her own practice. Cinematic imagery is evident not only in stories such as “Dead Mabelle” (1929) which are overtly concerned with film and film-going, but also in other stories which evoke the cinematic as a way of seeing the world and of framing experience. In this essay, I shall explore the relationship between cinematic imagery and temporality through a close reading of “Ivy Gripped the Steps” (1945).

2 The story’s pictorial elements are obvious from the initial scene-setting, describing an abandoned house in a deserted seaside town:

Ivy gripped and sucked at the flight of steps, down which with such a deceptive wildness it seemed to be flowing like a cascade. Ivy matted the door at the top, and amassed in bushes above and below the porch. More, it had covered, or one might feel consumed, one entire half of the high, double-fronted house, from the basement up to a spiked gable; it had attained about half-way up to the girth and more than the density of a tree, and was sagging outward under its own weight.

(686)

3 The language itself is dense and luxuriant; a creative writing workshop might suggest pruning, but Bowen revels in stylistic excess, lingering on those long sentences with their multiple clauses. This is Bowen at her most gothic; the ivy is a demonic force, consuming and, in the next paragraph, “feeding on something inside the house” (ibid.).
But when she goes on to locate the house, mapping the fictional south coast resort with topographical precision, the gothic voice is in dialogue with something closer to social realism, configuring Southstone within a specific space and time: “The decline dated from the exodus of the summer of 1940 [...] It was now the September of 1944” (687).

Some of the other dwellings have been requisitioned by the army, but as the war draws to a close, their numbers have dwindled. The theatre of war has shifted elsewhere. I use the figure of speech advisedly, because the abandoned house is distinguished by its close physical proximity to the theatre. The atmosphere Bowen evokes in the early part of the story suggests a stage set: “Outside the theatre, a very few soldiers stood grouped about; some moodily, some in no more than apathy” (687).

The proscenium arch of the theatre is implicated in a later description of this once rather exclusive part of town as “a plateau backed by the downs and overhanging the sea” (691). Architect-designed, dedicated to recreational activities and conspicuous consumption, this bourgeois enclave was, in its Edwardian heyday, as artificial as the stage, which it so resembles geologically.

Theatrical imagery contributes elements of performance, artifice and display, shared by stage and screen alike; but in her “framing” of the visual, Bowen specifically invokes the camera’s eye. In the story’s opening passage, the eye pans across the scene, beginning with “close shots” of the ivy, then pulling back to the house, and finally encompassing the town with an establishment shot. In her gothic mode, Bowen, anthropomorphizes a house and its vegetation, a tactic she also uses in, for instance, “Look at All Those Roses” (1941). But “Look at All Those Roses” introduces its human characters in the very first line: “Lou exclaimed at that glimpse of a house in a sheath of startling flowers” (512). (Indeed, the very title seems to spring from Lou’s lips before the story has even begun.) In “Ivy Gripped the Steps”, the human presence is withheld for almost two pages. With the eventual introduction of an onlooker - the story’s protagonist, Gavin – what at first appears to be extradiegetic narration is recontextualised by a shift in focalisation, and a transition from omniscient or disembodied narration to free indirect discourse.

Gavin is no stranger to Southstone; as a child, before the previous war, he was a regular guest in this house, then owned by a friend of his mother. The story consists mostly of boyhood recollections of Mrs Nicholson, filtered through Gavin’s adult hindsight. But, as a witness, revisiting this changed landscape, he also reconstructs and speculates, authoring the past, skipping the long gap between Mrs. Nicholson’s premature death and the house’s current decay: “He attached himself to the story as to something nothing to do with him; and did so with the intensity of a person who must think lest he should begin to feel” (688).

This “attachment” is in fact a detachment. Gavin is an outsider and voyeur, both in the “now” of Bowen’s story and in the analeptic passages describing the past. The narrative is focalised through a perspective which is in many ways analogous to the camera’s gaze. This camera’s eye view is by its nature disembodied and impersonal. The limited attempts of some film makers to reproduce the human sensorium, for instance through the use of a shaky hand-held camera, only serve to remind us of what David Trotter calls “the instrumentality of a nonliving agent” (Trotter 2007 : 5). In his study, Cinema and Modernism, Trotter identifies what he calls a “will to automatism” in modernist writing. In the case of Bowen, and this story in particular, automatism may be linked to her use of a highly mobile and seemingly disembodied narrative viewpoint.
“Bright light, abrupt shadow, speed” (Bowen 2010: 192) were some of the things that attracted Bowen to the cinema; her use of light in this story is characteristic of her work, and, again, suggests the camera’s eye. When, as a child, Gavin first comes to Southstone, the “blazing June” on the streets (689) is contrasted with a “tense bright dusk” inside the drawing room. Mrs. Nicholson makes a grand entrance:

[...] she stood looking down at him – she was tall – with a glinting, charming uncertainty. Her head bent a little lower, during consideration not so much of Gavin as of the moment. Her coiffeur was like spun sugar: that its crisp upward waves should seem to have been splashed with silvery powder added, only, marquise-like glowing youth to her face. The summery light-like fullness of her dress was accentuated by the taut belt with coral-inlaid clasp: from that small start the skirts flowed down to dissipate and spread where they touched the floor. Tentatively she raised her right hand, which he, without again raising his eyes, shook. “Well...Gavin,” she said. “I hope you had a good journey? I am so very glad you could come.” (690)

Mrs. Nicholson glitters and glows, a creature made of light, like a figure on the screen. The vaguely eighteenth century appearance, bold gestures and enigmatic speech are reminiscent of a heroine from some silent film, perhaps Robert Wiene’s Der Rosenkavalier. Above all, it is the careful composition of the mise-en-scène that makes this first encounter so strikingly cinematic – the positioning of the characters in relation to each other within the visual frame, Mrs. Nicholson poised diagonally above the little boy. For Mrs. Nicholson, reality is projected, and therefore constructed, through the gaze of the other: “she vaguely glanced round her drawing-room as though seeing it from his angle, and, therefore, herself seeing it for the first time” (ibid.). The young Gavin adopts a similar mirroring strategy, at the height of his fixation: “he envisaged their two figures as they would appear to someone – his other self – standing out there in the cold dark of the avenue, looking between the curtains into the glowing room” (699-700). According to Bakhtin, we all “author” ourselves, constructing a dynamic and mutable subjectivity through the gaze of a putative other. In our everyday lives, “we are constantly and intently on the watch for reflections of our own life on the plane of other people’s consciousness” (Bakhtin: 16). In a striking phrase, Bakhtin warns that such reflections may sometimes ossify, acting as “dead points”, and “at times they may condense to the point where they deliver up to us a double of ourselves out of the night of our life” (ibid.)

A second crucial encounter also frames Mrs. Nicholson cinematically, with a careful use of light. Climbing up from the beach along a steep path, the young Gavin looks up to the cliff top, spying “Mrs. Nicholson’s face above him against the blue” (694):

The face, its colour rendered transparent by the transparent silk of a parasol, was inclined forward; he had the experience of seeing straight up into eyes that did not see him. Her look was pitched into space: she was not only not seeing him, she was seeing nothing. She was listening, but not attending, while someone talked. (ibid.)

Gavin desperately tries to make himself seen, leaning dangerously far back from the handrail, throwing flowers up at her, and then racing up to join her - all the more surprising when we remember that Gavin’s poor health is the reason for his visit. Throughout the story, there are constant references to the unseen and to the unseeing. In the present, September 1944, the windows on one side of the house are obscured by the ivy, and the rest “though in sight, had been made effectively sightless: sheets of some dark composition that looked like metal were sealed closely into their frames”
The impersonal narrator speculates about what cannot be seen, the inside of the
house, and the “something” which in imagination is feeding the ivy.

The cliff-top encounter is our first glimpse of an intrigue between Mrs. Nicholson and
another Southstone resident, Admiral Concannon. As in “The Little Girl’s Room” and
elsewhere in Bowen’s fiction, the reader fills in the gaps between a child’s eye view of
the world and the adult reading of social interaction; while the imagery of blindness
and vision has an obvious relevance to this aspect of the story, it also relates to Mrs.
Nicholson’s subjectivised view of reality. Once again, she refracts her own perceptions
through the reconstructed viewpoint of an other. Remarking on how long it has been
since they were able to see France through the haze, she says: “I don’t believe Gavin
believes it is really there” (695).

The conversation moves to the threat of war. With the benefit of hindsight, the reader
(and, implicitly, the adult Gavin) will see what is actually “on the horizon” in the years
leading up to the First War, even if it is not yet visible to the naked eye. Mrs. Nicholson
dismisses any possibility of imminent conflict, relegating war to history and “those
unfortunate people in the past […] no more like us than cats and dogs” (696); “Once
people wear hats and coats and can turn on electric light, they would no more want to
be silly than you or I do” (ibid.).

Mrs. Nicholson “never cared for history at school; I was glad when we came to the end
of it” (695). A businessman’s widow, she places her faith in an enlightened present
which is completely severed from the past. Gavin’s family, by contrast, belong to an
impoverished squirearchy, without access to modern technology, experiencing time as
the cycle of the seasons, bound to an unchanging natural world. Their sickly child,
Gavin, transfers his allegiance from a family home still lit by oil lamps to the “magical
artificiality” of Southstone (693). Electric light intensifies perceptions of a natural
world which here is tamed and controlled: “delayed late autumn and forced early
spring flowers blazed under artificial light, against the milder daylight outside the
florist’s plate glass” (698). While the landscape back home is characteristically
monochrome, Southstone is shot through with vivid colours. The visual palate favours
red, silver and, especially, blue, which is the colour of Mrs. Nicholson’s eyes and of the
sky which provides such a memorable backdrop to that first cliff-top encounter. The
three colours are combined in a description of a dinner party which begins with those
eyes:

Their sapphire darkness, with that of the sapphire pendant she was wearing, was
struck into by the Concannons’ electric light. That round fitment on pulleys, with a
red silk frill, had been so adjusted above the dinner table as to cast down a vivid
circle, in which the guests sat. The stare and the sheen of the cloth directly under
the light appeared supernatural. The centrepiece was a silver or plated pheasant,
around whose base the carnations - slightly but strikingly “off” the red of the
shade, but pre-eminently flattering in their contrast to Mrs. Nicholson’s orchid
 glacé gown - were bunched in four silver cornets. (700)

It is not hard to visualise this scene in technicolour. It is certainly hyperreal, presenting
Mrs. Nicholson along with the pheasant as an element in a still life. Once again, Bowen
lights her tableau with great precision. The repetition of “sapphire” conflates Mrs.
Nicholson’s eyes with the jewel in her pendant, rendering the human eye an inanimate
object. Mrs. Nicholson’s eyes are unseeing; throughout the text, they are the object of
the gaze, rather than the organ of sight. Even when she turns her attention to the male
dinner guests on either side, her “look” is described as “melting; for it dissolved her
pupils, which had never been so dilated, dark, as tonight” (701). Throughout the text, her repertoire of histrionic gestures includes the averted or diverted gaze, as in the passage immediately following the Concannons’ party, when she confides in Gavin. She is using the boy as a substitute for a male partner in a parodic version of adult intimacy, which is also intended as provocation for the Admiral.

As I have already suggested, narrative structure in “Ivy Gripped the Steps” parallels the temporal fluidity of film. With its extensive analeptic passages, the story as a whole presents time as Bergsonian duration, in which memory and perception, past and present, interpenetrate - contrary to Mrs. Nicholson’s belief in a modernity sharply divided from the past. Her teleological faith in a stable and well ordered present is proved illusory on both a historical and a personal level. Roles are reversed, as she becomes an invalid, while Admiral Concannon’s sickly wife recovers, becoming active in the newly established Awaken Britannia League.

Overhearing recriminations between the erstwhile lovers, Gavin enters the drawing room. Bowen does not spare us the theatrical attitudes struck by these two figures, once they realise they have an audience. There is even a burst of applause from the theatre next door. But the scene is also framed as through a lens – the room seemingly elongated. Bowen compares this to the effect of looking through a telescope, but we might also picture a cinematic depth of field through the open door.

As Bergson says, ‘Practically we perceive only the past, the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing into the future’ (Bergson 1991:150); the cinema shows that rapid progression, each moment consumed as it arises. Bowen’s use of light within this story – even the electric light which stands for progress and rationality – suggests the ephemerality of the cinematic image. The dresses which “shimmer” (701) and “flickered” (703) stand for their wearers, the transient figures glimpsed on a screen. By 1912 Mrs. Nicholson is dead, the Admiral’s death following during the first war. Time is experienced as flux, but also as irresistible forward motion. The very closeness of these images reminds us of their distance; the past haunts the present, yet is also irrecoverable.

In the final section of the story, back in 1944, Gavin watches an ATS girl staring out through the window of what was once the Concannons’ dining room. This voyeuristic encounter is shaped by memories of Mrs Nicholson:

> It was thus that, for the second time in his life, he saw straight up into the eyes that did not see him. The intervening years had given him words for trouble: a phrase, “l’horreur de mon néant”, darted across his mind. (710)

Bowen’s quotation aligns Gavin with Proust’s Marcel and the search for lost time. The similarity of the lighted window to the cinematic screen is implicit in the detailed description of the girl’s actions as she carefully arranges the black-out curtains. Tellingly, the “cracks” of light that must be eradicated echo the “cracks” in the pavement, filled with wallflowers seeded from the garden, an image that recalls the fecundity of the ivy (ibid.). When the girl leaves the house, she tries to ignore him, deliberately not seeing – or hearing – yet another middle aged man looking for a pick-up. In the final paragraphs, there is another shift in focalisation:

> [...] what she saw, in that moment before he snapped down the lighter, stayed on in the darkness puzzling her somewhere outside the compass of her own youth. She had seen the face of somebody dead who was still there – “old” because of the presence, under an icy screen, of a whole stopped mechanism for feeling. (711)
Described as “wolfish” and a “preyer” (ibid.), Gavin is framed by the girl’s perception of him. Or could this be Gavin’s perception of himself as she might see him? This is another of those “dead points” identified by Bakhtin, where the perception of the self projected through a putative onlooker interferes with the essentially protean nature of individual subjectivity.

As I have suggested, competing notions of time co-exist in Bowen’s story - the absolute linear time imagined by Mrs. Nicholson; time as Bergsonian flux; and the cyclical time of the seasons, associated with Gavin’s family, the Doddingtons. Compared with Southstone in its heyday, their lives seem anachronistic; yet images of the encroaching power of nature, introduced first of all by the ivy itself, suggest that the Doddington version holds true. Individual lives are subsumed by larger, inexorable forces, beyond human control. Bowen aligns historical events with natural phenomena:

 [...] this existence belonged, by its nature, to any century. It had stayed as it was while, elsewhere, history jerked itself painfully off the spool; it could hardly be more depressed by the fateful passage of armies than by the flooding of tillage or the failure of crops. (697)

Bridging the first and second world wars, the story reduces both conflicts in scale, by seeing them in the long term. Walking through the bomb-damaged Southstone, Gavin sees an apocalyptic landscape, which he associates, paradoxically, with the cessation of linear time foreseen by the dead Mrs. Nicholson. He himself is excluded from historical significance, a civilian, too young to fight in the previous war and too old for this one; he lives in a state of suspension, a witness rather than a participant. The earlier image, of history jerking itself from the spool - a literal reference to cinema newsreels - indicates, on the one hand, the relativity of cinematic time, which can be speeded up, slowed down, frozen or stilled; or can double back on itself, replaying an experience over again. On the other hand, the image anticipates the “whole stopped mechanism for feeling” in the adult Gavin (711), which might be a clock but which might also be the stuttering projector, or indeed any machine which is turned on and off.

In Cinema and Modernism David Trotter argues that Bowen “associated cinema with death rather than life, or with death-in-life” (Trotter 2007: 176), a notion which recalls the still life or nature morte at the Concannons’ dinner table. The revenant figure of the adult Gavin embodies “death-in-life”. As we have seen, the shifting focalization evokes the disembodied eye of the camera; and the cinematic framing of the self through that gaze serves, in Bakhtinian terms, as block to psychic growth. Film preserves the dead as seemingly living images – in Bowen’s story, “somebody dead who was still there” (711).

Film narrative, like narrative in the modern short story, is elliptical and elusive; meaning often lies in the space between referent and sign. We may recognise the image of the sightless house, with its hidden interior, as a gothic symbol of subjectivity, its metal shutters standing for the “icy screen” hiding emotions that are stopped dead. But the house is also the text itself; and it is in what cannot be seen, in the liminal space between surface and subtext, that the story’s meaning lies, impenetrable to the naked eye.
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NOTES

1. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle’s conception of Bowen’s novels as still lives might also be extended to her short fiction.

ABSTRACTS


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Ailsa Cox is Reader in English and Writing at Edge Hill University, UK. Her books include *Alice Munro* (Northcote House Writers and their Work series 2004) and *Writing Short Stories* (Routledge 2005). She is also the editor of the journal *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice* (Intellect). She has
published essays on Helen Simpson, Alice Munro, Nell Freudenberger and other short story writers. Her collection, *The Real Louise and Other Stories* is published by Headland (2009).
Intermediality and the Cinematographic Image in Angela Carter’s “John Ford’s’Tis Pity She’s a Whore” (1988)

Michelle Ryan-Sautour

1 Upon exploring Angela Carter’s study after the author’s death, Susannah Clapp, Carter’s literary executor, discovered a profusion of “drawings and paintings” (Clapp 1993, ix), as Carter “always travelled with a sketchpad” (Clapp 1993, ix), revealing the author’s keen attention to the visual. Carter devotes an entire section to “Looking” in her collection of essays, Nothing Sacred, has written of her interest in art, particularly that of the surrealists, and comments in a 1989 conversation with Dawn Ades on “Painting Magical Realism,” how people are drawn to narrative in and about painting, saying that we are essentially “narrative making animals” (Carter 1989). Such an impulse lies at the heart of much of Carter’s writing. Her demythologizing writing practices, as an attempt to “find out what certain configurations of imagery in our society, in our culture, really stand for” (Carter 1994, 12), are fraught with image-narrative complexities, a phenomenon to which Liliane Louvel has devoted much critical attention. Alison Lee also observes Carter’s interest in the “various modes of capturing how and what she saw” (Lee 1997, 1). These modes appear in the far-reaching intermedial aesthetics evident not only in Carter’s manipulation of visual tropes in her narratives, but also in her experimentations with writing for the radio and the cinema, which as Clapp has observed, “enlarge the scope and alter the contours of a rich body of work” (Clapp, 1997: ix). Similarly, Charlotte Crofts speaks of “reinvigorating the critical reception of [Carter’s] work” (Crofts 19) through a study of Carter’s productions for other media, as this work has often been overlooked by critics.

2 Carter’s work for the radio, for example, complicates the process of ekphrasis by preparing it for the aural “eye” of radio; the image is not locked into the linearity of written narrative, but becomes “a kind of three-dimensional story-telling” (Carter 1985b, 7). Carter indeed sees the radio as a means by which to intensify the reader’s
creation of the image, “radio always leaves that magical and enigmatic margin, that space of the invisible, which must be filled by the imagination of the listener” (Carter 1985b, 7).

3 In the Kim Evans documentary filmed shortly before Carter’s death, Lorna Sage remarks how Carter’s books “introduce people [...] to their images, introduce people to their shadows, introduce them to their other selves (Sage qtd. in Evans, 1992). Carter’s preoccupation with the “shadows” of film reaches back to her childhood experiences of “kitsch” collective viewing at the Granada, Tooting in London (Carter 1997b, 400). Susannah Clapp quotes her as liking “anything that flickers” (Clapp 1994, ix) and Carter admits that the cinema has “completely altered the way that we approach narrative on the page, that we even read nineteenth-century novels differently” (qtd. in Crofts, 92). Her attitude towards movies was mocking and probing, resulting in a carnivalesque frolic with Hollywood in Wise Children (1991), The Passion of New Eve (1977) and “The Merchant of Shadows” (1989). Such playful iconoclasm also lies at the heart of Carter’s short story, “John Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore” (1988).

4 The story title, as a direct quotation of the title of the original play (1633) by John Ford, the famous Jacobean playwright, underlines a playful superposition of creators and genres, as the playwright’s name is blurred into that of John Ford, the American film-maker of westerns such as “Stagecoach (1938); My Darling Clementine (1946); She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949)” (Carter 1993a, 20). The original play is a tragic story of incestuous love between a sister (Annabella) and brother (Giovanni) which is complicated when Annabella becomes pregnant and is obliged to marry the nobleman, Soranzo. The play ends with Annabella’s murder at the hand of Giovanni, who in turn is killed by a servant. Carter’s version transposes the original plot details into the realm of the prairies of the United States, as portrayed in Ford’s westerns, in a semi-serious juxtaposition of fragments from the 1633 play, and a narrativized account of a screenplay in which she applies the “what if” of her speculative practices to the re-enactment of incest and tragedy on American soil, a radical intertextual move that jokingly investigates identities, aesthetics and temporality. The experiment hinges primarily on the ambiguity of the proper name, as is underlined in Carter’s ironic quotation from the film-maker in a footnote to the story, ‘My name is John Ford. I make Westerns” (20).

5 The characters in Carter’s version are labeled, as if John Ford, film-maker, were the “director,” as Annie-Belle and Johnny (21), “Blond children with broad freckled faces” (21), who are the children of a rancher. Their forbidden love also leads to pregnancy and the marriage of Annie-Belle to the minister’s son, leading Johnny to a fit of jealous rage. He ultimately shoots and kills the couple as they attempt to leave town and then takes his own life. Carter’s version of the story was originally published in Granta in the Autumn of 1988, which corresponds to a renewed interest in the play, as is evident in a production by The National Theatre in the same year. According to Simon Barker, John Ford’s play was previously considered aesthetically and morally inferior to those by the group of dramatists which had preceded him (Barker 107), primarily because of the subject matter of incest (Barker 108). The play was neglected during much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and was revived in the 20th century because of “modern concerns with the issues of sexuality” (Barker 14). Such questions are familiar Carterian territory, and it is not surprising that the author should turn to the defamiliarization of the “natural” Barker sees as being inherent to the original play.
Carter's story even undergoes an anachronistic intertextual twist; Barker cites Carter's story as an example by which to understand the continued relevance of the play and its revival (Barker 105), as Carter's version of the American west presents "a dramatic world as claustrophobic and morally ambivalent as that of the earlier Ford's Parma" (Barker 105). Barker begins his critical reading of the 1633 play with the "contest" created by Carter's confrontation of two worlds in her story.

In a review of Robert Coover's A Night at the Movies, Carter comments on how "A critique of the Hollywood movie is a critique of the imagination of the twentieth century in the West" (Carter 1997, 382) and she openly foregrounds a preoccupation with American, Hollywoodian imperialism. As this statement was made in a review published merely one year before "John Ford’s 'Tis Pity She’s a Whore" was published, it is hardly surprising that this should figure as one of the main metatextual fields in the text. The light of the prairies is transformed by the narrator into a metonymy of American production of cultural myth:

The light, the unexhausted light of North America that, filtered through celluloid, will become the light by which we see America looking at itself. Correction: will become the light by which we see North America looking at itself. (29)

By inserting the devices of the screenwriter's practices into a short story narrative riddled with quotations from a 1633 play, Carter adopts the ironic position of the film-writer to dismantle naturalized Hollywoodian myth from within. Her writing transforms the reader's cultural memory, that is his/her "brain," into a screen upon which are projected images that seek to foster new concepts. Through the aesthetic tensions of cultural and temporal cross-cutting, she reveals aesthetics reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze's study of the cinema as a means of reflection. Without strictly adhering to Deleuzian philosophy, I will study how Carter's manipulation of intermediality in this short story captures the spirit of Deleuzian thought in its connection of film direction with thinking. Deleuze writes: "it is not sufficient to compare the great directors of the cinema with painters, architects or even musicians. They must also be compared with thinkers" (Deleuze x.).

Since the publication of Fireworks in 1974, Carter’s attraction to the short story form has been apparent. Her afterword to the collection speaks of how "The limited trajectory of the short narrative concentrates its meaning. Sign and sense can fuse to an extent impossible to achieve among the multiplying ambiguities of an extended narrative" (Carter 1987, 132). The form is indeed one that allowed for experimentation, and her "stories" are often anything but, playing with generic definitions, pushing limits, in short, condensed, bursts of Carterian energy. Salman Rushdie observes how this intensity seems most adapted to the story form: "the best of her, I think, is in her stories. Sometimes, at novel length, the distinctive Carter voice, those smoky, opium-eater’s cadences interrupted by harsh or comic discords, that moonstone-and-rhinestone mix of opulence and film-flam, can be exhausting. In her stories, she can dazzle and swoop, and quit while she’s ahead" (Rushdie ix-x). Crofts has commented, in reference to Clare Hanson, on the resonance between the characteristic open-endedness of the short story, with its emphasis on the implicit and ellipsis, and the radio, in that both "stir the imagination of the reader in a particular way" (Crofts 23):

Both forms paradoxically contain more imaginative space precisely because of their ‘lack’. The ‘blindness’ of radio, the absence of visual stimuli, necessitates the stimulation of the listener’s imagination (in Hanson’s terms, activating the ‘image-making faculty’), creating space for their active involvement in the process of
meaning production (inviting the listener’s ‘desire’ into the text). The lack of narrative space in short fiction contributes to its open-endedness as a medium, demanding a similarly active readership. (Crofts 23)

9 Although Carter’s focus is on the visual aspects of the cinema as juxtaposed with the dialogue of theatre, her story, “John Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore,” shares many characteristics associated with the radio, in that it points to potential images, and draws upon the reader to create the scene. The piece is neither a reflection on adaptation, nor a meditation on the theme of time and image in the cinema, but rather places the reader in the position of the screenplay reader, that is the person who must imagine, anticipate the images that could be created if the piece were to be actually directed. The text thus plays with the screenplay as a field of potentialities. The reader is not confronted with a film, or even a narrative that imitates the visual and formal characteristics of film, but rather provides a vision of what could happen, what might be the result of superposing the work of the two John Fords in a discontinuous narrative in which are interjected fragments of screen-play and theatre. The privileged mode is one of speculation.

10 In a manner characteristic of Carter, a didactic, authorial narrator, often figured in the text as “I” takes the reader – “you,” in the text – by the hand to explore this speculative field, proposing, for example, cultural commentary on America, “America begins and ends in the cold and solitude” (21), providing insight into the inner world of the characters: “What did the girl think? In summer, of the heat, and how to keep flies out of the butter; in the winter, of the cold. I do not know what else she thought” (23), and thrusting upon the reader the imperative of image-making: “Imagine an orchestra behind them: the frame house, the porch, the rocking-chair endlessly rocking” (23). Such open narrative interventions on the background music (“The ‘Love Theme’ swells and rises”) and on the validity of the scene (“No. It wasn’t like that!”) are, in turn, juxtaposed with screen directions:

EXTERIOR. PRAIRIE. DAY
(Long shot) Farmhouse.
(Close up) Petticoat falling on to the porch of farmhouse.

[...]

EXTERIOR. PRAIRIE. DAY
(Close up) Johnny and Annie-Belle kiss.
‘Love theme’ up
Dissolve. (24)

And with dialogue from the original play:
Annabella: Me thinks you are not well.
Giovanni: Here’s none but you and I. I think you love me, sister.
Annabella: Yes you know I do. (24)

11 The piece, as a consequence, does not foster a linear reading pattern but rather, with the disruptions caused by shifts in style, narrative interjections, mimetic stage dialogue, and screen/film directions, fosters disjointed modes of visualization. Moments of convergence between the texts tend toward the three-dimensionality Carter associates with her radio plays. In terms of textual processing, the reader is led to leap from straight-forward didactic narrative, to imagining a film scene, with its “long shot” and “close-up” and “dissolve” functions, to perceiving the resonances with intertext authored by playwright John Ford. The story becomes a field of diverse textual “cuts” assembled into a composite form that places modes of narrative and visual representation in tension with each other.
This “cutting” is strikingly apparent in the visual, typographical dimension of text on the page. As Liliane Louvel observes, the set-up of the text can produce an effect of visual scansion which provides the rhythm of the text* (Louvel 2002, 161). In Carter’s story, screen directions are expressed in capital letters set one inch from the margins, and fragments from the play, with character names in italics, are set alongside the margins with the ragged, short edged lines characteristic of writing for the theatre. Even the accompanying narrative, although following the stylistic norms of story presentation, is broken up by blank spaces inserted between paragraphs and sections. In this assemblage, one cut flows into the other as the narrator reworks the style or words of the play or screenplay, such as in the following example,

* Giovanni: I am lost forever.
  Lost in the green wastes, where the pioneers are lost. (26) (narrator)

The narrator appears to play upon words or aspects of the scene, amplifying details in what seems to be a willful manipulation of the reader’s “viewing” experience in the reading process, playing with transitions and reinforcing the thread that relates the pieces to a variegated whole. The predominance of stylistic variations in the framing narrative, with occasional privileging of parataxis, chiasmus, and repetition (She wore a yellow ribbon. Her hair was long and yellow* (40)), along with the incomplete paratactic sentence fragments in the screenplay sections (Train Whistle. Burst of smoke. Engine pulling train across prairie (41)), accentuates the process of “filling in the blanks” on a structural and visual level. The following excerpt, from the scene following Johnny’s shooting of his sister and husband, is an excellent example of the mental gymnastics required by Carter’s collage:

* Seeing some life left in his sister, Johnny sank to his knees beside her and her eyes opened up and, perhaps, she saw him, for she said:
  Annabella: Brother, unkind, unkind …
  So that Death would be well satisfied, Johnny then put the barrel of the rifle into his mouth and pulled the trigger.
  EXTERIOR. STATION. DAY.
  (Crane shot) The three bodies, the Minister
  Comforting his wife, the passengers
  Crowding off the train in order to look at the catastrophe. (43)

The second segment is taken directly from the original John Ford play, resonating with Carter’s version as the words of Annabella, in a ventriloqual “voice-over,” replaces the speech of Annie-Belle. The image of Johnny constructed by the reader through the framing narrative, alternates with the cinematic image suggested by the jarring screenplay segment of the station scene in which the reader is led to imagine the frame of the screen. The god-like, distanced point of view afforded by the “Crane shot,” along with the reference to the three bodies, invites the reader to superpose the images of Carter’s story onto his/her past viewing experience, thus submitting his/her cinematic recollections to the enquiry inscribed in Carter’s “shots.” The image is a hybrid one, put together through fragments of narrative and memory, in a self-conscious shifting between the reading image a typical reader projects upon his/her internal screen during the reading of fiction (Jouve 42) and the imagined cinema screen as a frame. The involvement of the reader is heightened not only by the need to compensate for the different degrees of discontinuity in the narrative, the various breaks and jumps, the lurching from intertext to diverse narrative modes, but also the need to move between the types of images fostered by these modes.
This process is accentuated by the narrator’s accompanying self-conscious reflections on the image. This is particularly evident in the use of the mirror, a recurrent motif in Carter’s texts, and one underlined by Louvel as being a substitute for the pictorial (Louvel 2002, 45). The mirror is fraught with signification in Carter’s work, and here it functions on multiple levels as it is associated with Annie-Belle and Johnny’s first act of transgression.

She propped a bit of mirror on the porch railing. It caught the sun and flashed. She combed out her wet hair in the mirror. There seemed to be an awful lot of it, tangling up the comb. She wore only her petticoat, the men were off with the cattle, nobody to see her pale shoulders except that Johnny came back. (23)

The mirror falls, she jumps at his arrival (“She jumps up to tend him. The jogged mirror falls” (24)) and the brother and sister kneel to look at their image in the broken mirror (“In the fragments of the mirror, they kneel to see their round, blond, innocent faces that, superimposed upon one another, would fit at every feature, their faces, all at once the same face, the face that never existed until now, the pure face of America” (24)). The conflation of the brother/sister incestuous configuration and America highlights a glaring reflection about American identity. Further along yet, the brother and sister turn from the mirror and “saw the other’s face as if it were their own.” (25) thus amplifying the specular theme of otherness. Such recurrent metatextual reflection reinforces the cinematographic images suggested by the screenplay fragments. Another example can be found in the quotation mentioned above in which “we see America looking at itself” by the light of “celluloid.” This also suggests the specular dimension of the cinema in American culture. And yet again, towards the end of the story, the narrator invokes the photograph in combination with the imperative to “see”: “And see them, now, as if posing for the photographer, the young man and the pregnant woman, sitting on a trunk, waiting to be transported onwards, away, elsewhere, she with the future in her belly” (42).

The text is indeed about making the reader see with his/her inner eye, an eye that Carter shows to be culturally saturated. Through her intertextual/medial use of the work of the two John Fords, her story foregrounds how our relationship to the image is never innocent, but is indeed partially forged through aesthetics, of which Hollywood is definitely an imperial dominant. That Carter’s writing about the radio should resonate so closely with this text is indicative of her complex play upon media modes and language:

Tricks with time—and also with place, for radio can move from location to location with effortless speed, using aural hallucinations to invoke sea-coast, a pub, a blasted heath, and can make extraordinary collage and montage effects beyond the means of any film-maker, not just because of the cost of that medium but also because the eye takes longer to register changing images than does the ear (Carter 1985b, 7).

In “John Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore” similar “collage” and “montage” effects are used to contemplate cinematographic memory. There is a great amount of irony in the idea that Carter’s hybrid “screenplay/narrative” would certainly be difficult to render in film format. On the contrary, with its disjunctions and halting progress, it calls more upon the adaptability and openness of the story form. It is perhaps not rendered through sound as is the radio image, but is in language, and in being detached from the traditional typographical linearity of the short story form, privileges a similar elasticity. It is this elasticity that Carter exploits for political ends. Deleuze has spoken
of the dehumanization of the camera lens in the cinema, and the flexibility afforded by
detaching point of view from the human eye (Deleuze 71-86), but here we see a
strategic navigation between this mobile, dehumanized lens and a didactic authorial
persona who appears to invest it with a political function.

The screenplay segments, for example, highlight action and movement as a language of
implicit clues; the viewer must draw his/her own conclusions. This is particularly
evident in the scene where Annie-Belle is courted by the Minister’s son. The shifting
“camera” between the farmhouse and the exterior, along with the change of Johnny’s
shooting to an out-of-field sound, and the movement of the “lens” to a close-up on
Annie-Belle and the Minister’s son fosters the impression of a language of sound and
image, in an orchestration that speaks indirectly of the thwarted desire of the brother
and sister, and the resulting conflicting emotions.

EXTERIOR. FARMHOUSE PORCH. DAY
Row of bottles on a fence.
Bang, bang, bang. Johnny shoots the bottles
One by one.
Annie-Belle on porch, washing dishes in a tub.
Tears run down her face.

EXTERIOR. FARMHOUSE PORCH. DAY
Father on porch, feet up on railing, glass and
bottle to hand
Sun going down over prairies.
Bang, bang, bang.

EXTERIOR. FARMHOUSE. DAY.
Minister’s son rides along track in long shot.
Bang, bang, bang.
Annie-Belle, clean dress, tidy hair, red eyes,
comes out of house on to porch. Clink of
father’s bottle against glass. (30)

As opposed to the dominance of dialogue in the original play, the characters are
particularly silent in this scene. This is the case with most of the cinematographic cuts
proposed in the text. The respective characterization of Johnny and his intertextual
counterpart, Giovanni, mirrors this relationship to language. The original Giovanni was
particularly well-spoken, well-educated, as stated in the play by Bonaventura, friar and
tutor to Giovanni: “How did the university applaud // Thy government, behavior,
learning, speech, // Sweetness, and all that could make up a man!” (Ford 1997, lines
50-52). Johnny, however, speaks very little, “I imagine him mute or well-nigh mute; he
is the silent type, his voice creaks with disuse” (25-26). His work appears as a series of
movements or gestures that “speak” beyond the voice, as “the vague, undistinguished
‘work’ of such folks in the movies” (26), thus resonating metatextually with the image
succession and movement in Carter’s “film” version. The passage above foregrounds
this shift from speech to gestures and movement, and the in and out-of-field sounds
punctuate the resulting expressions of affect in the passage (“father’s bottle against
glass”, as well as the repeated “bang, bang, bang”). Details such as Annie-Belle’s tears,
hers red eyes, the act of shooting bottles, speak indirectly of the growing tension in the
family, a tension amplified by the subsequent arrival of the Minister’s son which is
presented as a “long shot” accompanied by the out-of-field “bang, bang, bang” of
Johnny’s gun, a detail that undeniably foreshadows the tragic end of the story. A similar orchestration of movement and play with the implicit through the lens of the virtual camera is apparent in the wedding scene:

INTERIOR. CHURCH. DAY
Harmonium. Father and Johnny by the altar.
Johnny white, strained; father stoical.
Minister’s wife thin-lipped, furious.
Minister’s son and Annie-Belle, in simple white cotton dress, join hands.
MINISTER: Do you take this woman . . .
(Close up) Minister’s son’s hand slipping wedding ring on to Annie-Belle’s finger.
INTERIOR. BARN. NIGHT
Fiddle and banjo old-time music.
Vigorous square dance going on; bride and groom lead.
Father at table, glass in hand.
Johnny, beside him, reaching for the bottle. (31-32)

The emphasis on character expressions of affect (white, strained, stoical, furious), the relative positioning of the wedding party, the irony of the white dress, the wedding ring, and Johnny’s act of reaching for the bottle, asks the reader to “see” the story unfold through image, to shift to an internal screen of virtual film narrative. Carter’s story indeed not only plays with how we read, but also fosters a self-consciousness in the reader of the colonization of our imaginations by image producers: “The imaginative life is conducted in response to all manner of stimuli – including the movies, advertising, all the magical things that the surrealists would see in any city street” (Carter 1985a). According to Crofts, an impulse to subvert “the dominant visual economy” (Crofts 36) lies behind Carter’s attraction to radio. A similar impulse is apparent in the narrator’s repeated use of “same” and “you” in the following passage:

the Minister and his wife drove with them to a railhead such as you have often seen on the movies – the same telegraph office, the same water-tower, the same old man with the green eyeshade selling tickets (40).

Hollywood’s influence is subtle however; it occurs not simply through viewing the original John Ford films mentioned in Carter’s footnote, but also through a dissemination of the image of the Western with its temporal complexity, for even the most western-averse reader would be able to project Carter’s hybrid “film” upon his/her internal screen. As Crofts observes in an admittedly unscientific experiment with a group of listeners of Carter’s radio play, _Come Unto These Yellow Sands_, listeners/readers tend to reproduce details (such as a toadstool) in a similar way:

This suggests that there is an ‘ur-toadstool’ of the cultural imagination, the toadstool we remember from the fairy stories of childhood, demonstrating that radio’s ‘third dimension’ is not an unlimited space outside of the symbolic order giving free-rein to the listener’s imagination, but is always still influenced by cultural and social factors outside the text (Crofts 32).

Carter’s fiction engages with the intricate genealogy of such cultural images in this story.

As is often the case in Carter’s speculative stories, the reader is being given a lesson which functions on multiple levels, removing him/her from the innocent position of spectator, so as to inform his/her viewing. In this process, his/her own contribution to meaning is submitted to the forces of a narrative that seeks to undermine and question
from within. The jarring between the theme of incest and the plains of America as imagined in the typical Western fosters a sense of unease and foregrounds the affect associated with incest as an act of transgression of both family and religious law. Yet this flagrant incongruity between a story of incestuous love and the moral realm of John Ford, film-maker, is only the beginning of the speculative processes set up in the story through Carter’s cutting and assemblage of aesthetic fragments.

Crofts has commented on the “polyvalent, polysemic approach” (Crofts 72) adopted by Carter in her fictional biographies so as to not “build unified character” but rather “deconstruct it; not to create a whole picture, but to fragment the image” (Crofts 72). Carter indeed appears interested, as mentioned above, in the reader’s own images, in “his/her own way of ‘seeing’” she says in relation to the radio play (Carter 1985b, 7). Through a studied reassembling of fragments, Carter participates in what Jacques Rancière sees as the politics of re-framing as a means to engage the power of the image.

Skepticism [about the political power of an image] came as a result of an excessive faith. It came as a result of the belief in a straight line linking affection, understanding and action. This is why I think a new trust in the political capacity of the image might be based on a critical, but strategic scheme. Artistic images don’t bring weapons in the struggle. They help frame new configurations of the visible and the thinkable which also means a new landscape of the possible. But they help it precisely to the extent that they don’t anticipate their signification and their effect. (Rancière 2008)

Carter indeed frames the original play (of which, it should be noted, she alters not a word) with a culturally charged Hollywoodian structure. Through a studied placement of fragments of the original text in a new version inspired by a film-maker of the same name, she allows for resonances to emerge between texts and creators, and brings the reader to “see” the two John Fords in a different light, thus opening up to potential effects that, as Rancière observes, cannot necessarily be predicted. Ever the serious joker when it comes to the realm of identity, Carter’s high-flown experimentation with intermediality in this story creates politically charged effects, using the intensity, density, and multilayered quality of short story discourse to heighten the reader’s exercise of his/her imagination. Louvel evokes the term “tiers pictural” to refer to the floating space that emerges between text and image in the pictorially saturated text (Louvel 2010, 258), and suggests how the reader participates in the conjuring up of an image of his/her own invention through such mediation. In Carter’s story, he/she is led to don the persona of the film director, to project, through the cultural frame of cinematic memory, a potential film upon his/her internal screen. The debates about the relationship between text and image are ongoing. In this story Carter reminds us that some form of text often precedes film, as the verbal dimension of the screenplay is generally the starting point of the image. Jacques Rancière has commented on how the “wordless” intimacy of the visible in the cinema is akin to literature in its ability to “anticipate an effect the better to displace or contradict it” (Rancière 2009, 4). By placing us in the seat of the director, at the crossroads of both media, Carter asks the reader to not only question the nature of this “wordlessness” but also see how the cinematic “visible” is wrapped up in re-creation, how image-making is always guilty of cycles of repetition. As such, she holds the temporality of the cinematographic visible aloft for re-examination, and highlights the anticipatory power of screen-writing. Her images hover on the horizon of the possible through a meticulous manipulation of remnants of the past.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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NOTES

1. Of particular interest is Louvel’s study of the mirror as pictorial substitute in Carter’s “Flesh and the Mirror” (Louvel 2002).
2. Carter’s story “Puss in Boots” (1979) was transformed into a radio play (Puss in Boots 1982), and the radio play, Vampirella (1976), followed a reverse trajectory when it was rewritten as a short story, “The Lady of the House of Love” (1979). She wrote for the stage as well, but according to Clapp was less successful and wrote an operatic version of Virginia Woolf’s Orlando entitled Orlando: or, The Enigma of the Sexes (1979). Carter’s well-known text “The Company of Wolves,” however, speaks most clearly of the intermedial character of her work. It originated as one of the three “wolf” stories in The Bloody Chamber (1979), “The Compagny of Wolves,” “Wolf Alice,” and “The Werewolf,” and was written as a radio play (The Company of Wolves (1978)) before it was again transformed, and combined with the other two stories, into a screenplay (The Company of Wolves (1984)) with a “Chinese box” structure directed by Neil Jordan (Jordan qtd. In Bell 507). Carter wrote a screenplay for her novel The Magic Toyshop (1985) and another in 1988 about a matricide committed by two school girls in New Zealand. Her piece “Gun for the Devil” was originally written as a draft for a screenplay in 1987 and later published in American Ghosts and Old World Wonders (1993) as a short story.
3. Crofts takes issue with Sarah Gamble’s observation about Carter’s slow production between the writing of Nights at the Circus (1984) and Wise Children (1991), emphasizing Carter’s growing preoccupation with other media during this period: “But far from being a fallow period, Carter was busy working on the script for A Self-made Man (1984a), collaborating with Neil Jordan and David Wheatley on her two film adaptations, The Company of Wolves (1984a) and The Magic Toyshop (1986a) and continuing to publish a range of journalism. Furthermore, as these unrealized texts demonstrate, Carter was putting considerable creative energy into a number of projects which, for one reason or another, did not come to fruition between 1978 and 1989. The irreverent treatment of traditional theatre in Wise Children may stem from her unfruitful collaborations with the Glyndebourne Opera House and the national Theatre, the highest echelons of ‘high art’. The balancing act between her critique and celebration of the Hollywood production of The Dream might also be read in the light of the successes and the failures of her various film projects.
The novel is steeped with allusion to cinema, television, video and digital technology, demonstrating the cross-fertilisation between her work in media and her writing for the printed page" (Crofts 196-197).
4. I will come back to this question later, in an exploration of how Carter’s writing for the cinema also explores the potentials of such imagined visual spaces.
5. “Alan Ayckbourn literally opened the play out in 1988 by employing the full technological resources of the National Theatre and staging the play on an enormous revolve, the design of which seemed to owe not a little to the cityscape which greets the visitor to modern-day Parma. The action took place in rooms and courtyards linked by alleyways and bridges beneath a covering of red-tiled roofs. The beauty of Roger Glossop’s very public and centrifugal set contrasted with the poignant but deadly private activities of the figures which occupied it” (Barker 15).
6. Two film versions of the play have been made, one by Giuseppe Patroni in 1973 and another directed in 1980 by Roland Joffé for the BBC (barker 15).
7. “The American cinema was born, toddled, talked, provided the furniture for all the living-rooms, and the bedrooms, too, of the imagination of the entire world, gave way to television and declined from most potant of mass media into a minority art form within the space of a human lifetime. In the days when Hollywood bestraddled the world like a colossus, its vast, brief, insubstantial empire helped to Americanise us all.” (Carter 1997b, 382)
8. This quotation was taken from the preface Deleuze wrote for the English translation of The Movement Image.
10. One can’t also help noticing a play upon the title of one of John Ford’s films, “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon” (1949).
11. “L’image ‘littéraire’, représentation mentale construite à partir d’un support extérieur, paraît osciller entre les deux orientations (l’image onirique et l’image optique). On peut cependant inférer du caractère peu directif des stimuli textuels que l’image-personnage penche davantage du côté du rêve, donc du côté du plaisir.” (Jouve 1992, 42). “The ‘literary’ image, as a mental representation constructed by means of an external medium, seems to oscillate between the two orientations (the dream image and the optical image). However, because of the limited character of textual stimuli, it can be inferred that the character-image leans more towards the dream, that is towards the side of desire.” (My translation).
12. “Le ‘tiers pictural’ entre le texte et l’image, fait advenir autre chose, ce qu’il joue entre les deux. Ce tiers pictural serait l’image flottante (...) suggérée par le texte mais qui reste une image suscitée par des mots, une image qui peut renvoyer à un tableau dans l’extra-texte mais aussi à un tableau (ou l’un des ses substituts) imaginaire à reconstruire par le lecteur, image qui sera alors sa propriété, son ‘invention’, puisqu’elle ne coincidera jamais avec celle qui fut mise en texte par le narrateur plongé dans sa vision intérieure.” (Louvel 2010, 260)”The ‘pictorial third’ between text and image makes something else happen, something which plays out between the two. The pictorial third is a floating image (...) suggested by the text but with remains an image inspired by words, an image that can not only refer to a work outside the text but also to an imaginary work (or one of its substitutes) to be reconstructed by the reader; an
image that would then be his property, his ‘invention’, as it would never coincide with that which the narrator puts in the text, immersed in his internal vision.” (my translation)

ABSTRACTS

Dans son introduction au recueil posthume d'Angela Carter, American Ghosts and Old World Wonders (1993), Susannah Clapp rappelle que Carter l’a autorisée à “‘tout faire pour gagner de l’argent pour mes garçons,’ – c’est-à-dire son mari, Mark, et son fils, Alexandre. Peu importe le niveau de média utilisé ; chacun de ses 15 livres pourrait être mis en musique ou transformé en spectacle sur glace” (Carter 1993, ix.). Ce commentaire reflète l’attitude irrévérente de Carter envers les arts, une attitude que la fiction cartérienne exprime à travers la multitude de jeux discontinus et troublants sur les cultures savante et populaire dans sa fiction. Dans ce recueil de nouvelles, le jeu carnavalesque avec le mythe américain et la tradition britannique tente et séduit le lecteur, manipulant ainsi ses attentes par un tissage habile du discours intertextuel et par une expérimentation générique. Dans un texte court, “John Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore’” Carter navigue entre les représentations cinématographiques de John Ford, réalisateur américain du XXème siècle, et la pièce de théâtre du dramaturge John Ford du XVIIème siècle dont le thème principal est l’inceste. La nouvelle paraît comme un écran sur lequel le lecteur est amené à voir le vacillement des ombres de genres et de créateurs, favorisant ainsi un sentiment d’incertitude qui alimente l’engagement du lecteur avec les forces sous-jacentes du texte. Celles-ci revêtent la question de la valeur littéraire. La pièce originelle a été critiquée à des moments différents de l’histoire littéraire pour son traitement de la question de l’inceste, et la nouvelle de Carter met également en avant l’érotisme comme moyen d’explorer les forces politiques à l’œuvre dans la représentation de la sexualité. A travers un jeu adroit avec l’esthétique cinématographique, la nouvelle de Carter révèle des formes de persuasion subtiles, et souvent impalpables. Carter a écrit des scénarios, des pièces de théâtre et des pièces pour la radio, et elle investit les paysages génériques de sa fiction d’un esprit d’intermédialité, soulignant ainsi une extension de la stratification générique complexe qui caractérise sa fiction. Dans cet article, j’étudierais les différents moyens par lesquels la nouvelle “John Ford’s ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore’” exploite les images associées au cinéma à des fins spéculatives.

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The Urge for intermediality and creative reading in Angela Carter’s “Impressions: the Wrightsman Magdalene”

Karima Thomas

“Impressions: The Wrightsman Magdalene” is Angela Carter’s swan song. It was published posthumously in a collection of short stories dealing with literary, iconographic and cinematographic representations. The title is programmatic of the “pictorial project” of the short story. First, it signals a twofold pictorial frame: “Impressions” belongs to pictorial language and conjures up the Impressionist movement in the reader’s mind; second, to the informed reader and art specialist, it bears a direct reference to Georges de La Tour’s The Magdalene and Two Flames, bought by Mr and Mrs Charles Wrightsman and offered to the New York Metropolitan museum. The reader is already aware of the hybrid fabric of a narrative that intertwines the pictorial and the textual. The intermedial urge of the text is highlighted and the reader is warned that he is about to enter a haunted zone, where “suspicion” is the only shield against misreading.

The narrative is built around two distinct narrative lines, one embedded in the other. The first narrative line tells the story of the journey of Mary Magdalene to Saint Baume where the wayward girl is to become the repentant saint. This quasi-hagiographic account is then set against the pictorial representation of the repentant saint in de La Tour’s The Magdalene and Two Flames and a series of similar representations of the life of the saint.

The second narrative line is a first-person narrative. It tells the journey of the narrator in the maternity ward and the trance she experiences while looking at an imaginary candle flame, a detail cut out of de La Tour’s real painting which shows a backlit candle flame reflected on a mirror fixed by Magdalene’s gaze. The real painting is the link between the two narratives.
In this tentative reading of “Impressions”, I will try to analyze the modes, functions and consequences of the intercourse between the textual and the pictorial. My objective is to show how the operations of expansion, conversion, internalization and reinvention carried out in the iconotext are part of a wider compulsion for intermediality. Its objective is to perform the permanent construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of meanings out of existing cultural artifacts. The different movements operating in and through the text illustrate the intercourse between the sister arts and the esthetic and hermeneutic questions that their alliance arouse in the reader’s mind.

I- The image in the text: three possible movements

Movement one: expansion

De La Tour’s painting is part of the diegesis. Actually, it can be seen as “the pregnant moment”, the propitious event to which the narrator adds a beginning and an end (Louvel 2010, 229). The narrative captures the static temporality of the painting and expands it into a before and an after; into a fantasized journey preceding Magdalene’s meditation and a fantasized outcome brought about by her meditation. Both journeys originate in Western iconographic representations of Mary Magdalene. The interaction between text and image results in the expansion of the image by its insertion into an imaginary sequential temporality. As for the text, it feeds and thrives from a plethora of Western iconographic representations of Mary Magdalene.

The narrative is shaped as a series of different iconographic representations cut from an art book or borrowed from an art gallery and set one next to the other.

In Georges de La Tour’s painting, the Magdalene’s hair is well brushed. Sometimes the Magdalene’s hair is as shaggy as a Rastafarian’s. Sometimes her hair hangs down upon, is inextricably mixed up with, her furs… Sometimes she wears only her hair; it never saw a comb, long, matted, unkempt, hanging down to her knees. She belts her hair round her waist with the rope with which, each night, she lashes herself, making a rough tunic of it. On these occasions, the transformation from the young, lovely, voluptuous Mary Magdalene, the happy non-virgin, the party girl, the woman taken in adultery - on these occasions, the transformation is complete. She has turned into something wild and strange, into a female version of John the Baptist, a hairy hermit, as good as naked, transcending gender, sex obliterated, nakedness irrelevant. Now she is one with such pole-sitters as Simeon Stylites and other cave-dwellers who communed with beasts, like St Jerome […] Now she looks like hairy Enkidu […] But there is another way of looking at it. Think of Donatello’s Magdalene in Florence (Carter 410-411)

Each new paragraph becomes the frame of a new painting, portraying a different profile of Mary Magdalene as seen by different artists. The informed reader can trace the voluptuous Magdalene to a theme illustrated by Caravaggio or Domenico Puligo⁵; the voluptuous woman anointing the feet of Jesus then wiping them with her hair to Dieric Bouts in Christ in the House of the Pharisee (Lahr 73)⁶; the naked sexless Magdalene to Metsys (Haskin 234)⁷, the hairy Magdalene to the fifteenth century German tradition⁸, and the image of the cave dweller to Pierre de Besse or Bernini (Haskin 256). A new paragraph provides a close-up of the gaunt creature sculpted by “Donatello”. Another passage frames the image of the self-mortifying Magdalene who “belts her
own hair round her waist with the rope with which, each night, she lashes herself, making a rough tunic of it” (410). Even if the names of the painters are not always mentioned, the descriptive saturation of the text enhances its visual orientation. The ekphrastic pauses that permeate the text disrupt the narrative flow and introduce a new rhythm to which the reader cannot remain indifferent.

At a closer reading, it is tempting to see that the narrative dissects and exposes the pictorial mix that foregrounds de La Tour’s painting by expanding it into a rich diachronic journey over the different representations of Mary Magdalene’s life. Although not in a chronological order, the text provides the reader through inter-pictorial references with the hagiography of the Mary Magdalene, from the voluptuous wayward girl, to the hag-like repentant sinner. The ongoing movement from one description to another encodes the rhythm inherent to the reception of the image in the text. The narrative changes the temporality of the painting and brings to the fore the temporality of the reading act. Actually, the multiple interruptions corresponding to the time needed by the reader to shift his gaze from one painting to another as he walks down the imaginary gallery of paintings drawn by the narrative onto his inner screen creates a hectic temporal flux. Thus, the narrative implements a sequential temporality that supplants the condensed temporality of the pictorial.

The expansion operated by the narrative is also meant to set the painting in psychologically realistic grounds and to unfold the discourses underlying it. The narrator justifies the geographical setting of de La Tour’s painting in pseudo-objective terms: “Because Mary Magdalene is a woman and childless she goes out into the wilderness. The others, the mothers, stay and make a church where people come” (410). The narrator invests the story and the iconographic tradition that foregrounds it with a political discourse that points to the dichotomous representation of women according to whether they are mothers or not. This dichotomy is at the heart of the story and can be summed up by the narrator’s address to the reader: “Note how the English language doesn't contain a specific word to describe a woman who is grown up, sexually mature and not a mother, unless such a woman is using her sexuality as her profession” (410). Departing from the painting and the narrative, the quote adopts the style of a statement, of a fact. It becomes an element of a feminist discourse that explains that like the sexually mature woman, who does not find a signifier in the English language, Mary Magdalene in de La Tour’s painting, as well as in many iconographic representations, does not find a place in society and is often depicted in a cave, in seclusion or in the wilderness outside of the confines of society.

The interaction between text and image allows the image to overflow its space and time: through a historiographic fancy, it unveils the political discourse underlying the production of the painting. The narrator performs the role of a feminist reader who finds in the colors and the setting of the painting (darkness and seclusion) the opening from which to leap into the discourse underlying the containment of unregulated sexuality. Marina Warner explains that the image of Mary Magdalene in its association of physical beauty with temptation as well as subsequent practice of bodily mortification “condenses Christianity’s fear of women” (Warner 232).

The discursive dimension brought about by the text/image intercourse also opens up to various readings. This dimension culminates in a passage that performs or encodes the viewer’s questions about the alleged subject of the painting, namely repentance:
Georges de La Tour’s Mary Magdalene has not yet arrived at an ecstasy of repentance, evidently. Perhaps, indeed, he has pictured her as she is about to repent – before her sea voyage in fact, although I would prefer to think that this bare, bleak space, furnished only with the mirror, is that of her cave in the woods. But this is a woman who is still taking care of herself. Her long black hair, sleek as that of a Japanese woman on a painted scroll [...] Her hair shows that she has just used the mirror as the instrument of worldly vanity (411, 412, my emphasis).

This passage introduces a first-person narrator, and a discourse akin to an art historian’s interpretation of the motifs, lines, colors of the painting. It questions the predominant interpretation of the painting as an emblem of repentance and unravels the power of a painting to capture an intermediary moment and to arouse contrasting discourses. The intercourse between text and image as captured in this passage bears witness to the energy and dynamics that the painting brings to the text and the rhythm that the text reveals at the heart of the painting.

The second movement that results from the intercourse between text and image in Carter’s story is conversion.

**Movement two: conversion**

Conversion is much like translation in so far as it deals with the passage from one code to another. Louvel compares the conversion from a picture to a text to the operations involved in translating a text from one language into another. This implies various operations of modulation, compensation, transposition, adaptation and reformulation. But like in any translation there are aspects of the source text that do not travel well: either something is lost or something is added during the voyage. As a result, the target text is not another version of the original. It is a new product (Louvel 2002, 149). This is even more obvious when translation concerns two different semiotic systems. The iconotext is the new fabric that is borne out of the intercourse between text and image. Louvel draws the attention to its “oxymoronic” nature (Louvel 1998, 15). Right from its taxonomy, the iconotext underlines the tension at work in its creation, hence the tensions that run through it when it deals with the translation of the instantaneous into the sequential, of the visible into the sensorial.

By essence, a painting is meant to be seen at one shot. It is true that we move up and down the canvas, left and right and back and forth again and again, but the first reception is global and instantaneous. De La Tour’s painting in Carter’s short story appears to the viewer in a different light. Viewing the painting is no longer instantaneous. The global perception characteristic of the visual arts is challenged by the progressive disclosure characteristic of the diachronic nature of the linguistic chain. What is more, Carter’s text fragments the painting, presents a different detail at a time, thus delaying indefinitely the final disclosure of the whole. The skull is not mentioned for example until the final sentence of the short story.

The delay is caused by the interplay of the visual and the sensorial. In fact, the image in the text becomes a new artifact, subject to the viewer’s gaze and senses. Actually, between the different descriptive fragments appears the narrator/art viewer’s perception. The first reference to de La Tour’s painting is: “Georges de La Tour’s picture does not show a woman in sackcloth, but her chemise is coarse and simple enough to be a penitential garment, or, at least, the kind of garment that shows you were not thinking of personal adornment when you put it on” (409-410, my emphasis).
This first representation of the painting shows a reader oscillating between the position of art specialist, distinguishing de La Tour’s work from the prevailing iconographic representations of the repentant sinner as a Venus in sackcloth, and an amateur, whose subjectivity is felt in the fragmentation of the sentence. This subjectivity emerges also from the verbs and expressions of comparison and approximation. To the narrator, the chemise “does not seem to disclose flesh as such, but a flesh that has more akin to the wax of the burning candle” (410, my emphasis). The narrator’s double-fold posture is confirmed when he addresses the reader, saying “so you could say that, from the waist up, this Mary Magdalene is on the high road to penitence, but, from the waist down, which is always the more problematic part, there is the question of her long, red skirt” (410, my emphasis). On the one hand, the description shows a schematised gaze, distinguishing the two parts of the painting like a diptych. On the other hand, the fragmentation of the descriptive sentence by the non-restrictive relative clause betrays the narrator’s anxiety. The intercourse of the descriptive and the narrative shows that the painting is metamorphosed from an external object of the gaze into an internal sensory experience, subject to the narrator’s interrogations, fears and even desires. This passage performs the way the image opens the eye of the text by creating an intermedial zone that addresses the reader’s affect as much as his sight or his cognition. This zone transcends the painting and the text per se and flirts with some imaginary figurations on the reader/viewer’s inner walls – figurations screened out of the fears and desires borne out of the image/text intercourse. It is in this sense that we will read the descriptions of the imaginary painting that occupies the last part of the short story, a materialisation or a performance of the intermedial zone.

Movement Three: Within the intermedial zone or on the fringes of a pictorial third

The image/text intercourse in “Impressions” culminates in a scene that performs the advent of a new image, doubly painted on the narrator’s as well as on the reader’s mind. Its advent is to be interpreted in the light of what Louvel defines as the pictorial third, a real or an imaginary floating image akin to what Descartes calls “an image in the air”. It is built out of the text and may refer to a real painting or to an imaginary one created in the reader’s mind. In this sense, it is the reader’s painting since it is not a replica of the one sketched by the narrator.

In “Impressions”, a detail is extracted/cut out from de La Tour’s canvas; it is removed from its pictorial context and is promoted into a painting on its own. The flame of de La Tour’s painting becomes in the narrative a painting of its own, a kind of a “word painting”. The narrative vests it with a quasi-ekphrastic representation. The passage from the real painting to the imaginary one is set in a dream-like context. First, the source image is described in these words: “now [Mary Magdalene] is gazing at the candle flame, which doubles itself in the mirror. [...] but now, instead of reflecting her face, the mirror duplicates the pure flame”. Immediately after, a first person narrator enters the text, declaring: “when I was in labour I thought of a candle flame” (412, my emphasis). A complex operation of displacement is set in motion through which the first person narrator embodies the role of the meditative Magdalene. The narrative, in a mirror-like effect, frames the experience of the narrator in front of the candle flame.
in such a way as to double that of de La Tour’s Magdalene. The baroque scene of a mystic meditative trance is converted into a scene of a trance experienced at the maternity ward. Like Magdalene, the narrator looks at the flame and experiences a trance. A hidden voice surges to define a new viewing/reading program:

Look at the candle flame as if it is the only thing in the world. How white and steady it is. At the core of the white flame there’s a cone of blue, transparent air; that is the thing to look at, that is the thing to concentrate on. When the pains came thick and fast, I fixed all my attention on the blue absence at the heart of the flame, as though it were the secret of the flame and, if I concentrated enough upon it, it would become my secret too. Soon there was no time to think of anything else. By then, I was entirely subsumed by the blue space. Even when they snipped away at my body, down below, to finally let the baby out the easiest way, all my attention was on the core of the flame. Once the flame had done its work, it snuffed itself out; they wrapped my baby in a shawl and gave him to me.

Mary Magdalene meditates upon the candle flame. She enters the blue core, the blue absence. She becomes something other than herself. (412-413, my emphasis)

The vocabulary of seeing and the references to forms and colors highlight the visual nature of the passage. The imperative form directs the reader/viewer’s attention to the zones of focus, and sets a new viewing program. In fact, if we consider Deleuze’s conception of art as the site where forces are captured, then the reception can also be the advent of the recreation of new forces. This is the phenomenological experience described in the above-mentioned extract. De La Tour’s painting is far removed from the imaginary painting borne into the reader’s mind. Yet, the latter traces its origins back to “The Wrightsman Magdalene”. This is not a paradox, it is rather inherent in the nature of the reminiscence of a painting, a reminiscence that plays the twofold role of a screen in so far as it reflects and casts back impressions (Louvel 2010, 207). The passage textualizes the effect produced by the painting on the narrator, and thus casts it in a new light. For instance, the color blue is not at all present in de La Tour’s image, but its absence is symptomatic of an aesthetic system influenced by a moral discourse. The presence of the blue color in the trance scene produces a new painting that makes the reader rethink his perception of cultural artifacts.

In fact, this new painting is the result of a displacement and a condensation of two cultural representations. The blue color belongs to the iconography representing the sanctity of the Virgin Mary as the narrator has previously explained.17 The flame belongs to de La Tour’s Magdalene and Two Flames. Like in a dream, signs from different spaces and cultural codes come together. The idea is to draw a parallel between the dematerialization of the woman in both iconographic traditions.

In fact, the hypnotizing effect of the candle flame carries the narrator into another dimension, into an almost ethereal status. She is so absorbed by the candle light that she no longer feels the birth pangs. For a while she is abstracted from her worldly situation, her body is an absence. The narrator underlines forcefully the motif of absence that haunts de La Tour’s painting. In fact, in de La Tour’s painting the mirror in front of Mary Magdalene does not reflect her. Like a phantom, de La Tour’s Magdalene does not cast a reflection on a mirror. Paradoxically, what predominates is the candle flame, doubly represented through its reflection in the mirror. De La Tour’s Magdalene and Two Flames dematerializes the woman, mystifies her desires by casting them in Christian lights: the only passion and the only love it enhances are those for Christ, hence the Flame, a symbol of Christian revelation. According to the narrator’s reading,
de La Tour’s painting encodes a discourse that by sanctifying a woman deprives her of her identity as a sexual being, and as Carter insisted elsewhere, “All the mythic versions of women from the myth of the redeeming purity of the Virgin to that of the healing reconciling mother are consolatory nonsense; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway. Mother Goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods.” (Carter 1997, 5)

22 On an aesthetic level, the description of the trance of the narrator before an imaginary candle flame produces an imaginary painting, with impressionist brush strokes, hence the title of the short story: “Impressions: the Wrightsman Magdalene”. Actually, the narrator’s trance is conveyed from an impressionistic narrative point of view. It is shaped out of approximations and comparisons introduced by ‘as if’ and ‘as though’. The colors are hazy; the blue oscillates between transparency and absence. In sum, the painting is a “floating impression” marked by the instability of its signifiers. A constant slippage between the real and the imaginary, between the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene and the narrator is set into motion. The narrator as a viewer of de La Tour’s painting comes to grasp it according to the etymological definition of the French word “comprendre”, that is to say to englobe (Picard, 131). In other words, the narrator internalizes the image, makes it her own. What is happening at this level is a regression of the narrator into a pre-linguistic stage wherein meaning is developed through images. The detour via the real and the imaginary paintings allows the narrator to visualize and rethink through images her identity as a woman and her iconographic representation over history as a saint or a sinner, mother or wayward girl. In each case, representations show her as “something other than herself”, a cultural construct.

23 It is worth considering however that the narrator, while internalizing de La Tour’s painting, reinvents it and plays with it. In fact, she enters into a dream-like sphere, the imaginary world of the “as if” and “as though”, just like a child enters the transitional zone of playing to master the pains of the absence of the mother. As if under a magic spell, she enters the blue absence and she no longer feels the birth pains. However, she remains aware that this is just role-play. The dividing line between playing and being is clear: “once the flame had done its work, it snuffed itself out.” (412) Here the narrator, after playing the role, plays with it by keeping a voluntary suspension of disbelief in the magic spell of the candle flame and the revelation that it symbolizes.

II- The New Hermeneutic Project and the Urge for Creative Reading

24 The nature of meaning and signification is a theme that runs through “Impressions”. The short story performs the process of meaning as the product of impressions left on the viewer’s mind by the real painting and the fears, desires, thrills brought by the sensorial experience inscribed in the iconotext. As it oscillates between the textual and the pictorial, the iconotext generates a new hermeneutic process. Actually a compulsion for intertextuality and intermediality runs through all of Carter’s works. Every narrative is woven out of a plethora of texts and images, a saturation of semiotic codes that ultimately alters the concept and the process of signification. What is at stake through this aesthetic choice is Carter’s conviction that meaning is the product of cultural representations. The iconotext becomes the medium par excellence to embody
the floating and fleeting nature of significance, since it unveils it as a mere construct made out of the dialogue of various artifacts and cultural representations.

25 The idea of the floating and illusive nature of meaning haunts the short story, its title, its textual structure and motifs. “Impressions”, the enigmatic title of the short story, puts in high relief a concept central to the idea of the nebulosity of meaning. Impressions can refer to reminiscences or mental images. They can also refer to blurred allusions that give an impression without reaching a fixed and clear idea. Whether the first or the second interpretation, some structuring leitmotivs run through the text and bring to the fore the nebulosity of meaning. The episode of the trance is a case in point. The hypnotic effect introduced by the imperative form transports the reader into a sphere outside the referenced time and space: “look at the candle flame as if it is the only thing in the world....that’s the thing to look at, that’s the thing to concentrate on” (412). In this dream-like sphere, no fixity is allowed and meaning becomes allusive, and I am tempted to say, illusive.

26 The unnamed references contribute to disrupting meaning. Throughout the short story, many phrases or descriptions signal the intrusion of an external reference in the narrative flow. This is not always easy to prove, but the reader is confronted with a feeling of incongruity, the feeling that this phrase or this description belongs somewhere else and that it is a quote, or an allusion to an unnamed text or painting. Whether able to check this allusion or not, the reader is always left with vague impressions, blurred reminiscences that bring to mind a teeming army of images and ideas. The new dynamics introduced by the text-image intercourse requires a new reading posture, a reader willing to change his focus, to look things up whenever he suspects an extra-textual reference within the text. The text, with its untitled references, weaves a hide-and-seek motif into its texture, a playful and erotic motif, since every veiled reference invites the reader to unveil it as in a slow “strip-tease show” to borrow Louvel’s comparison. Meaning becomes a perpetual reconstruction and approximation depending on the reader’s encyclopedic skills.

27 The text is no longer a site of meanings but of cues to an infinite and thrilling quest, though no Grail is at the end. The text/image intercourse performs the tension at the heart of meaning construction, the succession of references, adding a visual layer to text, the textual instability apparent in the intermingling of the narrative, the descriptive and the overtly discursive; all this bears witness to “the disjuncture” permeating the iconotext (Louvel 2010, 252), thus disrupting the construction of meaning. Several signs of this disjuncture are to be seen on the textual level. For instance, while describing Magdalene’s dress in de La Tour’s painting, the text oscillates between the external (the canvas itself) and the internal (the reader’s perception and interpretation of the painting), between the objective and the subjective, between the visible and the sensorial, between reason and affect:

Left-over finery ? Was it the only frock she had, the frock she went whoring in, then repented in, then set sail in ? Did she walk all the way to the Sainte-Baume in this red skirt ? It doesn’t look travel-stained or worn or torn. It is a luxurious, even scandalous skirt. A scarlet dress for a scarlet woman (410).

28 The succession of questions, each new one more pressing than the previous, the use of some stark and blunt expressions (whoring in) illustrate the mounting tension of the narrator, her inability to comply with the meaning stressed by the symbols and motifs of the representations of Mary Magdalene in de La Tour’s painting and other similar
representations of the repentant sinner. The passage introduces a narrative and a
textual gap in so far as it interrupts the ekphrastic flow and introduces the reader’s
questioning reception. At a visual level, the succession of question marks introduces
extra-linguistic graphic signs, embodying the disruption of the linguistic chain and
bringing home intonation as a new element in the construction of signification. This is
confirmed a few lines down, with a new series of questions illustrating the tension
introduced by the text/image intercourse: “but why has she taken her pearl necklace
with her? Look at it, lying in front of the mirror. And her long hair has been most
beautifully brushed. Is she yet fully repentant?” (410) The questioning culminates in
suspecting the very discourse underlying the representations of Mary Magdalene, to
whom de La Tour devoted many paintings, one of which was entitled “The Repentant
Magdalene”. (Lahr, 96)

The text-image intercourse also disrupts the narrative structure and makes the
constitution of meaning all the more difficult. In fact, the narrative starts as a third
person narrative, imitating the oral tradition. The narrator addresses a listener to
whom he repeatedly says: “don’t run away with the idea [...]”, “don’t forget” (409). The
narrative itself respects a rhythm, born out of the repetition of the same phrasal
structure and the same opening for a succession of sentences: “She walked until she
came to the forest of the Sainte Baume. She walked until she came to the remotest part
of the forest. There she found a cave. There she stopped. There she prayed. She did not
speak to another human being, she did not see another human being…” (409). The folk-
tale like narrative structure is suddenly disrupted by a more factual reference to the
painting and the painter and is again followed by a long ekphrastic passage devoted to
the painting, yet permeated with the narrator’s subjective reception of this painting.
The reader is to follow back and forth to grasp the different meanings suspended in the
air and aroused by previous narrative segments. The textual rhythm and the reading
rhythm it encodes undermine signification because “the oscillation confronts the
subject with an infinitely elusive meaning, meaning which vacillates in the interlaced
space of the visible and the sensible” (Louvel 2002, 173, my translation)

Considering the self-reflexive dimension of the narrative in “Impressions”, I am
tempted to read a hint of the transience of meaning in the delayed reference to the
skull. Although clearly visible in de La Tour’s painting, the skull, symbol of the momento
mori motif, is not mentioned until the last word of the narrative: “But something is
already born out of this intercourse with the candle flame. See. She carries it already.
She carries where, if she were a Virgin mother and not a sacred whore, she would rest
her baby, not a living child but a momento mori, a skull” (413). The only revelation that
results from the long meditation is an allegory for transience. This final reference to
the painting performs an additional movement from the text back to the image. It is as
if to remind the reader that the meaning will never be sealed up and that it is, as usual,
mediated by an artifact, in this case a new detail from the painting. The iconotext and
the new hermeneutic project it entails alter the reading posture in a significant
manner.

III - Performative narrative and creative reading.

The narrator of “Impressions” performs the viewer’s reception and reading of cultural
artifacts. Her descriptions, comments, questions, comparisons, conversions,
expansions, appropriation and reinvention of the painting illustrate the way the viewer reacts to the painting. But the reader of “Impressions” has to cope not only with the painting but also with its interactions with the text.

The Carterian narrative encodes the role of a mobile reader, now an expert able to recognize the allusions made by the text; and now a seeker of jouissance trying to unveil one by one the ambiguities, the nebulous articulations of the text. Whether one or the other, this reader is in all cases intent upon negotiating meaning. In a word he is a creative reader. As the site of the intercourse of a complex network of iconographic representations and artistic readings, “Impressions” invites the reader to travel back and forth from the text to the images and vice versa. He has to check his encyclopaedia of iconographic representations, see the paintings mentioned by the text, guess the ones described but not named, and again visualize the imaginary ones. Sometimes, this reading demands thorough research which allows the reader to avoid what Picard calls “mis-reading”. It also demands a new reading ethic founded on the need to “look things up”, as Carter herself says (Kenyan 26). Michel Picard in Essai sur l’Art comme jeu insists on this point and goes as far as calling it “an ethical demand to be informed” (Picard 40, my translation). Does this mean that the reader should become an art historian? The answer is no. The text with its profusion of references impels him to get informed, but through its shadowy zones and its blank spaces it also gives him the opportunity to be imaginative and creative. Some of the paintings which are described but are difficult to identify play this role. Others are simply a patchwork, a result of condensation and displacement of items from various motifs into an imaginary painting. In all this, the text becomes a form of what Carter calls “an exercise in a certain kind of erudite frivolity that does not do good as such, but offers cerebral pleasure of the recognition of patterning” (Carter 1993, 19). As a consequence the reader becomes a creative reader who according to Carter, “can rearrange the book in an infinite number of ways, like a Rubic cube.” (Carter 1993, 11)

The repeated address to the reader, the multiple questions and the exhaustive references show that the text encodes the profile of this creative reader, a reader willing to take part in painstaking efforts to negotiate meaning. This posture is materialised through the quasi dialogic nature of the narrative which exhorts the reader to “Look” “to think” “to consider” and to “see the point”. The whole text becomes a negotiation zone. What is at stake is an uneasy transaction that is summed up in the narrator’s final remark “but there is another way of looking at it” (411, my emphasis). The choice of the verb “to look” is not random. The pictorial saturation brought about by the references conjures up sight as a new means of cognition. In fact, the text conjures up all the senses to contribute to the construction of the multifaceted aspects of meaning, making it all the more illusive. At one point, even smell plays a role in the construction of meaning. The reader is invited to “smell the odour of that kind of sanctity that reeks from [Donatello’s representation of Mary Magdalene]. It’s rank, it’s raw, it’s horrible”. The detour via the text and the iconographic heritage performs the necessary distance, literal as well as metaphoric, that the reader has to adopt in order to grasp the meaning. Seen in this way, meaning has nothing to do with REVELATION. Instead, it is a negotiation, a permanent appearance/disappearance of impressions, left by the multiple representations on the reader’s mind.

Even if the negotiation of meaning is painstaking, it is also a source of pleasure. When the narrative line is suspended by the descriptive passages, the reader is accompanied
into a passionate guided tour through different paintings, whose contents are unfolded by the text like extracts from a booklet delivered in an art gallery. The reader’s curiosity is aroused to the extreme. The multiplication of references, details and interpretations develop a sort of hermeneutic vertigo, an exaltation that satisfies his epistomophilic compulsion (urge to know), which is according to Picard a sublimated version of the primary urge to see (scoptophilic urge) (124-125).

“Impressions”, with its obsessive oscillation between text and image embodies the culmination of Carter’s compulsion for intermediality. This compulsion has been present in embryo in almost all of her works. The references to Rops’ etchings and to Fragonard’s miniatures are part of the construction of meaning in The Bloody Chamber, and references to Surrealist paintings shape the Infernal Desire Machine of Doctor Hoffman. But far from being a means of transmitting meaning via an iconographic detour, the image in “Impressions” contributes to creating a new dynamics in the textual fabric. The energy it diffuses shows meaning as the result of a complex alchemy whereby existing cultural artifacts are expanded, translated, converted, or juxtaposed with earlier ones. Meaning proves to be just an impression, a vague idea or image born out of the encounter of these cultural artifacts and their textualisation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

2. The various definitions of the word ‘impression’ involve the idea of the image or its ersatz. For instance, an impression can be: “a deep and long lasting effect on the mind or the feelings of somebody; unclear or uncertain idea, feeling or opinion; appearance or effect of somebody; impressions of somebody: funny imitation of the behaviour or way of talking of a well-known person: the students did some impressions of the teachers at the end of the year; mark left by pressing something hard into a surface.” Oxford Advanced Learner’s Encyclopedic Dictionary. The different definitions of ‘impression’ imply something close to the original yet not exactly the same since it is colored by the subjectivity of the viewer. This is important to the understanding of the hermeneutic project developed in Carter’s writing as I will show later in this paper.
3. It is interesting to underline that the painting referred to in the title is not considered as de La Tour’s but Wrightsman’s. Here, it is the material canvas more than the artistic product that is brought to the fore. This also suggests that the painting belongs to those who behold it as much as to the painter himself.
4. Analysing Girl with a Pearl Earring, Liliane Louvel writes “the title and the book cover are signs of intermediality; at this level, an atmosphere of suspicion is set in motion, drawing the reader’s attention to other pictorial allusions. The informed reader is being warned.” (Louvel 2010, 237) “… le titre et la page de couverture sont des signaux d’intermédialité, c’est alors “’l’ère du sous-soupçon” qui se lève pour repérer les autres allusions. Le lecteur alerté est mis en garde.” (Louvel 2010, 237)
5. Saint Mary Magdalene, Domenico Puligo, in Jane Lahr, Searching for Mary Magdalene (79). Or Christ in the house of Mary and Martha by Jacopo Robusti (Lahr 70). Or again The Conversion of Mary Magdalene by Caravaggio in Susan Haskin’s, Mary Magdalene: the Essential History, 257.
6. Christ in the house of the Pharisee by Dieric Bouts the Elder (Lahr 73).
7. Metsys’ The Penitent Magdalene (Haskin 234).
8. Susan Haskin writes: “St John’s lustful sin couples him with Mary Magdalene and, like him, she becomes affected by the imagery of the wild man in German art for from the mid-fifteenth century, she is often shown covered, except for her face, breasts, feet and hands, in a kind of fur which seems to grow from every pore.” (233)
9. This is a condensation of various motifs in different paintings that show the Penitent Magdalene scourging herself and her lashes becoming part of her flesh.
10. Louvel underlines the link between the motif of the gallery and the creation of a rhythm and underlines the consequence of this rhythm on the reception. She says: “The gallery-tour motif introduces into the narrative a new rhythm that follows the viewer’s subjectivity. It is a matter of rhythm because the text is punctuated by the appearance of the painting, of the image in the text. None of the two media loses its specificity, instead, each acquires more energy, thus giving the affect a new dimension” (Louvel 2002, 226-227) “Le temps, ainsi réintroduit par le parcours de la galerie, avance au rythme de la subjectivité.
C’est bien de rythme qu’il s’agit lorsque le texte est scandé par l’apparition de la peinture, de l’image en texte... L’intérêt de la chose étant qu’aucun des deux média n’y perde sa spécificité mais y gagne au contraire un surplus d’énergie, produisant une redimensionalisation de l’affect.” (Louvel 2002, 226-227)

11. Condensed temporality should not be mistaken with Lessing’s classification of painting as an art of space opposed to the arts of time. Actually, de La Tour’s painting itself points both the emblems of vanity; and to her future: the contemplative gaze and the skull point to the present in _The Magdalene and Two Flames_. Carter’s choice of this painting in particular expresses her desire to shed light on a phase of transition. This overtly mentioned in a passage that we will study below.

12. The painting itself does not carry a discourse, and has in no way a discursive dimension, contrary to François Whal’s theroy. However it invites the viewer’s comments and the writer’s lengthy essays. Louvel refers to “Walter Sickert, a conversation” by Virginia Woolf where the narrative becomes a hybrid narrative essay (Louvel 2010, 36-37). The esthetic dimensions of some paintings or photographs are sometimes neglected because of the discourse to which the painting gives way. A case in point is the exposition entitled _Controverses_ which took place in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in 2009.

13. According to Mikhaïl Bakhtine, pseudo-objective motivation consists in feigning to defend an argument by giving deliberately weak or illogical justifications, thus creating laughter or surprise among the readers. (Bakhtine 126).


15. “‘The pictorial third’, the text/image intercourse, conjures up something else, something that acts in between. This pictorial third would be a floating image (virtual or real, ‘an image in the air’ as Descartes would have put it; Wollheim refers to the floating nature of two superposed experiences). This image is suggested by the text but is still an image borne out of words, an image that can refer us back to an extra-textual painting but also to an imaginary painting (or one of its substitutes) to be reconstructed by the reader; an image that belongs to the reader; it is his own invention, since it does not repeat the one expressed in the text by a narrator engulfed in his own inner vision.” (Louvel 2010, 260) “Le tiers pictural entre le texte et l’image fait advenir autre chose, ce qui joue entre les deux. Ce tiers pictural serait l’image flottante (virtuelle ou ‘réelle’ au sens de Descartes, une ‘image en l’air’ et Wollheim évoque la qualité “flottante” des deux expériences qui se superposent) suggérée par le texte mais qui reste une image suscitée par des mots, une image qui peut renvoyer à un tableau dans l’extra-texte mais aussi à un tableau ou un de ses substituts) imaginaire à reconstruire par le lecteur; image qui sera alors sa propriété, son “ invention ” puisqu’elle ne coïncidera jamais avec celle qui fut mise en texte par le narrateur plongé dans sa vision intérieure.” (Louvel 2010, 260)

16. Expression used by R. Flaxman, quoted by Louvel (2010, 250)

17. “The Virgin Mary wears blue. Her preference has sanctified the color. We think of a heavenly blue. But Mary Magdalene wears red, the color of passion.
The two women are twin paradoxes. One is not what the other is.” ("Impressions: The Wrightsmans Magdalene” 410)


19. “Une exigence éhique de se documenter.” (Picard 49)

20. Louvel explains that “The instability of the iconotext, its ongoing oscillation which is borne out of the text/image intercourse, fascinates the writer ant the reader because it sets them endlessly in the sphere of transaction and negotiation and imposes on them a dynamic and active writing and reading practice (...) It is a real operation, which accounts for the choice of the word ‘transaction’; it is an operation of conversion, of change too, ‘a change of relations and, like with the monetary conversions, there is always some remaining sum, a difference in value which must be paid somehow. There is never an exact count. In fact, in the iconotext, this remaining entity corresponds to the role of the imaginary, left suspended, between the two” (2002, 149).

"Cette instabilité de l'iconotexte, son oscillation sans fin qui résulte de la mise en rapport du texte et de l'image, fascine l'écrivain et le lecteur car elle les loge constamment dans la transaction, la négociation et leur impose une écriture ou une lecture dynamique, active, là où l'image donne l'impulsion à travers le texte, à travers la parole, qui lui permettent de se lever. Il s'agit bien d'une opération, ce qui rend bien le terme de transaction, d'une opération de conversion, de change aussi. ‘le change de rapport’. Et comme le change opéré entre deux monnaies, il y a toujours un reste, une différence de valeur dont quelqu'un paie le prix. La balance n'est jamais exacte, le compte ne tombe pas juste. Le reste est alors la part d'imaginaire laissé en suspens, entre deux” (2022, 149).

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ABSTRACTS

“Impressions : The Wrightsmans Magdalene” est la dernière nouvelle écrite par Angela Carter. Elle a été publiée dans un recueil de nouvelles dédiées à la représentation littéraire, iconographique et cinématographique. Etant une référence explicite à un tableau éponyme de Georges de La Tour, le titre de cette nouvelle annonce d'emblée son projet pictural. La pulsion picturale investit aussi bien le style que la structure narrative de la nouvelle. Le tableau de Georges de La Tour est au cœur de la nouvelle. Il est le point de départ de la trame qui s'en inspire pour situer les événements dans un contexte historiographique. Mais le projet de Carter ne se limite pas à traduire en récit une représentation picturale. Cet article analyse les modes, fonctions et conséquences de l'interaction entre le textuel et le pictural. Mon objectif consiste à montrer que les opérations d'expansion, conversion, internalisation et réinvention font partie d'une pulsion pour l'inter-médialité, une pulsion qui illustre le mouvement permanent de construction et déconstruction du sens à partir de productions artistiques existantes. Les différents mouvements qui opèrent dans le texte et entre le texte et ses différents intertextes illustrent le rapport entre les différents arts et les questions herméneutiques et esthétiques que ce rapport suscite chez le lecteur.
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The Interplay of Text and Image, from Angela Carter’s The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault (1977) to The Bloody Chamber (1979)

Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère

‘Images send us back our gaze.’
Hans Belting, La vraie image. Croire aux images?
(167)

1 In recent years, the ordinary sense of translation as the transfer of a text from one language to another has been extended to the arguably even more complex transposition of verbal text into visual image (or vice versa). Following Roman Jakobson, translation is no longer limited to interlinguistic mediation but has come to encompass intersemiotic transposition. Liliane Louvel, for example, has developed the idea that the interplay of text and image implies operations that are akin to translation in L’œil du texte (1998), and she has outlined the modalities of this dialogue in Texte/ Image: Images à lire, textes à voir (2002), where she argues that ‘the term of translation is flexible enough to describe what happens when we move from image to text and vice versa in a configuration of dialogue and responses, an operation of translation or interpretation’ that stems from their mutual relationships. She goes on to describe the interplay of text and image in terms of a differential structure of analogy and difference (or, rather, différance) that arises from their tension, so that ‘the passage between the two semiotic codes is to be read in-between’. The dynamic process of intersemiotic (or intermedial) translation therefore requires a form of active reading on the part of the reader/viewer who is made to move to and fro (Louvel uses the term oscillation) between text and image.

2 Most people today, including children, become familiar with Perrault’s contes through illustrated books or animated films. But it is significant that in the last decades of the twentieth century, the fairy tale was also revived as a genre for adults in the English-speaking world. Angela Carter played an important role in the development of this
parallel tradition through her collection of fairytale-inspired stories, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), which started a veritable fashion that lasts to this day. Significantly, Martin Ware’s artwork for *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (1977), Carter’s translation of Perrault’s tales published two years earlier, already modernizes them and goes against the Disneyfied reception of the genre. Ware’s images depart from the conventionalized reception of the fairy tale even more radically than Carter’s translations, which are still governed by the assumption that Perrault’s tales were written for children (she refers to them as ‘nursery stories’). By contrast, the illustrations are aimed at an adult audience and they self-consciously foreground the formal and visual dimensions of the tales. In this sense, they prefigure *The Bloody Chamber*, which re-envisions the traditional stories of Bluebeard, Little Red Riding Hood, and Beauty and the Beast through the prism of Western art, literature and culture. The palimpsest quality of Carter’s richly allusive fiction has been well documented. Likewise, Carter’s interest in the visual arts (predominantly painting and cinema) has been examined in relation to the author’s concern for the impact of visual culture on women’s self-representations and social roles, and to her intervention in the debate on the ‘male gaze’ and pornography that animated feminist circles in the late 1970s and 1980s. More recently, critics have traced the influence of film, surrealist art, painting and comic books on her work, and shifted attention from Carter’s fiction to her lesser-known radio plays, film scripts, journalism and cultural criticism, as well as to Neil Jordan’s and David Wheatley’s cinematic adaptations. While Carter’s nuanced criticism of the politics of vision and the ‘male gaze’ has been much discussed with regard to *The Bloody Chamber*, however, little has been done on the interaction of the textual and the visual regimes in her work, which to me is a key to her creative process.

3 While Carter’s collection of ‘stories about fairy stories’ (Carter, 1998, 38) has generated a great deal of critical interest, her translation of Perrault’s *contes* into English has long been neglected, even though these two projects were conducted more or less simultaneously. I wish to argue that translation and rewriting were not only closely related in terms of chronology and genre, but that considering them together sheds new light on the dynamics of creation in *The Bloody Chamber*, which emerged partly as a response to Martin Ware’s artwork for her translations. *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* marked a turning-point in Carter’s career as it changed her perception of the fairy tale and raised central issues that the writer was to pursue in *The Bloody Chamber* collection. The interplay of text and image in *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* also enables us to re-read Perrault’s tales differently, as it highlights the specific nature of each medium as well as their intricate relations.

4 *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* was first published by Victor Gollancz Ltd in 1977. While Carter’s translations adapt Perrault’s tales for modern-day children (especially girls) with a view to conveying their ‘politics of experience’, to borrow her own words (Carter, 1998, 452), Ware’s artwork for *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* provides an intriguing counterpoint to the translator’s understanding of the nature, purpose and readership of Perrault’s *contes*. In this sense, Ware’s etchings anticipate a shift in audience (from children to adults) and a concern for visuality that becomes central in *The Bloody Chamber*. Further, Carter adapted specific elements from Ware’s illustrations in her collection of fairytale rewritings, including visual details and strategies that she transposed to the realm of verbal narrative.
The circumstances of the collaboration between the writer and the visual artist draw attention to the role of editors and publishers in the making of a book which was to play a major (and so far underestimated) role in Carter’s development as a writer. Angela Carter was commissioned by Victor Gollancz Ltd to do a new and fresh translation of Perrault’s collection in 1976. In a private correspondence, Martin Ware confirms that even though *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* was marketed as a children’s book, he took it to be aimed at an adult audience while hoping that it would be appreciated by younger readers as well. Ware’s illustrations are set in strong contrast to Carter’s rendering of Perrault’s tales, insofar as there is nothing child-like about them. Besides challenging generic expectations, they also foreground the issue of vision in the tales. This is particularly striking in *Bluebeard*, a tale based on a visual prohibition, but also in *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood*, where the famous scene of the encounter of the Prince and the Princess reworks the erotic topos of the ‘belle endormie’, and in *Little Red Riding Hood*, a tale which notoriously revolves around deceptive appearances.

**From ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ to ‘The Company of Wolves’ and ‘The Werewolf’**

In her 1976 essay for *New Society*, ‘The Better to Eat You With’, Carter records her experience of reading Perrault’s *contes* in French prior to translating them into English, and she opposes their sound worldly pedagogy to the irresponsible escapist tradition of fairyland. She admires Perrault’s ‘Le Petit chaperon rouge’ for the narrative economy of the tale that so effectively conveys its basic conflict by privileging action over narration and description, and relying on characters reduced to types or ‘functions’:

> And what a craftsman Perrault was! ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ is a classic of narrative form. The plot arises from the interaction of the wolf and his hunger, and the child and her ingenuity. The suspense springs from our knowledge of the predatoriness of wolves and our perception of Red Riding Hood’s ignorance of it. No child reared on these austere and consummately constructed narrative forms is going to be easily fobbed off with slipshod stream-of-consciousness techniques, or overheated poetic diction. (Carter, ‘The Better to Eat You With’, 1998, 454)

Carter is here concerned with the politics of style and narrative form: her reading of the tale as a warning against deceptive speech and rhetorical manipulation, embodied by the wolf, is in turn reflected in her translation of Perrault’s text, which further simplifies the grammar, syntax and style of the story in keeping with its cautionary moral. And yet, clear-cut binary oppositions and fixed roles are inevitably complicated insofar as the plot revolves around deception, disguise and substitutions. This is what Martin Ware’s full-page etching suggests, as it depicts two brief moments of narration inserted between the famous dialogues:

> Le Loup ne fut pas longtemps à arriver à la maison de la Mère-grand ; il heurte : Toc, toc. […] Ensuite il ferma la porte, et s’alla coucher dans le lit de la Mère-grand, en attendant le petit chaperon rouge, qui quelques temps après vint heurter à la porte. Toc, toc. (Contes, 1981, 144)

> The wolf soon arrived at Grandmother’s house. He knocked on the door, rat tat tat. […] Then he closed the door behind him and lay down in Grandmother’s bed to wait for Little Red Riding Hood. At last she came knocking on the door, rat tat tat. (Fairy Tales 24; 26)
While the tale is plot-driven, centering on dramatic action, dialogue and sound effects (onomatopoeia), Ware chooses to focus on a structural aspect, namely the repetition of the scene.

Ware translates this visually on the page by juxtaposing images that represent those two transitional moments as variations on the same situation: in the top frame, the spectator is inside the grandmother's bedroom, looking out: the old lady, seen almost in profile, is wearing a nightcap and nightgown. She sits straight in her bed (as if waiting for someone to arrive), staring stonily ahead, while the head of the wolf, framed by the open window, is visible from the spectator's point of view, but not his future victim's. Below, the setting and perspective are identical, except for the characters swapping places: the wolf has now replaced the grandmother, and he is wearing her nightcap (but no nightgown) to signal his usurpation of her identity, while the head of the heroine (light-haired, age uncertain, wearing her hood) is visible through the window: she is looking in, seemingly at the reader, who can only stare back helplessly: we know that wolves are dangerous, but she doesn't and we cannot warn her of the impending danger. Thus, whereas Carter seeks to emulate the masterfully constructed plot and effective style of Perrault's tale in her translation, Ware interprets the story visually as being about the old woman's and the little girl's inability to see the wolf and the danger that he represents. His characters are impassive, still, and expressionless, to the point of undermining the dramatic action and its impact on the reader that supposedly drives the cautionary message home, according to Carter in her essay. The marked absence of visible emotions (in face, attitude, or gesture) in the pictures thus shifts the focus from action to narrative form, story to discourse, affect to critical distance.

Ware's defamiliarizing strategies invite alternative interpretations of the tale and thereby draw attention to significant differences between the visual and textual regimes. However, they also complicate any attempt to oppose them, since the juxtaposition of two almost identical scenes in the picture conveys an idea of elementary sequence and development that is characteristic of narrative, as opposed to the alleged descriptive nature of illustration. The brutality and violence of the devouring of the grandmother and the girl that follows upon each scene of waiting is elided, although the fact that the wolf moves from outside to inside the house, from
background to foreground creates a sense of suspense and threat, suggesting that he
might even step outside the frame to devour the reader. Ware also pays homage to his
predecessors: the night bonnet worn by the grandmother and appropriated by the wolf
seems to allude to Gustave Doré’s well-known illustration of Little Red Riding Hood in
bed with the wolf.

Significantly, the bonnet passes from grandmother to wolf in the tale, just as the motif
passes from Doré to Ware in the iconographic tradition.

In turn, structural, narrative, generic and stylistic experimentation becomes a key
feature of *The Bloody Chamber*, where Carter proposes several variations on the story of
Little Red Riding Hood that explore the disquieting confusion between the
grandmother and the wolf, the girl and the wolf, the hunter and the wolf, etc. The
possibilities opened up by role-switching, substitutions and conflated identities are
notably exemplified in ‘The Company of Wolves’, where the story is retold from
different perspectives and in different modes, styles and contexts. In keeping with
Carter’s association of the wolf’s smooth tongue with the dangerous seductions of
language (after Perrault’s moral cautioning against the ‘Loups doucereux’ 145), the
following passage combines textual and visual effects to ambiguous ends. It is written
in an excessive and self-consciously visual style that evokes a scene full of eyes and
(literal and metatextual) reflections:

At night, the eyes of wolves shine like candle flames, yellowish, reddish, but that is
because the pupils of their eyes fatten on darkness and catch the light from your
lantern to flash it back to you – red for danger; if a wolf’s eyes reflect only
moonlight, then they gleam a cold and unnatural green, a mineral, a piercing
colour. If the benighted traveler spies those luminous, terrible sequins stitched
suddenly on the black thickets, then he knows he must run, if fear has not struck
him stock-still. (‘The Company of Wolves’, *The Bloody Chamber*, 110-111, emphasis
mine)

The narrator/storyteller addresses the implied reader/audience as ‘you’ and thus casts
‘him’ in the role of Little Red Riding Hood, unless the central trope of the reflecting
eyes governing the passage suggests that there is something wolf-like about us too.
‘Images send us back our gaze’, according to Belting, but some texts have the same
effect too. While the declared intention of the narrator seems to be to warn ‘the
benighted traveller’ against the danger represented by wolves, the elaborate, ornate,
alliterative style dazzles and confuses all the better to trap ‘him’ in the yellow, red and
green lights reflected in the wolves’ eyes that glow in the dark. Her role becomes even
more ambiguous when s/he invites the ‘benighted traveller’ to run, only to stop ‘him’
’stock-still’ at the end of the sentence and paragraph. This strategy is reminiscent of
‘The Bloody Chamber’, which seemingly condemns the perverse (and deathly) seductions of art represented by the murderous Marquis and yet couches the story in a densely allusive and baroque, artful and artificial language that ambiguously enacts what it cautions the reader against. Unlike the straightforward message conveyed by the translation, then, Carter’s rewritings teach a lesson in the ambiguity and complexity of meaning, and of shifting subject positions.

In another variation on the story, ‘The Werewolf’, Carter proposes alternatives to the familiar plot when the grandmother, who turns out to be a werewolf in disguise, is neutralized by her bold and armed granddaughter; or alternately (depending on how we read the tale) the granddaughter plots against her grandmother, accuses her of being a witch, and appropriates her belongings. Here also, the meaning of the tale remains ambiguously open. These complex reconfigurations of the constitutive elements of the tale call into question the simple conflict and clear message that Carter praised in her essay about Perrault and sought to emulate in her translation. The text-image interaction that characterizes The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault thus suggests a variety of possibilities for interpretation that the writer explored in The Bloody Chamber.

From ‘The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood’ to ‘The Lady of the House of Love’

‘La Belle au bois dormant’ (‘The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood’), as the title of the tale suggests, presents a variation on the topos of the ‘belle endormie’ which raises the question of the gendered gaze, visual pleasure, and desire and/or love at first sight, but also of violated intimacy and voyeurism. In the galant style, Louis-Marin Bonnet’s engraving of ‘Mars et Venus’ (1772) foregrounds the erotic implications of the famous scene of discovery that remain chastely ‘veiled’ in Perrault’s literary rendering:

The visual dimension of the scene is highlighted by Mars opening the curtains to unveil the naked body of the sleeping Venus (literally, Beauty!). The curtains thus dramatize the conditions of visibility of the picture while clearly associating vision with sexual intimacy, sensual pleasure and erotic desire (see Louvel, 2002, 140). Writing in a more prudish context, Perrault also mentions curtains but there are no references to
nakedness and the erotic/voyeuristic implications of the discovery of the sleeping woman so present in the literary and visual tradition are attenuated. Instead, he highlights the admiration of the young Prince at the dazzling spectacle of the sleeping princess, conveyed in a hyperbolic and humorous fashion: enshrined in a golden room, her face radiates light (‘éclat resplendissant, lumineux et divin’) to the point of triggering in the young man a mixed aesthetic, amorous and mystical experience, which also comically recasts the young woman as a female equivalent of the Sun King. The galant elements of Bonnet’s licentious picture and complex humour of Perrault’s description disappear altogether in Carter’s translation for children, which reorient the ‘marvellous’ (merveilleux) of the French conte de fées towards the more ordinary and yet subjectively magical encounter between a young man and a ‘lovely’ girl (‘she was so lovely that she seemed, almost, to shine’). Ware’s visual illustration of the passage, in turn, goes against the licentious tradition exemplified by Bonnet’s picture, but to different effects. It emphasizes the theatricality of the scene, but does not play up either its erotic, humoristic or romantic/sentimental associations which characterize the twentieth-century reception of the tale (including, of course, Disney’s movie).

The scene represents a moment where vision is overdetermined vision in Perrault’s text, as the visual details, the many occurrences of the verb ‘to see’, the light emanating from the girl that floods the scene, the connotations of the verb ‘admirer’ (which capture the effect of surprise and visual pleasure of the spectacle on the Prince) all show:

*il entre dans une chambre toute dorée, et il vit sur un lit, dont les rideaux étaient ouverts de tous côtés, le plus beau spectacle qu’il eût jamais vu : une Princesse qui paraissait avoir quinze ou seize ans, et dont l’éclat resplendissant avait quelque chose de lumineux et de divin. Il s’approcha en tremblant et en admirant, et se mit à genoux auprès d’elle. Alors comme la fin de l’enchantement était venue, la Princesse s’éveilla ; (Contes 135-6, 1981, italics mine)*

At last he arrived in a room that was entirely covered in gilding and, there on a bed with the curtains drawn back so that he could see her clearly, lay a princess about fifteen or sixteen years old and she was so lovely that she seemed, almost, to shine. The prince approached her trembling, and fell on his knees before her. *The enchantment was over; the princess woke.* (Fairy Tales 64, italics mine)

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-Courtesy of Orion Books
Ware’s drab, somber and almost sinister rendering of the scene evokes a scene from *Hamlet* (another Prince...), or perhaps a downbeat version of the English pantomime tradition which sometimes features adaptations of Sleeping Beauty. Framed by drawn curtains, the white horizontal rectangle on which the heroine is laid out is opposed to the vertical black backdrop on which the young man, looking surprised or frightened (possibly to convey ‘trembling’) and facing the viewer/audience, detaches himself. The reclining girl is wearing a plain dress and her hair is neatly arranged in a bun while a blank-eyed youth wearing a fur-lined cape and crown is staring at her reclining body (or is it at the spectator?). The Prince’s face is brightly lit from below, and the young woman’s seemingly from above, as if by a spotlight, instead of the radiating light which emanates from her body in Perrault’s text. The visual treatment of the scene thus foregrounds the theatrical aspect of the passage in Perrault’s and Carter’s texts, but deprived of its wonder and splendor, as well as its voyeuristic implications. There is nothing erotic about the dress, the hairstyle or the rigid body of the sleeping girl/woman in Ware’s picture. The idea of the ‘disenchantment’ of the famous bed scene, which occurs immediately after the description of the encounter of Sleeping Beauty and the Prince in the text (‘the enchantment was over’), is therefore represented visually in the etching: the young Prince’s subjective (‘enchanted’ or enamored) perception of the sleeping Princess is replaced by the external, neutral and detached gaze of the spectator. Retrospectively, we are made to notice the presence of the word ‘paraissait’ (seemed) in Perrault’s text, which already suggests that the youthful beauty of the girl may be no more than an illusion and therefore hints at a discrepancy between the naïve and enthralled focalizer on the one hand and the ironic narrator on the other.

The disenchantment of the fairy tale also characterizes Carter’s rewriting of the story as a Gothic tale in ‘The Lady of the House of Love’, when the female vampire (who is both Beauty and the Beast, Sleeping Beauty and her cannibal mother-in-law) lures a young man into her castle but falls in love with him, lets herself be kissed, and dies. The following morning, when the young man wakes up to find the room empty, the sinister decor of the Gothic castle is no more than a paltry illusion, and the morning light lays bare the device: ‘The shutters, the curtains, even the long-sealed windows of the horrid bedroom were all opened up and light and air streamed in; now you could see how tawdry it all was, how thin and cheap the satin, the catafalque not ebony at all but black-painted paper stretched on struts of wood, as in the theatre’ (‘The Lady of the House of Love’, 106). The trappings of Gothic fiction are just a cheap trick of the light – like the illusions of romance that Perrault already makes gentle fun of in his *contes*, and are further challenged in *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault*. Adaptations and rewritings of Sleeping Beauty that exploit the ‘dark’ aspects of the tale abound in English literature and culture, from Carter’s vampire in ‘The Lady of the House of Love’ to Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga, which features a heroine called ... Bella.

And thus the interplay of text and image renews our understanding of Perrault’s *contes* and the power they exert over our imagination. *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* becomes part of a complex creative continuum involving (re)reading, translation, illustration and rewriting. It exemplifies the intricate relations of visual and literary culture, which produces new possibilities for (re)interpretation of the classic tales while transforming our perception and understanding of their significance, since ‘a
text or a painting can contribute to the transformation of a view held by the culture in which it functions’ (Bal, 2006, 47).

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NOTES

1. I am grateful to Liliane Louvel for drawing my attention to Hans Belting’s study. The translation of the quotation is her own.

2. Although Jakobson’s model gives pre-eminence to the linguistic sign, it extends to other forms of communication, including musical and visual semiosis, especially cinema: “This pragmatic approach must lead mutatis mutandis to an analogous study of the other semiotic system” (‘Language in Relation to Other Communication System’s, 703).

3. ‘Le terme de translation est suffisamment plastique pour décrire ce qui advient lorsque l’on passe de l’image au texte et vice-versa en une sorte de système de dialogue ou de réponses, en une opération de traduction ou d’interprétation (…), un transport (…) un rapport plutôt’ (148); Tension de leur différence-écart qui appelle aussi à leur rassemblement, le processus dynamique de la translation s’effectue en réponse à l’écart entre l’image et le texte. Le passage entre deux codes sémiotiques se lit entre-deux’ (149). Louvel’s model is based on an interlinguistic pun, since the word translation
combines the French sense of spatial/geomatrical displacement and the English sense of linguistic transposition: this oscillation appropriately enacts the in-between space that she locates as the site of reading. The translations are my own.

4. Gillian Lathey remarks that ‘One of the most notable differences between translating for adults and translating for children is the challenge of what Anthea Bell has called a third dimension to the translation process. In addition to source and target languages, a translator for children often works with images, either illustrations that punctuate a prose text or, in the case of the modern picture book, an intricate and vital counterpoint between image and text’ (111). The spirit of Richard Ware’s original artwork is not unlike David Hockney’s etchings for Six Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm (1969). I am grateful to Gillian Lathey for drawing my attention to this connection. The tradition of ‘dark’ and macabre fairy tale illustration/adaptation has recently been popularized by Edward Gorey and Tim Burton.

5. It ranges from Shakespeare to Sade, Perrault to Poe, Dickens to Baudelaire, to name a few of its numerous intertexts. See Bacchilega and Roemer 1998, Gamble 2001 and 2055, and Munford 2006.


9. This may have to do with the poor status of translation, seen as a ‘secondary’ activity. See Hennard Dutheil 2009 and 2010.

10. The book was reissued in a different form (and format) as Sleeping beauty and Other Favourite Fairy Tales in 1982, with illustrations by Michael Foreman. The second edition clearly capitalizes on the success of The Bloody Chamber, and on Michael Foreman’s popularity as an illustrator. The recent reissue of Carter’s translation in paperback by Penguin, prefaced by Jack Zipes, is discussed in Hennard Dutheil 2011.

11. The notion of the fairy tale as a vehicle for moral instruction is not a fashionable one. I sweated out the heatwave browsing through Perrault’s Contes du temps passé on the pretext of improving my French. What an unexpected treat to find that in this great Ur-collection (...) all these nursery tales are purposely dressed up as fables of the politics of experience. The seventeenth century regarded children, quite rightly, as apprentice adults. (...) Cut the crap about richly nurturing the imagination. This world is all that is to the point’ (‘The Better to Eat You With’, 452-3). In this passage, Carter outlines a pre-romantic use of the fairy tale that privileges its educational function over the escapist pleasures of imagination. Distinct from the moralizing/moralistic tradition that has dominated the reception of French fairy tales in England and the US since the mid-eighteenth century, Carter’s translation nevertheless contains a strong didactic element as it uses the tale to convey what she calls ‘the politics of experience’. Neil Forsyth has confided to me that at the time, Carter used the phrase quite often; it was borrowed from the title of R. D. Laing’s popular book, to which she apparently objected in a letter to him.

12. From her translation to her rewritings, Carter moves from a child reader to a knowing, sophisticated, adult one in The Bloody Chamber. The latter book
changed common perceptions of the genre and started a veritable fashion for fairy tale-inspired fiction by such authors as Kate Bernheimer, Emma Donoghue, Nalo Hopkinson, A. S. Byatt, Nancy Madore, Gregory Maguire, Joyce Carol Oates, Donald Barthelme, Marina Warner and Janes Yolen, who belong to what Stephen Benson has aptly called ‘the Angela Carter generation’ (‘Introduction: Fiction and the Contemporaneity of the Fairy Tale’, 2).

13. A successful, independent publishing house created in 1927, Victor Gollancz Ltd was sold to Houghton Mifflin, then to Cassell, and subsequently incorporated into Orion Books in 1998. Sheila Hodges notes that ‘In 1970, Joanna Goldsworthy took over entire responsibility for the children’s section of the list. She earned for Gollancz a reputation for publishing literary children’s novels’ (219). Although the market for original children’s books suffered in the late seventies, illustrated children’s classics remained popular: ‘In the last few years Gollancz (...) brought out a number of extremely successful volumes of this kind, among them The Water Babies and The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde, both illustrated by Harold Jones. Then there was The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories of Hans Andersen, which (...) was the first complete version to be published for a century. It was not illustrated; but a selection of the tales came out a year later with marvellously imaginative pictures by Michael Foreman, who has also illustrated a new collection of Grimm’s fairy tales chosen and translated by Brian Alderson. Another interesting venture is a translation of the Mother Goose stories written by the seventeenth-century Frenchman Charles Perrault, illustrated with black-and-white etchings by Martin Ware. The translator is Angela Carter, who writes not only children’s stories but novels with a powerful note of the macabre’ (Gollancz, 219-220).

14. Ware’s emphasis on frames and enclosures (rooms, doors, windows, etc.) suggests the multiple meanings of the word ‘to frame’ as an apt visual image for ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, in the sense of to compose or conceive, but also to enclose with a frame, and hence to contrive the dishonest outcome of a contest.

15. In a footnote to Perrault’s Contes, Jean-Pierre Collinet lists dozens of references to the theme of beauty surprised in her sleep, from Boccacio to La Fontaine, Colonna, and Melle de Scudéry among others (Contes, 319). Feminist critics of the male gaze have indicted Sleeping Beauty as a paradigmatically sexist tale. This is to ignore significant differences in the treatment of the story, from Basile to Perrault and Grimm, let alone contemporary retellings and adaptations, including John Sparagana and Mieke Bal’s collaboration on Sleeping Beauty for the ‘artists and writers together’ series, and even more recently Julia Leigh’s cinematic adaptation of Yasunari Kawabata’s ‘House of the Sleeping Beauties’ in Sleeping Beauty, presented at the 2011 Cannes festival.

16. In the fourteenth-century prose romance Perceforest, a king’s daughter named Zellandine is made pregnant during her sleep by Prince Troylus, who rapes her upon discovering her naked body in a deserted castle. In Basile’s Pentamerone, Talia is also abused in her sleep by a passing king; she bears twins and only awakens when one sucks at her fingers and draws out the splinter that caused her sleep. There is no sexual violence in Perrault’s tale but mutual desire expressed upon the awakening of the Princess, followed by a rapid church ceremony followed by a sleepless wedding night.
ABSTRACTS

Cet article s’attache à l’interaction du texte et de l’image dans les contes de Perrault traduits par
Angela Carter et illustrés par Martin Ware (The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault, 1977), comme une
forme de dialogue intersémiotique particulièrement productif. Il démontre que les illustrations
originales de Ware ne mettent pas seulement en question l’assimilation des contes à la littérature
de jeunesse (qui est encore la perspective adoptée par la traductrice dans ce livre), mais
permettent aussi de saisir un aspect essentiel mais jusque-là ignoré du processus de création
dans l’œuvre de Carter, à savoir la dynamique qui lie la traduction, l’illustration et la réécriture
des contes classiques. Plusieurs éléments des illustrations de Ware sont ainsi repris et élaborés
dans The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories (1979), la collection de “stories about fairy stories”
qui rendit Carter célèbre. La transposition de détails et de stratégies visuelles dans l’écriture
donnent ainsi l’occasion de réflexions sur les rapports entre la visibilité et la textualité.

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The Image and its Discontents: Hawthorne, Poe, and the Double Bind of 'Iconoclash'

Peter Gibian

Organizing a wide-ranging art exhibition in 2002, Bruno Latour introduced the term “iconoclash” to define the dynamics of a fascinating, seemingly universal cultural phenomenon: our love-hate relation with images. The newly-coined term was necessary, in Latour’s view, to convey the double nature of the process through which iconoclasm—the human urge to critique and destroy images—is so often expressed or acted upon in association with its twin, and seeming opposite, iconophilia: idol worship, the human impulse to enthralment with visual figures of mediation. For Latour, this dialectical cycling between iconoclasm and iconophilia is experienced by the human subject as a form of Batesonian double bind: the two irreconcilable impulses always seem to arise together, calling upon us in the same moment, even as they drive us in contrary directions (Latour; Besançon; Bateson).

Whatever we may think about the universal validity of this vision, Latour’s definition of the double bind of “iconoclash” certainly provides a perfect introduction to the short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne. These are precisely the dynamic tensions that are played out at the center of many of Hawthorne’s self-conscious, self-questioning early works of the late 1830s and early 1840s. His obsessive concern with the visual image is evident even in the titles of tales such as “The Prophetic Pictures” (1837), “Fancy’s Show Box” (1837), “Edward Randolph’s Portrait” (1838), “The Artist of the Beautiful” (1844), “Drowne’s Wooden Image” (1844), and “The Snow-Image” (1850). But the double-bind relation to such images is most fully figured in two complex, important early stories: “The Minister’s Black Veil” (1836) and “The Birth-mark” (1843). And the dynamics of this dialectic are then brought even more clearly to the fore in a telling public dialogue between Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe in this period, with the two closely related authors testing opposed impulses as part of a shared exploration of questions fundamental to their literary project—questions about the aesthetic and psychological implications of a fixation on the image. In April and May of 1842, Poe
published in Graham’s Magazine both his now-famous, celebratory review of Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales and the first version of a key story, “The Oval Portrait,” written as a commentary on and corrective to Hawthorne’s “The Prophetic Pictures”—a tale in which Hawthorne raises questions about the life-altering powers of an image-based art. “The Birth-mark,” written in the following year, then constituted, among other things, Hawthorne’s long-meditated response to the challenge posed by Poe’s “The Oval Portrait.” And finally, in 1845, Poe published his much-revised, second version of the “The Oval Portrait” at least in part as an answer to “The Birth-mark”—once again to consider and to counter Hawthorne’s vision of art, aesthetic figuration, and the figure-making artist.

Through this series of paired tales and reviews, then, these two prime shapers of the short story form used each other as sounding boards as they worked to establish their literary careers in the early 1840s—a moment of marked cultural and literary self-consciousness provoked by the shock of great transformations in the American cultural landscape. An age of aesthetic ferment that witnessed the emergence of a surprising number of new writers, contributing in diverse ways to the first truly broad-based development of a distinctive American literature, the decade of the 1840s brought to the fore with new intensity a range of questions about the place and power of the image: it was a period when many authors and painters felt compelled to respond to the threat of a major new visual technology—photography; a period of major challenges to the dominance of an anti-aesthetic, anti-iconic Puritan theology; and, at the same time, with the exploratory work of Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville, a crucial period for the formation and development of the modern short story.

Hawthorne’s “Icono-clash”: “The Minister’s Black Veil” and the Horror of Symbolism

Hawthorne’s early career is fascinating for the way in which his self-reflexive stories play out the author’s unease about representation itself, his fundamentally conflicted relation to his own medium—and especially to the insistence of the iconic verbal-visual image that seems, for Hawthorne, to epitomize that medium. Preparing the ground for his extended meditation on the social, psychological, and aesthetic functioning of the elaborately embroidered letter A at the center of The Scarlet Letter (1850)—a verbal symbol that becomes an almost magically powerful visual icon—Hawthorne’s early tales often revolve around the mysterious power of a single image. Characters and readers in these minimalist works come to focus or fixate their emotional energy on their response to a single, monolithic visual symbol, in each case a figure that disfigures a human identity—a serpent appearing out of a man’s chest; a black veil appearing to cover a minister’s face; a hand-shaped birthmark emerging on a new wife’s cheek. The recurring, self-reflexive plot is, then, simply the tracing of what Philippe Hamon calls the “image drive”—or the “image-drive” gone mad (?). These tales compulsively explore, again and again, the question of how a single unchanging, opaque, surreally intensified image can invade and take over a life, a consciousness, a story—so that all else fades away into a dim background. They are all, of necessity, very short short stories, because they enact the over-arching theme of confinement—tracing a narrowing or constriction in the focus of consciousness. The tales’ central characters are often artist-figures who find themselves imprisoned, walled-in, by the over-
determining power of the “image-drive,” restricted in their thought or expression to visual icons that flatten life rather than conveying its richness and that conceal as much as they reveal. And the tales’ narrators, in the same way, find themselves trapped within the rigid confines of a verbal mode they describe as Romance, allegory, or symbolism—but that we might term fetishization, or, more generally, reification. These are overwhelmingly image-centered works, then, but they speak at the same time for a powerful, fundamental horror of the image. As Charles Feidelson puts it, in a seminal study exploring both Hawthorne’s anticipation of modern symbolism and his profoundly ambivalent relation to the written symbol: “The truth is that symbolism at once fascinated and horrified him” (14). Perhaps reflecting in some ways the inheritance of a Puritan suspicion of “graven images” as material embodiments of thought or spirit, Hawthorne’s analysis also develops out of more modern, nineteenth-century concerns with the psychological implications of a fixation on the hardened image as fetish. Key early works, such as “The Minister’s Black Veil” and “The Birth-mark,” show how Hawthorne’s vision of the “symbol” or the “image” that is so central to his own process of writing and imagining highlights two dynamics: one psychological and one verbal. As Richard Brodhead observes, Hawthorne becomes obsessed with analysis of one specific psychological state—obsession, or monomania—and its close association with a singular mode of figuration: a verbal mode that tends to seize upon certain objects or aspects of human beings, “freeze-framing” them to take them out of the flow of life, and then transforming them into heavily charged signs or symbols (35-36). The central characters in both “The Birth-mark” and “The Minister’s Black Veil,” for example, are artistic emblem-makers who select and then fixate on a single, reified visual image (a facial mark, a veil) that, in each case, hardens into an unchanging, mysterious, opaque sign. And the result of this visual fixation is the same for both characters: it takes over their lives; it separates them from sympathetic social interaction with other humans—in fact in each plot it leads to a willfully shattered marriage. As energies formerly channeled into Eros (or intimate human relations) are rechanneled into relations with visual icons, the artist figure finds that the icon (mark or veil) literally comes between him and other people. To summarize the point here, we might invoke the moralistic language of many of the prefaces Hawthorne wrote to his short story collections, warning about the dangers latent in his own authorial tendencies toward what he calls allegory or symbolism: life-enhancing, flowing, warm energies of the heart can become warped as they are diverted into cold manipulation of fixed, hardened, unchanging symbols.

Hawthorne’s central ambivalence to the seemingly unavoidable relation between the short story and the “image drive” is expressed in the paradoxical, or internally contradictory, stances of the central characters here—who seem to be exploring and experiencing the double bind of “iconoclash” just as Latour describes it. In “The Birth-mark,” the scientist, Aylmer, who becomes pathologically obsessed with a facial “birthmark” that he hone in on as the sole object of his study, makes that visual mark the image of the physical materiality and mortality that he wants to deny. The image that so fascinates him, that he selects, brings out, and invests with projected meaning, finally takes over his life as the embodiment of all that he wants to destroy. His symbolist arts are employed, then, both to give the birthmark its talismanic power and then to attempt to erase it. “The Minister’s Black Veil” works even more directly as an allegory about the heart’s allegorizing tendencies. Like Aylmer, the minister here is a
verbal worker (a preacher) whose obsession with mortal man’s deviation from the mode of pure, unmediated revelation available in the ideal afterlife leads him to become morbidly fixated on his own fallen, imagistic medium—described as “a medium that saddened the whole world” (380). The veil that he places permanently over his face—or that descends, through a movement of over-determining destiny, over his face—becomes, literally and figuratively, the image of man-made mediation, the visual symbol of the symbolic nature of all language. But this veil also remains the only language available to the minister with which he might gesture toward his ideal: the desired state of final, fully-unveiled revelation. So Reverend Hooper fabricates and puts on this fetishized, iconic “black veil,” allows it to take over his life, to hide his face, to come between him and others, at the same time that he becomes married to it, he needs it, as an admonition, and as a signifier pointing to its opposite: the iconoclast’s idealist dream of unmediated expression. Here, though, Hooper finds himself turning in circles: his iconoclasm must be expressed through a compulsive form of idol worship; donning the veil to protest against it, he finally suggests that unveiling can only be figured through the image of the veil. By the end of the tale, when what was at first a simple piece of cloth has emerged as an overwhelming, mesmerizing, inescapable icon, Hooper’s dilemma of entrapment within his medium can stand as an epitome of the deconstructionist lesson summarized by J. Hillis Miller: the story of the veil “is the unveiling of the possibility of the impossibility of unveiling” (51). Indeed, in this story about mysterious secrets, every unveiling only seems to reveal another veil; every attempt at confession or revelation (like the veil taken on by Hooper, warning against secrecy while diverting attention from his own secret, buried motives) is also revealed as a further concealment. Latour’s words seem to sum up the fundamental ambivalences here in the position of Hawthorne as well as of Reverend Hooper—a verbal worker in the church whose central preoccupation with the Biblical prohibition on the making of “graven images” leaves him caught between irreconcilable demands in a debilitating double bind:

“The second commandment is all the more terrifying since there is no way to obey it. The only thing you can do to pretend you observe it is to deny the work of your own hands, to repress the action ever present in the making, fabrication, construction, and production of images, to erase the writing at the same time you are writing it, to slap your hands at the same time they are manufacturing. And with no hand, what will you do? With no image, to what truth will you have access? . . . Can we measure the misery of those who have to produce images and are forbidden to confess they are making them?” (Latour 23)

More complex and multi-leveled than “The Birth-mark,” Hawthorne’s story about the misery of this self-divided minister expresses the author’s own ambivalences through the double nature of its conclusions—as it leaves readers with two contradictory perspectives on the final position of the veiled Reverend Hooper. On the one hand, Hooper’s obsession with this “mysterious emblem,” a single, fixed imagistic figure, is seen to wall him in, allowing him a life of cloistered, monastic purity—denying the possibility of marriage, cutting off worldly relations, and thus making possible uncorrupted contemplation of the afterlife (381). At the same time, though, his symbolist arts also have the effect of permanently separating him from social life: “All through life that piece of crape had hung between him and the world: it had separated him from cheerful brotherhood and woman’s love” (382). With the veil as his only intimate relation, he becomes a ghost, dead to this world, losing his humanity. In fact, in the eyes of his parishioners, he becomes the veil; when they look at him, the veil is
all they see; the veil thus transforms him, taking over his image and identity. But here
Hawthorne’s story combines such now-familiar admonitions about the horror and
limits of symbolism with a simultaneous evocation of the other side of the question—
concluding with a paradoxical recognition of the mysterious, visionary, transformative
potency of the image-making artist and his imagistic arts. Though the black veil may
leave him imprisoned in monastic isolation, it also makes Hooper a compelling, awe-
inspiring verbal performer who is able to use the medium of the veil to communicate
powerfully with his parishioners. During his formal sermons, the veil becomes a vehicle
through which he can speak to and transform his congregation, penetrating and
expressing their secrets, their souls. Though donning the veil means he sacrifices his
private, intimate life to exist only as an image, in the realm of images this somehow
gives the minister an “awful power,” and an unexpected centrality as a public figure
(381). Crowds of new church-members now begin to travel from miles around to hear
him preach. In the double vision of “The Minster’s Black Veil,” then, a public is formed
around the expressions of an isolated image-worker who represents the social whole
but, because of the nature of his medium, cannot himself be a part of it.

The Power of the Image: Hawthorne and Poe’s “The
Oval Portrait”

These ambivalences about the aesthetic image are what led Hawthorne to enter into an
extended public dialogue with Poe—a dialogue that began for Hawthorne with
publication of “The Birth-mark” (1843), which, as we have noted, can be seen as a
revisionary reading of Poe’s “The Oval Portrait” (1842), taking that work as the point of
departure for a fascinated and worried meditation on the founding dynamics of Poe’s
aesthetic—and on the closeness of that aesthetic to Hawthorne’s own.

“The Oval Portrait” is a highly wrought miniature recognized by many as an epitome of
Poe’s aesthetic vision. Baudelaire placed it last, as the summary story, in one of his
volumes of Poe translations; Jean Epstein and Luis Bunuel, in their classic 1928 Poe film
“La Chute de la maison Usher,” merged the plots of “The Fall of the House of Usher”
and “The Oval Portrait” to make their cinematic work a paradigmatic Poe experience;
and this mini-tale, centering on the powerful, over-determining life-force seen to be
immanent within a painting, is (along with Hawthorne’s related story, “The Prophetic
Pictures”) a key precursor to a line of later-nineteenth-century fiction leading through
several Henry James stories to Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray. So it seems
fitting that Poe’s contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne made “The Oval Portrait” the
locus of a clarifying exchange with Poe in 1842-43.

But of course this exchange involved much more than a simple, coincidental likeness
between two tales. In these years Poe and Hawthorne were following each step in the
other’s progress with intense interest. By the early 1840s, then, Hawthorne could
hardly have missed the remarkably close connections between Poe’s literary
experiments and his own—with Poe evolving in some ways as Hawthorne’s double, or
dark twin, in this formative period for the modern short story. Eerily parallel to
Hawthorne’s work, many Poe plots also center on exploration of the pathology of the
“image drive,” featuring monomanically obsessed central characters who exteriorize
their inner energies by investing them in everyday visual objects that then return as
haunting, over-powering, iconic fetish images driving them to destructive, and self-
destructive, actions; the black cat in “The Black Cat” (1843); the beating heart and Evil Eye in “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843); the raven in “The Raven” (1845); the old urban wanderer in “The Man of the Crowd” (1840); and so on.

And certainly Poe was far from unconscious of the uncanny resemblance between these two bodies of work. Indeed, in his own typically sly, perverse way, he recognized and brought to the fore the intimacy of his aesthetic relation with Hawthorne in the conclusion of his landmark 1842 review of *Twice-Told Tales*, when he raised the vexed question of plagiarism: “In ‘Howe’s Masquerade,’ we observe something which resembles a plagiarism—but which may be a very flattering coincidence of thought” (644, 648-50). This suggestion that Hawthorne’s “Howe’s Masquerade” is in part a copy of Poe’s “William Wilson” was plainly absurd—since there was in fact very little resemblance between the two story passages put forward as evidence in Poe’s review, and “William Wilson” appeared a year later than Hawthorne’s tale. But it did allow Poe to highlight in this way the “flattering coincidence” of his thought with Hawthorne’s—while at the same time betraying acute anxiety about that aesthetic intimacy, and denying that the lines of borrowing in this case actually place his work not as the original but as a copy. In the end, though, Poe’s accusation, calling attention to the question of plagiarism, rebounded back on him, as it had the effect of leading newly-attuned readers to discover other examples of Poe’s significant borrowings from Hawthorne in this period. Indeed, alongside his review of *Twice-Told Tales*, in the same May 1842 issue of *Graham’s Magazine*, Poe published a story titled “The Mask of the Red Death” (later revised and renamed “The Masque of the Red Death”)—a work clearly incorporating key elements appropriated from “Howe’s Masquerade” and the three other stories in Hawthorne’s series titled “Legends of the Province House.” As Robert Regan explains, the Poe who denounced plagiarism here was himself, at the same time, “a flagrantly public plagiarist”: “Far from masking his ‘plagiary,’ Poe’s charge [against Hawthorne] calls attention to it. He invites the careful reader—the very careful reader—to see “The Mask of the Red Death” as a critical exercise which out-Hawthornes Hawthorne” (292, 296).

And a month earlier, alongside his first critical notice of Hawthorne in *Graham’s Magazine* for April 1842, Poe had published the first version of “The Oval Portrait” (under its initial title “Life in Death”)—which, Richard Fusco suggests, can be read in the same way as a critical fiction, a review in fictional form, developing an analysis and commentary on Hawthorne’s vision of art. This time Poe’s story, not so much a plagiaristic copy as a conscious critique, is modeled on and in response to Hawthorne’s “The Prophetic Pictures,” an important, self-reflexive tale exploring the ur-plot that, as we have noted, would be reprised in a line of works from James’s “The Story of a Masterpiece” and “The Liar” to Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—the story of an artist (here characteristically figured as a painter) endowed with a quasi-divine ability to produce aesthetic representations (here visual images) that have the visionary power not only to reflect natural, temporal reality but also to transfigure it, to form it or control it, to penetrate its soul, to take over its spirit, its “life.” But while Hawthorne’s fable begins by evoking the dream of an iconic art of marvelous agency, in the end the self-divided tale registers Hawthorne’s deep ambivalence about this aesthetic ideal, finally turning away from this dream as his narration raises ethical questions about the dangers of such an urge to dominance. Here, as in many Hawthorne works in this line, successful aesthetic figuration is seen to tear apart the fabric of intimate social life, leading to the prideful alienation of the artist and the shattered marriage of his
subjects. And though his portraits give the painter a magical, God-like power to regulate human destinies, the tale finally seems to renounce what is described as the “spell of evil influence” in such dark arts (468). But Poe’s revision of the tale in “Life in Death” intervenes to make the counter-argument. According to Fusco, Poe, both “inspired” and “inflamed” by Hawthorne’s vision, decided to “respond in kind, . . . that is, to retaliate by mocking Hawthorne’s aesthetic” (33). If Hawthorne was too timorous to see his plot through to the end, to face up to its full implications, and thus in the end trivialized the powerful potential of the aesthetic imagination, Poe would produce a short fable unambiguously celebrating the artist as a god-like creator and embracing the power of ambitious, image-based art to transfigure life.

But the intertextual exchange between “Life in Death” and “The Prophetic Pictures” was only the point of departure for further turns in the more developed dialogue to come. With his glowing review celebrating Hawthorne’s genius and claiming close kinship with it, and two markedly Hawthorne-esque stories backing up those claims, Poe had not only attracted Hawthorne’s keen attention but also called out for a response. And the response came in “The Birth-mark,” Hawthorne’s revisionary reading of Poe’s “Life in Death.” Echoing Regan, we might say that, with “The Birth-mark,” Hawthorne is working to out-Poe Poe—or to get Poe out of his system (296). Poe continued to keep the intertextual exchange alive, though, with the republication in April 1845 of “Life in Death”—now titled “The Oval Portrait.” As D. M. McKeithan suggests, the major revisions Poe made before this republication can be seen to have been inspired, in large part, by his careful reading of “The Birth-mark” (258).

“A Modern Pygmalion”: Art and Idolatry — Anticipating Aestheticism

Both “The Oval Portrait” and “The Birth-mark” take up a modified version of the Pygmalion story—actually an inversion of the classic Pygmalion story—as a way of meditating on the impulses at the basis of the “image drive,” in the process developing a prescient shared sense of the founding dynamics of later-nineteenth-century Aestheticism. (The fact that the Pygmalion myth was very much on Hawthorne’s mind as he wrestled with questions about the imagistic mode of his own stories is made clear in “Drowne’s Wooden Image,” a closely related work written in this same period, which develops as a conscious, over-obvious reworking of the classic plot. Here the painter John Singleton Copley, visiting the workshop of a humble Boston wood-carver who seems to have become involved in idolatrous worship of a bejeweled female figure he has sculpted, observes how this craftsman’s passion for the “mysterious image” gives it a miraculous physical and spiritual “life” that is absent in the “stolid,” hard, cold “abortions” of his other carvings, and marvels at the transformation in both artist and art work that has made the rude Yankee artisan, for at least one moment, into “a modern Pygmalion” (934-40).) In “The Birth-mark,” Hawthorne’s central artist/scientist addresses his new bride in a speech directly summarizing the mythic thinking basic to this aesthetic ideal: “What will be my triumph, when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect, in her fairest work! Even Pygmalion, when his sculptured woman assumed life, felt not greater ecstasy than mine will be” (768). Adapting the Pygmalion plot in “The Oval Portrait” and “The Birth-mark,” both Poe and Hawthorne conjure the vision of a mode of aesthetic creation that might surpass natural creation;
an Art that is separate from and a rival to Nature; an Art forged through the sublimation or rechanneling of Eros; Art as a form of Idolatry. Enacting this aesthetic theory, both plots follow an isolated, male artist figure as he becomes obsessively fixated on hard, unchanging fetish objects that trouble his natural relation with an inspiring female figure of desire. The dialogic relation between these two stories thus raises key questions not only about the fascination and horror of symbolism in antebellum America, but also about notions of gender embedded within articulations of this shared aesthetic vision.

The classical Pygmalion story follows the development of a male sculptor who has no interest in worldly women but then falls in love with the ideal beauty of his own sculpture of a woman. At first this seems to involve a narcissistic or introverted worship of his own work, of his own creation, of something he can wall in and completely control—more than he could any more differentiated, exterior, imperfect, independent entity created by God or Nature. And early on this dead-end position is expressed in kinky, perverted, and silly forms of fetishism and idolatry—as the artist clothes and bejewels the sculpture, caresses it, gives it a name, and so on. But finally, when he gets his wish and the sculpture does come to life, the sculptor finds himself humbled and admonished by his artwork, realizing that he should never have shunned living women. So he learns from his artwork to turn from art back to life. And in the process of this turn, he also humbles himself before Aphrodite—a female god with great creative powers.

But if the classical myth thus works in the end as a challenge to the doctrine of art for art’s sake—the artist here breaks from his idol, and wishes his art could have life—in both Hawthorne and Poe things move in just the opposite direction. These narratives are not about art coming to life, but about art coming to have a life of its own. The central artist figures here will put up with a loss of physical life as a sort of collateral damage necessary to the pursuit of art; in each case, the artist transfers his affections and his visual gaze from the “living object of desire” to the inanimate aesthetic image of that love object. Becoming married to his art, the creator begins to love his perfect, ideal representation of that love object’s life (or of his love for that life) more than he loves the living figure herself. Rechanneling Eros into art, the artist finds that the art object he produces then preserves his love for eternity, even if the mortal, temporal, fleshly female object of that love falls by the wayside. Indeed, in both plots, the life of art, and of the visual image, is seen to be founded upon the death of the female subject of representation, and the male artist’s creation is seen to develop out of a rivalry with the creative powers of a female Mother Nature. Women can create life; men can create art.

In their basic outlining of this proto-Aesthetic version of the Pygmalion story, Hawthorne and Poe are registering and playing out a strong mid-century American fascination with and anxiety about aesthetic representation, the uses of symbols, or graven images—perhaps even (especially in Poe’s case) anticipating more twentieth-century, Benjaminian concerns about aesthetic reproduction and the decline of “aura,” about “simulacra” and a crisis in representation brought to the fore by the advent of photography, panoramas, and other extensions of realist art (Benjamin; Rothberg 4). In both of these plots, the perfect portrait-replica threatens to destroy the original object through its power to make possible infinite replication of that object’s form—or its idea.
“The Oval Portrait” follows the results of an artist’s compulsive portraiture of his wife, “a maiden of rarest beauty” (298). A prototypical Aesthetic type, he lives austerely in and for his art. In fact he has pushed this aesthetic devotion to the point of Decadence—he has a “bride in his Art” (298)—and in the service of Beauty he will live the truth of Poe’s own dictum: the “death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (680). When he walls his fleshly wife into his workshop space, turning his gaze resolutely from the woman to the portrait emerging on the canvas, the interminable sittings destroy her health and her spirit, with each brush stroke seeming to transfer another drop of blood and vitality from her body to her effigy on the canvas. The tale ends as the artist’s triumph—his monstrous completed painting is “indeed Life itself!”—reduces his wife to a corpse: “She was dead!” (299).

“The Birth-mark”—Hawthorne’s Response to his Dark Twin: Renouncing the Dark Arts

In Hawthorne’s “The Birth-mark” the central artist figure, Aylmer, also enters the story attempting to negotiate a balance between his marriage to his scientific/aesthetic studies and his love for his new bride, Georgiana. And he too soon turns away from his wife to fixate his visual gaze and his emotional life on a fetish image of her—in this case a synecdochic figure of his own creation: the birthmark. Although he is initially presented more as a scientist/philosopher than as an artist, then, Aylmer’s relation to his wife comes to center on the workings of his symbolist arts. Hawthorne’s tale thus underscores the ways in which the philosophical critic of the image, the image-destroyer, is, at the same time, an obsessive image-user and image-maker. Aylmer’s cold, inhuman, scientific stare is what first brings the mark out on his shocked wife’s suddenly pale face; seizing upon this naturally-occurring mark, his blinkered vision then removes it from the flow of everyday life, converting it into a hieratic visual icon invested with magical potency and significance. Fastening upon this image as the sole object of his further studies, he moves Georgiana out of their home to a new place inside the controlling walls of his laboratory—and thus (in a move typical of many Hawthorne characters) transforms an intimate human relationship into an intellectual experiment. Repelled by this figure that in his eyes disfigures Georgiana, he nonetheless soon finds that the birthmark comes to dominate any vision of her. But a heightened focus on this image also seems to be the only means to respond to its power. Channeling all his energies into work on this mark, Aylmer then discovers that it takes over his inner life; he too, along with Georgiana, becomes a victim of the powerful image he has constructed.

The birthmark provokes this artist, most fundamentally, as a symbol of the woman’s fleshly mortality; to him it is the mark that she was born, and so will die. Its physical form also comes to represent, more generally, her physical existence—the fact that, like all humans, she is grounded on this earth as well as potentially angelic; the fact that her life involves bodily form as well as spiritual idea. In manipulating and attacking the bodily mark, Aylmer then is working to eradicate Georgiana’s ties to material, bodily existence—to eradicate her physicality (including, it seems, the threat of her sexuality). Paradoxically, he uses this physical form—a mark in the flesh—to express his idealist vision. But if the birthmark is a sign that Georgiana was born into the natural creation, Aylmer will work to take her out of that creation (clearly marked in the story as the
realm of a female Mother Nature), to erase this mark of the original creator—and thus to produce a perfect image of her that is fully his own creation. The final goal of such an experiment with the birthmark would be to see Georgiana erased from the book of life and written into Aylmer’s great book—the lab journal and testament that records all of the attempts of this artist/creator to triumph over Nature, to capture or recreate life in a perfect, non-temporal, non-physical form.

But if “The Birth-mark” thus shares founding impulses with Poe’s “The Oval Portrait,” Hawthorne finally develops, on the basis of these shared premises, a very different narrative—implying an opposed response to the aesthetic vision played out in these paired plots. First, his scientist/artist figure produces no physical object; no thing is created that will remain after the woman is gone. While in Poe the painter does succeed in passing down the art object that he produced, the male artist in Hawthorne, here more of an idealist philosophical seeker than a physical creator, uses his symbolist, imagistic arts not only to construct and manipulate the image that enthralles him but also, finally, to destroy that image. Working to erase a physical mark rather than to create one, Aylmer is seeking to sever his wife’s ties to flesh and physicality, to take her out of mortal creation so that she could take a place in his own disembodied, perfectionist vision. At the story’s conclusion, then, when perfecting her turns out to take her out of earthly life, Aylmer is left alone with his philosophical ideal.

Secondly, and most crucially, Hawthorne’s tale approaches the central artist’s actions through the point of view of a detached, moralizing, judgmental narrator, while in Poe’s tale readers follow (and identify with) the much-less-detached progress of a viewer-within-the-tale as he is drawn into absorbed enthrallement before the artist’s painting. If “The Birth-mark” develops through a singular focus on the psychology of the artist/scientist Aylmer, Poe’s tale divides its focus to follow two plots associated with two main characters. And although “The Oval Portrait” concludes with a vision of one of these characters, the painter, recreating the dramatic scene of his completion of the portrait, the story begins with an extended, first-person introduction to the point-of-view and psychology of the narrator—who is also given a key role in Poe’s work as the character who views the portrait, reads critical literature about it, and responds to it. The emphasis on the experience of this model reader-within-the-text is what fundamentally distinguishes Poe’s vision from Hawthorne’s. In “The Oval Portrait,” this narrator/viewer emerges as a prototypical Poe character—a relative of Roderick Usher and many others: a highly educated, last-of-the-line aristocrat stranded inside a ruined chateau full of bizarre art. Sick, wounded, hypersensitive, delirious, he is hardly presented as an objective or neutral observer. In fact, in the first published version of the story, “Life in Death” (of 1842), where Poe places an even greater stress on this character’s role and perspective, his experiments with pain-killing opium are seen from the beginning to have left him with “reeling senses” and marked boundary problems, so that he struggles to distinguish external sense perceptions from internal dreams, projections, or feverish hallucinations (296). This narrator-reader, then, expresses himself less through action than through intense personal reaction to a host of exotic stimuli—a stance that leaves him especially susceptible to the shock of a first viewing of the oval portrait. Thus, while Hawthorne’s narrative structure leaves his readers detached from Aylmer and his fraught interactions with the birthmark, Poe’s narrator, when he encounters the portrait, does not judge it in terms of its moral or ethical effects, or speculate about multiple possible responses to it, but instead finds himself immediately carried away by it. He relives it. Ravished by a compelling
emotional connection with the painted figure, he re-experiences the artist's complex, multi-leveled affective response at the moment of the painting's completion—feeling again a combination of wonder and horror at this triumph of art. The painted simulacrum here thus makes possible a reproduction or repetition, across the ages, not only of a sense of the "life" of the female subject but also of the love of the painter—his aesthetic response to that life.

23 While in the Hawthorne story the focus is on the husband-wife relation, and then on the loss of the potential of that relational life along with the loss of the life of the young bride, in Poe's version the woman's role is minimal. She remains mainly the initial object of the gaze, the raw material to be objectified in art. The Poe story's emphasis is much more clearly on the mystery of the bizarre moment of shared feeling—bridging a separation of space and time—that the painting has made possible between the tale's two central male characters. In Poe's allegory of aesthetic process, the dying woman is the necessary subject or material for art, the painter is the producer of art, and the narrator models the process of the reception of art. The woman's death is mainly valued as it makes possible the production of the visual representation of her, which in turn makes possible the intimate sharing of "love" and "life" between the artist and his specially-attuned audience—through the mediation of the work of art.

24 While Hawthorne's narrative, then, becomes a horror story about a self-divided aesthetic impulse combining fascination with, fixation on, and fear of the visual image that leads to ethical failure and human loss—placing the accent on the life that has been lost in the present—Poe's parallel narrative centers on evocation of the titillating horror seen to be foundational to the making of the aesthetic image—and thus to the success of the timeless work of art that lives on in the enthralled, affective responses of future readers.

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ABSTRACTS

Le concept d'« iconoclash », forgé par Bruno Latour, qui explique comment l'iconoclasme est si souvent associé avec son apparent opposé, l'iconophilie, offre un moyen très pertinent de comprendre un grand nombre des premières nouvelles auto-réflexives et métatextuelles écrites par Nathaniel Hawthorne. Une telle relation d'ambivalence envers les images est essentiellement représentée par les positions paradoxales des personnages principaux dans deux contes complexes de Hawthorne. Dans « Le Voile noir du pasteur », l'iconoclasme de Hooper s'exprime par une forme compulsive d'idolatrie; dans « La Tache de naissance », Aylmer se sert de ses créations symbolistes pour donner à la tache le pouvoir d'un talisman puis il tente de l'effacer. En outre, le mouvement de cette dialectique est mis en valeur d'autant plus clairement par un dialogue public révélateur qui a eu lieu à cette époque entre Hawthorne et Edgar Allan Poe. Ce dialogue porte sur deux contes allant de pair, « Le Portrait ovale » et « La Tache de naissance », qui offrent des réponses différentes à des questions communes sur les implications esthétiques et psychologiques de l'obsession pour l'image.

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relation of a line of nineteenth-century American writers to the cosmopolitan vision of a
“traveling culture.”
The Ineluctable Modalities\textsuperscript{1} of the Visible in Daniel Corkery’s “The Stones”: Eye, Gaze and Voice

Claude Maisonnat

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\textsuperscript{1} As an active writer and cultural theorist of the Irish Revival in literature, Daniel Corkery earned for himself a reputation for intransigent dogmatism in the promotion of Irish culture, which has frequently led critics to attack him for his alleged narrow-minded nationalism, an accusation that undoubtedly damaged the reception of his short stories. In keeping with the Irish Ireland ideology of the period, his short stories, set in rural Munster in the 1920s, focus on the emotional attachment of small farmers to their farm as they struggle to wrest a living from the land. The social and historical background of “The Stones” is no exception to this rule. John Redney’s strong and exclusive attachment to his land urges him to seek revenge on a neighbour for what he considers to be a major breach of solidarity. In the context of a local superstition according to which the stones of the aptly named Kilclaw\textsuperscript{2} forewarn the local people of their imminent death if they form the appearance of any of them, Redney eventually turns out to be the victim of his own curse. Yet, for all their strong local attachment, Corkery’s stories may prove to be more ambiguous and sophisticated than they are usually made out to be. It is certainly the case with “The Stones” owing to a complex use of the image understood as a process of representation that ranges from the mental picture the subjects construct of themselves to the aesthetics of representation through art as implemented in the text of the short story.

\textsuperscript{2} Not surprisingly, the motif of the stone effigy\textsuperscript{2} is a very ancient one that can be found in Irish and Scottish oral traditions, and one of its most famous literary avatars is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Great Stone Face” (1850). However, the treatments of the ancient theme are radically different. Where Hawthorne’s stone face is a benevolent figure, visible to all, a tourist’s attraction, shedding peace and wisdom over the village, Corkery’s effigies are lost on a remote hillside, and bode death for the unlucky villager. If the well-meaning moralizing message in “The Great Stone Face” is plain to see, it

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seems that “The Stones” calls for a more ambiguous and problematic interpretation. Both nevertheless provide evidence that the powers of the image are central to the universal need for identification and representation because they result from archaic drives, and the power of such images may prove either apotropaic or destructive.

In the following remarks, the word image is not to be understood as a form of iconographic representation or even as a textualised entity, as is the case with ekphrasis, but rather as an imaginary reconstruction beyond words. It is therefore a narrativised version of the image, invisible like the unconscious, but whose existence is predicated on its effects through the mediation of the signifying chain. As French writer Pascal Quignard aptly remarked: “Man is a desiring gaze that is looking for another image beyond everything he actually sees.” To simplify the point, this type of image is very much like a projection space on which each subject imagines he is represented, but this representation remains invisible, the nature of what the inner eye sees being somewhat problematic.

I - John Redney’s vacillating self-image

To start with, Redney’s process of identification appears to be closely linked with his location. His sense of identity is contained in a narcissistic framework. He has inherited the farm and he has no other interest or horizon than the farm. To a large extent, he is the farm, and in the social game of distribution of symbolic places within his community, he needs the recognition of his neighbours. This is precisely what Con Jer denies him when he refuses to lend him his horse to save the year’s crop of turf from the flood. As a consequence, what triggers off the plot is a difference between neighbours as to the real cause of the conflict. The story remains highly ambiguous in that respect. On the one hand, Redney blames the Nyhans and Con Jer for his misfortune as he might have saved his turf had he been lent a horse on time; on the other hand, Con Jer finds Redney’s demands on him exorbitant as he should have known that Con Jer needed the horse for his own purposes. There is no small amount of dramatic irony when Pat Early, the village smith, accuses Redney of lack of Christian compassion: “If you knew he was going to meet his end, sudden, and without preparation, you might have warned him: ’twould be a neighbourly act.” (85), because the reader remembers that the refusal of the initial loan could hardly be said to be a neighbourly act.

This ludicrous game of “he started it first” would be mere child’s play if it did not reach deep into the question of idealised self image and identity. If Redney is beset by images in more ways than one, it is because Con Jer’s refusal is felt as a blow to his dignity, a threat to his integrity and a denial of his status as one of them. In other words, by considering himself as the excluded third party, the innocent victim of a misunderstanding with unforeseen consequences, he gets involved in a self-centered process of victimization. The result is that it is the very foundation of his being that is shaken because his whole identity is encapsulated in that shattered self-image. As all human beings, he is constantly under the gaze of the other, but this other has now turned into an enemy, hence the desire for revenge that overwhelms his better judgement. It is manifested by a great surge of anger against his neighbours that is the emotional transposition of the flood that destroyed his crop. The cause of this exaggerated emotional response is made explicit by the text. It is the direct
consequence of a Con Jer’s words to the effect that Redney himself could well be the
very cause of his own mishaps:

... he knew quite well that all down the valley, and on the heights as well, the
farmers were shaking their heads over what had befallen him, were by adding this
to that, proverb to proverb, memory to memory, strengthening one another’s
beliefs that such disasters did not overtake a man without cause. And the picture4 he
made himself of them so grouped was a pain that almost overwhelmed the pain of
his actual loss. (78)

6 The mere expression “without cause” testifies that Redney is destabilised, that is to say
removed from the unconscious imaginary identification that bolsters his ego. His anger
is all the stronger as he resents the judgement of his fellow farmers and, most of all, as
their judgement bears on the question of the relation to what is the apple of his eye :
his farm. His sudden anger is therefore a bid to restore the unity of the shattered image
of a worthy farmer. In this perspective, the cunning sleight of hands of the narrative
consists in shifting the focus of the short story from Redney’s problematic self image to
the actualisation of his image in stone, in a process of literalisation of the signified, that
takes shape in the stone, the stone being at the same time the image and the object it
represents.

7 What Redney experiences is a form of anger that is generated by what he
considers to be unacceptable, as if a limit had been crossed. The injustice of his loss suddenly seems
unbearable to him, and his anger overflows exactly as the stream that carried away his
turf. What makes things worse is the implication that he himself is responsible for his
loss. In the economy of his representations, his anger is a response to the
destabilisation of his image, as if it were the consequence of words that ought not to
have been spoken:

... he could not help recalling the very words the boy had brought back in his mouth
from Con Jer, nor how they had set him on fire, maddened him until he had told
him angrily that it might be a good thing for Con Jer to go up to Carrigavawring and
have a look at his own effigy there. (79)

8 The complex relationship that connects words and images in a literary text is further
exemplified by the causality that is established between Con Jer’s words and their
destructive effect on Redney’s self-image. One of the many ironies of the story is that
Redney’s means of retaliation is also a linguistic instrument, e.g. the curse that he
brings upon him by telling him that he has seen his image in stone. This information
was bound to upset Con Jer, as Redney had rightly anticipated:

Let them now come together, the farmers of the valley, stick their noses into one
another’s faces, make out that his turf had not been swept without reason – it was
all one to him. Con Jer would toss and turn on his pillow for many a night to come
wondering if what the boy had reported was true, and if true, what would come of
it. (79)

9 Furthermore, it is striking that the short story closely links the channel he chose for his
vengeance - a peculiar performative use of language - with the function of images that
it can produce: “He felt quite certain that Con Jer did not laugh in his heart when he
laid his head on the pillow in the darkness.” (81) What Redney could not foresee is that
no one can master language and discourse to the point of instrumentalising them,
without resistance. The same holds true for images, and the price he has to pay for this
demiurge-like attempt is his symbolic death. By highlighting in this way the question of
the powers of language, it seems that Corkery introduces a metafictional and self-
reflexive dimension to his story that is even more minutely explored through the problematics of the gaze it exemplifies.

Ultimately, Redney’s predicament must not only be read as the singular fate of an unlucky and particularly hot-tempered individual, but it can be endowed with a more universal import, if he is to be considered as the archetypal Irish farmer threatened by the suicidal logic of a collective form of image building. In this perspective, I would suggest that, as a highly suggestive illustration of D.H. Lawrence’s famous claim that one should never trust the artist but the tale, the story – contrary to all expectations – can be read as a warning against the evils of the misguided autistic logic that underpins the temptation of a self-enclosed nationalistic and narcissistic construction based on an excessive emotional attachment to the land. The conclusion of Corkery’s story clearly images the fact that the fear of the other and the attempt to silence him inevitably lead to exclusion from the community of civilized men, the irony being that Redney is the very agent of his downfall, in a way that is reminiscent of the Lacanian distinction between the two deaths, the biological one and the symbolic one, the gap between the two being filled in the story by the monstrous stone images. It is thus perfectly fitting that the excipit of the story, suggesting the image of the living dead, should read: “Only after weeks and weeks the men of the valley learned her husband had taken to his bed, awaiting his doom. In tongue tied silence still he awaits it, his eyes starting out straight before him.” (90)

II – Image and gaze: the reader’s response

One of the most significant narrative features of the story is that it shows a strange reluctance to be specific about the contents of the images it refers to, so that in almost all cases they seem to remain out of focus, or even empty, as if they were meant to function as projection screens rather than representations. Indeed, such pictorial references provide only the vaguest outline of an image, as we can see in the following instance where the unidentified narrative agency recounts the villagers’ discovery of Pat Nyhan’s effigy: “Even if, with his stick, he had not pointed out the particular group of stones in that long-deserted mountain farm, they would have known it for Pat Nyhan. It was set up in a listening attitude, Pat Nyhan’s attitude;” (88) It cannot be stated more clearly that the image is already present in the viewer’s gaze even before the villagers come upon it. Similarly, when they discuss the threatening powers of such images the villagers admit that they “wouldn’t like to picture it.” (84), and the narrator comments: “Lambert and Redney might by dint of searching come on the images of the whole countryside and they would not lift an arm to prevent it.” (84) This inchoate description of the images is the very condition of their fascination for the viewer, and it is this power which Redney mistakenly thought could serve his private revenge: “See what ? A couple of stones ! Do you think I believe old Redney has power over us ?” (85)

But things do not stop at that, because images do not exist independently of the gaze that supports them, and I wish to show that the real interest of the short story lies in the original way it articulates their relationship, as it means introducing the mediation of a subjective agency that is, here, split between the characters and the reader.

Thus, imperceptibly but surely, the short story moves from an illustration of how language can be used through the performative and supernatural mediation of the curse, to a questioning of the power of the image through the function of the gaze, not
only as regards the characters (intradietgeic gaze), but also as regards the readers (viewer’s gaze). The following remarks are predicated on the assumption that gazing at a picture is somehow, and *mutatis mutandis*, not so different from reading a text. To that effect, the methodological prerequisites of my analysis will be Barthes’ distinction between *studium* and *punctum* re-visited by the Lacanian theory of the gaze, or more accurately of the object-gaze.\(^5\)

If we now move from the fatal intratextual gaze of Redney to the enjoying gaze of the reader, that literary version of the viewer, it is easy to see that they are treated in diametrically opposed ways. The image as distinct from the picture can be defined as an incarnation of the visible and definitely shifts the thematic concerns of the story to the question of the gaze. Philosophers like Jacques Rancière\(^6\) long ago recognized that the visible is predicated on the verbal, i.e. that, as Conrad memorably put it\(^7\), the essence of language and discourse is to make you see what pertains to the realm of the visible but also the invisible. But what is the reader really expected to see? It is important in this respect to remember that according to the pictorial turn, if a picture refers to the material object, the image is what exceeds it. Language and painting are two ways of constructing the visible, but their modalities are specific since they obey two different semiotic codes. When the reader follows the signifying chain, he doesn’t build a picture (however mental it may be), but constructs an image on a backcloth of the invisible, as the text is not a screen (there is nothing behind it but a void). However, the crucial point is that this image is constructed through the mediation of a gaze, and the part of the gaze is played by language, by his words themselves or more accurately by the act of their enunciation.

It follows that an image does not always belong to the order of the visible, because words and speech make the subject see through narration and description what is of necessity absent. The case of Redney is proof enough of that; what he sees in the stones does not exist. The image of his enemy that he forms is a virtual one, a production of his desire to see Con Jer dead, but the stones remain stones. It goes to show that some modalities of the visible do not appear through images and that images can be words, and it implies that all images are narrativised, constructed through the mediation of the symbolic code of language. The conclusion is that the visible in an image is set upon a background of invisibility.

The best way to account for the pregnance of the scopic drive is to rely on the split between the seeing eye and the gaze. The eye may be the visual device through which reality is allegedly apprehended, but the gaze is another matter altogether. In fact, the gaze does not belong to the subject, it pre-exists the act of vision, because when the subject looks at an object, the object is already looking at him from a point that he cannot see. Consequently, the gaze is not a property of the subject, it is rather the object of the scopic drive, an invisibility at the very heart of the visible, and it stresses the dependence of the visible on the gaze that precedes it. The object-gaze is the only image that the subject cannot see, and this is exactly what the character of Redney unwittingly experiences when he is eventually confronted with his own effigy in stone. When he points out the image of his enemy in stone to the villagers, he is in return confronted with his own gaze. His stone effigy returns the gaze but the effect is devastating. The opposition between *punctum* and *studium* might come in handy here. The *studium* is the literal, factual content of the picture, it is culturally coded and corresponds to what the viewer brings into the image, but which is already there,
whereas the punctum is an unpredictable element that perturbs the studium, and introduces a blind spot in the image, which is the very location of the subject’s gaze. The stones represent such a blot as well as the gaze of the Other, but this gaze must remain invisible to the viewer, hence its threatening impact.

17 In the short story, the reader, like Redney, is first confronted with the stones perceived as modalities of the studium. They belong to the conventional superstitious beliefs of the Irish small farmer within the cultural framework of a community easily identifiable on account of the landscapes, the characters the toponyms and patronyms, and even traces of the Gaelic language. The frightening potential of the stones is further deflated thanks to the stylistic devices of personification that pave the way for the actual transformation of the stones into effigies, which is part of the fantastic element of the story, exactly as if the stones put on a garment to become effigies. They are first described as “unclad” then become “moss-clad” and later they become “skull-like” (81), before they “looked like massive ancient long-weathered skulls” (87). It is ironically appropriate that the aforesaid personification should be systematically associated with death.

18 However, the turn of the fantastic screw occurs when the stones as studium suddenly turn out to be modalities of the punctum, stirring up strong affects, because it is an unwelcome manifestation of the gaze that de-subjectivises Redney, and turns him into a stone. In this narrative arrangement, in which his own stone effigy gazes back at Redney, it is exactly as if he had usurped the place of the Other, and the price he had to pay for it was his symbolic death, illustrated by his being stuck in bed motionless and speechless, a form of petrification before his death.

19 Of course, no such thing applies to the reader who is, on the contrary, invited to enjoy the fantastic mode, because his relation to the textual punctum is quite different. The punctum effect is still present, but it operates at another level because, instead of the direct, dual confrontation with his gaze in the guise of a stone, which destroys Redney, the reader is confronted with the stones and Redney’s fate through the mediation of the narrative which, in this particular instance functions as the well-known shield in the myth of Perseus and Medusa. The short story offers an interesting variation on the traditional myth in that, as Greimas’s actantial model helps us to perceive, Redney simultaneously occupies the position of the sender and the opponent. He is at the same time the gorgon and Perseus. It is a perverse position that entails his being the victim of his own devices. For him the apotropaic function of the narrative, of the text as shield, does not work in the context of a direct, dual confrontation with the Real, as it certainly does for the reader. In the case of Redney, the stones of his everyday environment first belong to the realm of the studium, but then they suddenly turn into the punctum of fantasy and of the death drive. Since there is for him no possibility of extraction of the vanishing point of the punctum he is threatened by fear, silence and death. As far as the reader is concerned now, the process is reversed and the extraction of the gaze as punctum is achieved through the modalities of writing, since the textual stones as punctum become part of the aesthetic studium of the text for the reader, losing their potentially destructive force in the process, because they are at the same time present and absent for him, visible and invisible to his gaze in a process adequately described by Mladen Dolar: “the gaze is an object, something that cannot itself be present, although the whole notion of presence is constituted around and can be established only in its elision.” (Dolar, 15)
If we now refer to the paradigmatic example of the function of the gaze in Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, I would argue that the narrative, because it produces the equivalent of the lateral vision required by the enigmatic skull in the foreground of the painting, is exactly what turns a strictly realistic, mimetic, picture into an artistic image. However, it must be strongly asserted that the anamorphic dimension of the narrative is more complex than in the case of painting, because it never constrains the reader/viewer to occupy a certain fixed position in order to see the true form of the anamorphosed object or picture, but the viewing point can be endlessly displaced to allow the same readers/viewers to exercise their freedom to choose any aesthetic or ethical position towards it.

If for Redney the stones are real, or more precisely are the modalities of the Real staring back at him, on the contrary for the reader they are artefacts, parts and parcel of an aesthetic enterprise. The blind spot in the visible is no longer threatening because it is integrated into an artistic gesture. As this process of extraction of the gaze is impossible for Redney, he is bound to be confronted with his own, as Nietzsche graphically put it in his *Apophthegm n° 146*: “He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss the abyss will also gaze into thee.”

The mythological background can further be interpreted as the illustration of the Lacanian reading of a painting, which consists in arguing that the function of the painting is not only to seduce the viewer’s eye, but most of all to pacify it when it is distressed by the intrusion of the gaze under the pressure of the *punctum*, or destabilising blind spot, in the picture. It amounts to saying that the reader is invited to lay down his gaze as one lays down a weapon, in order to enjoy the literary dimension of the text. In this respect, the literary shield which deflects the petrifying gaze of the stones qua gorgon is none other than the work of the signifier in the text, the way the agency of the letter articulates the visible and the speakable into modalities of writing which amount to the production of a textual voice. Pascal Quignard makes no different claim when, putting in a literary way Lacan’s claim that there is no such thing as a meta-language, he says: “It is inherent in the structure of language to be its own tertiary element. The writer just like the thinker knows that the true narrative agent is his own linguistic expression.”

These modalities, submitted as they are to ethical and aesthetic demands, are central to the efficient, yet silent, textual voice with which the writer successfully inscribes his idiosyncratic mode of enunciation. It is to be opposed in the story to the fate of Redney, who is ineluctably reduced to silence on account of the fact that he is deprived of his own voice: a situation which Slavoj Zizek admirably sums up when he claims that: “The voice qua object is precisely what is stuck in the throat, what cannot burst out, unchain itself and thus enter the dimension of subjectivity.” (Zizek, 127) John Redney’s voice may be silenced but it is the better to allow the readers’ perception of the textual voice at work in the short story.

Ultimately, I would argue that such a taming of the gaze does occur in the short story, and that it is made possible by the presence of a textual voice, albeit not without a certain amount of ambiguity, if one opposes the moralizing ending, of the “an eye for an eye” type, justifying Redney’s retribution, to the remarkably relevant reflections on the power of the image. The treatment of the image in the short story may not be devoid of ethical perspectives if one remembers that the national culture usually...
associated with Corkery's fiction has a lot to do with the way images are constructed. Thus, I would conclude that if we move from the individual plane to that of the collective, the narrative strategy in “The Stones” succeeds in outgrowing the representations of traditional folklore, thus remotivating the story for modern readers, and by so doing enhances its poetic qualities.

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NOTES

1. The phrase is a variation on the opening statement of Chapter III of Ulysses: Proteus, in which Stephen Dedalus, echoing Bishop Berkeley and Aristotle’s theories of space and vision muses on the question of representation and the nature of reality. p. 42
2. It is probably not irrelevant to mention that Corkery was interested in sculpture and statues and that he expatiated at length on the status of the contemporary church statuary.
3. This is my translation of Quignard’s statement in Le Sexe et l’Effroi, p. 10
4. My emphasis.
5. The gaze differs from the object-gaze in that the former can be compared to an optical device, whereas the latter pertains to the scopic drive. The word “object” is to be understood not in the conventional sense of a tangible thing, but in the psychoanalytical
perspective of the cause of desire. As such it implies a relation with the Real more than with reality, and most of all has to do with the ambivalent temptation/threat of jouissance.

7. In his well-known preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, p. 5
8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, chapter IV, Apopthegm 146
9. The original statement in French is to be found in: Pascal Quignard. *Les Ombres Errantes*, p. 16

ABSTRACTS

Cette nouvelle peu connue de Daniel Corkery à la tonalité vaguement fantastique se présente comme une simple anecdote mettant en scène les effets ravageurs de la superstition dans une communauté rurale irlandaise du début du vingtième siècle. Pourtant, en focalisant l’attention du lecteur sur les visages de pierre qui sont au cœur de l’intrigue du récit, elle propose une réflexion sur le pouvoir et l’importance de la vision et du regard dans le processus de la représentation, donnant de ce fait une dimension métafictionnelle à la nouvelle. Pour rendre compte du mode de fonctionnement du regard, l’analyse se fonde sur l’opposition de Roland Barthes entre le studium et le punctum, revisitée à la lumière de la notion lacanienne d’objet regard. Il en ressort une mise en perspective de la vision étroitement nationaliste généralement attribuée aux fictions de Corkery.

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Elizabeth Bishop's writing is mostly preoccupied with the question of loss in creation, and more precisely of loss as creation. She develops strategies of avoidance and of peripheral deviation to thematize the sensitivity, the pain of what is left unsaid and cannot be put into words. By leaving certain things unexpressed, Bishop's approach makes the reader experience for himself or herself the taboo of trauma, the pain caused by the void. The question that will concern us presently is the following: in her short stories, how does image serve such narratico-poetic strategies? To this end, we will mainly focus on two of her most traumatic short stories: "Gwendolyn," which deals with a child's death, and "In the Village" which tackles the same experience of loss as the one Bishop suffered when her own mother contracted dementia.

The short story "Gwendolyn" is told by a child narrator who is acquainted with a little neighbor, Gwendolyn. The latter is about her age and seriously ill. The story is constructed and unfolds as follows: it is composed of three main parts: its main, central section relates Gwendolyn's last days, and it is both preceded and followed by an incipit and an excipit from which Gwendolyn is absent but in which the young narrator recalls playing with a doll that is obviously Gwendolyn's counterpart, a doll that the narrator eventually uses to re-enact her young friend's funeral. The story ends with the narrator being surprised in the process of this game, and being scolded for it by her grandparents.

Gwendolyn, who appears only in the second part of the story, seems no more real than the doll, as she is depicted as an archetype: "to me she stood for everything that the slightly repellant but fascinating words 'little girl' should mean. In the first place her beautiful name. Its dactyl trisyllables could have gone for ever as far as I was concerned." (Collected Prose, 216). She embodies a verbal representation that is encapsulated in language by the words "little girl." Thus the relationship between life and representation is reversed. Bishop already reflected on such a reversal in a poem,
interestingly entitled “Poem” (Collected Poems, 176-177). I suggest a small detour through this poem to enlighten our understanding of how the character Gwendolyn, in connection with the doll, is built as an image of the anxiety born from the confrontation with the void of death and the shapelessness of loss. The title, “Poem,” suggests that we are going to be presented with an archetypal specimen, and yet this poem turns out to be about a picture. Both verbal and visual representations as means of endurance and memory appear as attempts to counter life’s ephemeral nature, its subjection to time and with it, to contingency, change, and loss. The process involved consists in:

- art copying from life and life itself
- life and the memory of it so compressed
- they've turned into each other. Which is which? (v.52-54).

But at the same time in this poem, the unbridgeable gap between reality and representation persists and is reaffirmed, loss taking part in the representation. So if we come back to the character of Gwendolyn, we can see that it serves as an enactment of the verbal representation carried by the expression “little girl” which is itself an embodiment of a real life concept. It is then twice remote from the original. In the same way, representation overrides the reality depicted when the child narrator mentions her friend’s diabetes: “She had diabetes. I had been told this much and had some vague idea that this was because of ‘too much sugar,’ and that in itself made Gwendolyn even more attractive, as if she would prove to be solid candy if you bit her, and her pure-tinted complexion would taste exactly like icing-sugar Easter eggs or birthday candle-holders, held to be inedible, except that I knew better” (216). Gwendolyn is presented here as the embodiment of a child’s fantasy. She is thus slowly constructed as a recipient encapsulating intangible impressions. She becomes an icon.

This is reinforced by her being constantly placed in the position of a doll – the image of the doll thus progressively imposing itself to the point where it will completely replace the “real child.” At one point in the story, for instance, during a picnic, she is lifted by the narrator’s grandfather and held on his knee just as one holds a doll pretending it is a real child.

Gwendolyn is in fact a character which makes not death, but the representation of death become real. What I mean is that death cannot be real except for the one actually dying and therefore the direct experience of death cannot be related. The only thing that can be represented is the witnessing of others’ deaths. Correspondingly, the story does not start off with a notion (that of death, or of loss) trying to encapsulate it and describe it, but with a representation and then, through this vector, it seems to approach the concept behind it. The story enables the narrator to express death, to “say it,” or “write it,” literally: “Two days after this visit, Gwendolyn did die” (221). This recalls another poem, “One Art,” about “the art of losing,” which ends with the poetic voice staging herself as forcing herself to “write,” that is to acknowledge, the disaster that loss represents for her: “the art of losing's not too hard to master / though it may look like (Write it !) like disaster.” (Collected Poems, 178).

The transfer of Gwendolyn’s fate onto the doll, although it makes her death fictional, reinvests death with a visual tangibility, if not reality. Gwendolyn and the doll, as images, endow death with a greater degree of reality or tangibility (once again, of course, from the point of view of the witness). In other words she does not stand for death itself, but for the way human beings conceive of it and how they cope with it.
this regard, Bishop provides an interesting counter-example with the episode of the narrator visiting the graveyard with her grandfather who tells her, on this occasion, about various people’s deaths. This telling does not register at all like the actual seeing of Gwendolyn’s coffin, the unbearable loneliness that it conveys as it lays there in front of the church waiting to be carried inside. The effect of the image on the character-narrator is much greater than any telling of it because of its spatial quality and of the pre-linguistic mode of perception that it involves.

8 The proximity of the funeral, and later of the coffin, is made to contrast with the way in which the narrator tells the reader about it. She does so through a focalization that is remote from the scene and which thematizes both the inapproachable quality of death and the impossibility to represent either this shapeless otherness or the inexpressible feelings of anxiety, loss, panic, etc. that it engenders. Here is how she witnesses the scene of the villagers attending the funeral. First, there is a tension between the nearness of the event (she lives across the road from the church) and the fact that she is forbidden to go to the funeral. She is sent to play at the back of the house and insists on the indirection of her testimony as she builds a picture of the scene that plays on perspective, the backroom where she is to play having an inside window connecting it to the kitchen, which itself has another window on the other side opening onto the church. Through the backroom window, the child narrator first witnesses not the funeral itself, but her grandmother’s pain, that is, the impact of the funeral on someone else. Here again, she underlines the indirection of the process of representation, visual or linguistic. Then she tries to approach the scene and sneaks into the parlor but even there insists on the framing of the scene, hence on the distancing of it: “There were long lace curtains at the window and the foxgloves and bees were just outside, but I had a perfectly clear, although lace-patterned, view of everything.” Yet, even as this more “direct” view offers itself to her, she resorts to another strategy of deviation by means of a digression evoking her visits to the graveyard. And only afterwards does the little coffin appear in front of the church, a scene depicted as being impossible:

But suddenly, as I watched through the window, something happened at the church across the way. Something that could not possibly have happened, so that I must, in reality, have seen something like it and imagined the rest; or my concentration on the one thing was so intense that I could see nothing else [...]. Two men in black appeared again, carrying Gwendolyn’s small white coffin [...]. They put it down just outside [...]. Then they disappeared again. For a minute I stared through my lace curtain at Gwendolyn’s coffin, with Gwendolyn shut invisibly inside it forever, there, completely alone on the grass by the church door (223-224).

9 The long introduction to the terrifying image of the lonely coffin also constitutes in itself a further delay. Indirection in space and time appears as the means by which story-telling manages to approach and convey utter strangeness such as that of death as well as the feelings of loss, isolation, and abandonment connected to it.

10 So let us now consider how the image of the doll partakes of this strategy to deal with the shapeless and the inexpressible. The title “Gwendolyn” is followed by an incipit devoid of any character called Gwendolyn. Instead, we are quickly presented with a doll whose name, we are told, the grandmother has forgotten. This detail makes the doll available to adopt the name “Gwendolyn”, providing a body for the name as it hangs so far, disembodied, in the title. This will in turn allow the projection of Gwendolyn’s fate onto it. We will see that its being both life-like and lifeless eventually calls for its use as a representation of a dead body.
As we have already noted, the “nameless doll” appears before Gwendolyn enters the scene, then disappears during the narration of Gwendolyn’s final days, and reappears only after the girl’s death. This sets not a metonymic but a metaphoric relationship between them as though the doll were a representation meant to replace the original. As a metaphor for Gwendolyn, the doll allows the child-narrator to come to terms with the otherwise disparaging idea of Gwendolyn’s death and her irreparable loss. By playing at staging Gwendolyn’s funeral, the children (the narrator and her cousin) appropriate the other child’s death. They turn this strange worrying feeling of death into an embellishing ceremony and derive a pleasure from this aesthetic taming or aesthetic domestication of this utter and otherwise unacceptable strangeness. The image of the doll and all the children project onto it thus are at the core of the strategy of avoidance and domestication of the unacceptable and ultimate otherness. And indeed, that is what a toy is meant for: to re-enact real-life events so as to appropriate them. A life-like doll is a mirror-object for real life people. The use of a doll partakes of a game of make-believe, as Kendall L. Walton puts it in his article “Looking at pictures and looking at things”: “Pictures are props in games of make-believe. They function in many ways as dolls, hobby horses, and toy trucks do” (103). Then he adds: “My claim is that all representational pictures bring the viewer into a fiction, a game of make-believe, together with the people and objects which are depicted” (107). In “Gwendolyn”, the doll is the source of a game of make-believe re-enacting the funeral. The doll also allows the narrator to cease standing as a witness and to become an actor in the farewell to the deceased. She is enabled to take part in the funeral process and also in its domestication through the spatialization and aesthetic embellishment it allows, especially as the doll is a beautiful one. For the reader, the use of this scene with the doll operates as a picture of the child’s disorientation and of her need to materialize it.

However, what is more troubling is that the stories that little girls re-enact with their dolls are mock scenes, which include the idea of counterfeiting, of undermining real, serious life. This is precisely what happens when the little girl replays the burial of her friend Gwendolyn: she derides something held to be most serious, and that is also why she is scolded for doing so, because this deriding dimension disturbs the adults who discover the game. They are troubled by that picture of their own social, adult ritual of the funeral meant to appease the feelings of dissolution generated by irredeemable loss by giving them a place to be expressed. The child’s game operates as a glass revealing the inadequacy of the adult ritual to assuage grief or make sense of the void of death.

The combination of Gwendolyn as an image of the typical little girl, and of the doll as an image of the domestication of death, works as a sort of puzzle creating a larger image of something inexpressible: that of the feeling of injustice and of the impossibility of understanding the loss of beauty, of innocence and its dissolution into shapeless void.

This process of mapping the inexpressible also informs the short story “In the Village.” Again, the piecemeal puzzle is made of various objects conveying images of loss, but it also includes the image of a sound. More precisely, “In the Village” is constructed around two sounds: the echo of a scream, let out by the little girl's mother in a fit of madness, and its aesthetic counterpart or, one might say, its antidote, the clang of the nearby forge. The echo works as a mirror-image of the original scream. As for the blacksmith’s clang, it seems to attempt to outperform the disturbing scream and stands.
as a negative image of it. What is of interest here is that the echo is spatialized from the very beginning of the story, notably by the repeated verb “hang” and the comparison with a stain:

A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies, skies that travelers compare to those of Switzerland, too dark, too blue, so that they seem to keep on darkening a little more around the horizon – or is it around the rims of the eyes? – the color of the cloud of bloom on the elm trees, the violet on the fields of oats; something darkening over the woods and waters as well as the sky. The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory – in the past, in the present and those years between (251).

15 Through this spatialization, the scream becomes an image of the overwhelming presence of trauma when faced with madness, with the annihilation of reason, the fading into shapelessness.

16 In the same way, the story is made of several little episodes, each being presented as a fragment of a puzzle that the reader tries to put together to finally reconstruct an overall picture encapsulating the feeling of an experience of loss. Rather than a linear description of that experience, Bishop once again adopts fragmented, spatial strategies in an attempt to make readers feel some inexpressible feeling precisely by making them feel they are denied easy access to it.

17 Within each of these episodes, the story accumulates objects which become pictures of an absence, namely here that of the little girl’s mother who appears to have had a nervous breakdown and who is finally permanently confined there. All the objects are either metonymically connected to the mother without referring directly to her, language thus embodying her absence, or they point to an absence, thus multiplying the experience of loss throughout the story. The mother’s “things” that arrive just before she is back from a stay in an asylum all point to a lost past: postcards from absent friends from the days of happiness, broken china symbolizing the broken marriage, a “silver-framed photograph quickly turned over” that the reader assumes might be that of the lost husband, a mourning dress which both evokes the mother without naming her as well as the reason of her breakdown, and which consequently points to the woman that she no longer is, an ivory stick that the little girl steals and hides by burying it so that it is both kept and lost. Later a five-cent piece is subject to the same treatment as the little girl swallows it so as not to lose it. Later again, the girl passes shop windows in which she discovers shoes, but significantly each time only one of the pair is displayed. Further in the story, a fire breaks out in the night. On that occasion the narrator hears disembodied voices. This device plays a major part in building a metonymic description of absence and panic. Finally, we learn implicitly that the mother has been sent away: “Now the front room is empty.”

18 All these images are fragments that indirectly delineate the realm of anxiety provoked by something surpassing all understanding and all acceptance. The collection of images is not meant to depict a clear picture. Their indirection rather invites the reader to probe their margins, the margins of meaning and presence, on the threshold of strangeness, of incomprehensible and therefore inexpressible otherness.

19 Thus through the use of a network of juxtaposed images, Bishop manages to portray, if not express, the disorientation and despondency experienced in the confrontation with the shapeless or with some utter strangeness, the resort to such efficient, condensed fragments suiting perfectly the dynamics of short story writing and reading.
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ABSTRACTS

« Gwendolyn » et « In the Village », deux nouvelles d’Elizabeth Bishop, sont construites autour de moments et de situations traumatiques dans lesquels narrateur et lecteurs sont mis en contact avec l’étrangeté informe, indicable de la mort et de la folie. Cet article explore la manière dont Elizabeth Bishop exploite le pouvoir métonymique des images, et la manière dont cela permet au texte de cerner au plus près ce qui ne peut être exprimé avec des mots. Ces images insérées, inscrites dans le texte, interrogent à la fois leurs limites et celles du texte et du langage. Enfin se pose la question du lien entre le pictural et la forme courte de la nouvelle : cette étude met en évidence l’interrelation entre la juxtaposition fragmentée d’images et la mise en œuvre d’une économie d’écriture condensée propre au genre de la nouvelle.

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Conrad’s Picture of Irony in “An Outpost of Progress”

M’hamed Bensemmane

The prose fiction of Joseph Conrad, including his shorter narratives, tends to privilege settings located out of Europe, in distant parts of the world. This is the case for ‘An Outpost of Progress’, one of his early short stories that appeared in the collection Tales of Unrest (1898). This tale relates to the European colonial experience in Africa, and dramatises the interaction of two worlds, one characterized by the brutal mercantilism of the conqueror and the other by a down-to-earth and unsophisticated African mode of life. The Congo basin, which is the locus of this short story, as well as of his novella Heart of Darkness (1902), which develops the same theme, is a region about which Conrad had first-hand experience in relation to the dubious trade of ivory conducted by white adventurers. A flurry of panoramic descriptions, contrasting with impressionistic snapshots, gives substance to this grim narrative. An Afro-centred approach to it would take account of a plot-line and tropes which crudely reveal an environment and people whose stability is interfered with, and which put in perspective the colonial notion of “the white man’s burden”. A mock-heroic treatment is selected for the diegesis, through the portrait and actions of two ineffectual representatives of European civilisation in the African colony.

But the moral implications that emerge here reflect a certain complexity of Conrad’s discourse, for they contrast the basest instincts of humans, notably through the white people’s ivory business, with the declared aim of Europe, endorsed by him, to conquer and enlighten the “dark continent”. My interest here is to study Conrad’s attitude towards the imperial project, in view of his iconoclastic discourse and the ironic treatment he applies to his tale, and to query critical postulates to an anti-imperialist discourse in this text.

I – Location and points of contact

Despite the disparaging comment about the so-called “un-evocative prose of ‘An Outpost’, which adumbrates Heart of Darkness” (Guerard, 1958: 64-65), laudatory
assessments usually draw attention to Conrad’s “fine artistry” (Hawthorn, 1990: 168) or even refer to the story as a “masterpiece” (Moura, 1994: 70).

If anything, the scenario of this short story is directed by an impressionistic imagery which frames efficiently the dramatic scenes leading to the moral and physical annihilation of the two Western visitors in charge of a trading station lost in central Africa. The description of locale and people reflects the visitors’ perplexity from the first. The generic word employed to refer to this environment is “the wilderness”, as a cliché recurrently used to signify a terra incognita, implying the newcomers’ (and indeed the narrator’s) obvious incomprehension of a different order of existence, and a lack of affective contact with it. Geographically speaking, if the story unmistakably refers to the Congo basin, no territorial landmarks are available and no names are given to the location; likewise, we have no name for the river on which the trading post is situated. This is deemed unimportant by the narrator, who prefers to focus on the strangeness of the place, and seeks to achieve an effect of de-familiarisation, with intensifiers producing dazzling images of the luxuriance of the fauna and the flora, “the immense forests, hiding fateful complications of fantastic life” (89) and “hippos and alligators (which) sunned themselves side by side” (89). Such images reflect the impassive and somewhat indifferent universe progressing alongside the two Europeans, a space in which codes of existence cannot be deciphered by them, owing to a blatant ignorance of such codes. For them, it is “a wilderness more strange, more incomprehensible by the mysterious glimpses of the vigorous life it contained” (85). The natives who visit the station to trade their ivory for the Outpost’s cheap European products are thus ‘exoticised’, to match their environment. Their physical aspects and behaviours are rendered in derogatory terms from the two men’s viewpoint: “naked, glossy, black, ornamented with snowy shells [...] they made an uncouth babbling noise when they spoke.” (88) This treatment, supplemented by Kayerts’ and Carlier’s racist comments on their physical features, brings out the contrast between two radically different worldviews and modes of existence. Significantly, Africans are degraded as inferior beings, as “fine animals” or “funny brutes” (89) who would only receive some of the “rubbish” stocked in the store in exchange for the ivory they bring.

The strangeness of Africa is also underscored by the sense of claustrophobia of the two men, as they cannot size up and apprehend the space around the immediate vicinity of the trading station. Yet, this space is reportedly brimming with life:

They lived like blind men in a large room, aware only of what came in contact with them (and of that only imperfectly) but unable to see the general aspect of things. The river, the forest, all the great land throbbing with life, were like great emptiness. Even the brilliant sunshine disclosed nothing intelligible. Things appeared and disappeared before their eyes in an unconnected and aimless kind of way. The river seemed to come from nowhere and flow nowhere. (88)

But the whole attitude of colonials is revealed by Conrad’s underscoring of the uneasy and somewhat unnatural meeting of two opposed worlds. The obvious symbol of the presence of Empire in Africa is this quaint-looking steamer “that resembled an enormous sardine box” (84) which brings the two men up-river to the station, and is metonymically called “civilisation” when it returns just after their death. Another symbol is the trading station itself, which marks an intersection of two cultural norms. The metaphoric reference to it as an “outpost of progress” signals the seemingly heroic penetration of civilisation in this part of the world, though its store is dubbed “the fetish” by the white traders to accommodate the local people’s worshipful attitude.
towards it. This patronising term is approvingly commented upon with a Euro-centric explanation, i.e., “because of the spirit of civilisation it contained” (89). At all events, this simplistic interpretation of the natives’ psyche translates an ignorance which seems to interpolate Conrad’s critical position towards it.

7 Ivory is another trope reflecting the writer’s moral concern, probably the most important in view of the dramatic developments that occur around it. It is a potent sign of the presence of Empire, as it impinges upon the local cultural continuum, as does Kayerts’ and Carlier’s presence in Africa. When treated and manufactured into luxury objects for affluent European households, ivory is the utmost symbol of refinement and reflects Europe’s higher order of technical and artistic achievements. But when still a “raw” material, it refers back to its country of origin and the devious means through which it is acquired, i.e. in exchange for rags or trinkets, or worse still, through poaching or slave dealing, as happens when Makola the black assistant decides to sell their African labourers to black ruffians. Still, Conrad does not seem to take sufficient notice of the ecological damage done to the “dark” continent, which is an “unsaid” in the narrative. Actually, as Jeffrey McCarthy remarks in his eco-critical appraisal of Heart of Darkness, Conrad declares an absence. “The work obsessively repeats one element to foreground another” (McCarthy, 2009: 621). This remark can be extended to this short story which precedes the novella on the same theme, for indeed Conrad uses the terms “ivory”, “tusks” and “bones”, but never mentions the elephants from which these organs are brutally extracted.

II-Representations and misrepresentations

8 From the outset, Conrad orientates our reading towards the issue of what should be a civilised and decent representation of Empire in Africa, precisely by sketching an unrepresentative pair of agents: clearly, Kayerts and Carlier do not embody the advertised imperial fortitude. They are mock-heroes who belie the qualities of efficiency and determination which reputedly characterise European commerce in Africa. Their physical portrait is anything but flattering, with Kayerts presented as “short and fat”, and “Carlier the assistant […] tall, with a large head and a very broad trunk perched upon a long pair of thin legs” (83). They are written off by their director as mentally unfit for their mission, which is why they are appointed to a far-off and barely productive trading station.

9 As an aside meant for the reader, Conrad makes the director address his servant on board the departing steamer to refer to them as “two imbeciles” with no skills:

   I told those fellows to plant a vegetable garden, build new store houses and fences and construct a landing stage. I bet nothing will be done! They won’t know how to begin. I always thought the station on this river is useless, and they just fit the station. (85)

10 As Ted Boyle remarks, “Conrad surrounds Kayerts and Carlier with some powerfully conceived images of decay, resulting from the men’s neglect and untidiness” (Boyle, 1965: 88). Indeed, their house is poorly kept, and for edibles the two men rely on the dwindling Company supplies of pulse and rice since they have not planted a vegetable garden to support themselves as their director told them to do before his departure. They largely depend on the food lavished by Gobila, the chief of neighbouring villages, despite his being arrogantly described as “a grey-headed savage” (91). Deflation is very
much the privileged medium for their moral portrait, and they are recurrently shown as poor examples of imperial authority and inventiveness. Thus the image of the resourceful West which they are supposed to represent is derided by those “savages” who, contrary to them, combine industry with generosity, and regularly offer them “fowls, and sweet potatoes and palm-wine and sometimes a goat” (92).

The reversal of hierarchical roles is further amplified by the presence of Makola, the black assistant in the station, whose portrait exudes cold determination, and who receives the new arrivals as “more white men to play with” (84). He is “taciturn, impenetrable [and he] despised the two white men.” (83). His composure and steadfastness counterpoint the carelessness of his white superiors. He actually acts as surrogate agent of the Company’s interests where Kayerts and Carlier prove unable to make business thrive. As Andrea White notes, not only does Makola “run the Company’s business of ivory collecting,” (White, 1996: 190), but he behaves as if he were the actual manager of the trading station. His decision to do business with black slave dealers to increase the amount of ivory in the station indicates his compliance with the Company’s mercantile objectives. The switching of roles is well rendered in this exchange, when Kayerts discovers that their native workers have been sold:

I did the best for you and the company’, said Makola imperturbably. ‘Why you shout so much? Look at this tusk.
I dismiss you! I will report you- I won’t look at the tusk. I forbid you to touch them.
I order you to throw them into the river. You-you!’
‘You very red, Mr Kayerts. If you are so irritable in the sun, you will get fever and die- like the first chief!’ pronounced Makola impressively (98).

The irony of the situation functions in the sense that the competence of action in the territory is handed over to the “subaltern”, who is made to speak and re-order the course of action. Kayerts and Carlier’s inadequacy comes as an impaired picture of imperial achievement, just like in this ‘dark’ place of the world, the usual objects of light and civilisation fail to perform their duty. Indeed, the ship due to return to the station and relieve the white tradesmen from hunger and disease comes dramatically late, the trading station’s mercantile activities grind to a stop and in the end, the elephant tusks, to be refined and turned into precious objects, lose all meaning in this remote corner of the world.

III- Conrad’s dimmed image of progress

Stephen Land remarks that “An Outpost of Progress’ is typical in exhibiting the ironic contrast between stated ideals and actual motives” (Land, 1984: 43). Jakob Lothe adds that the irony “is not only wide ranging but also sophisticated” (Lothe, 1989: 56). The very title of this short story reads like an intended derision, a tone which is applied throughout the narrative. The term ‘progress’ is recurrent, and always to point to an illusion. At no point are we made to see here that Europe’s self-appointed duty to enlighten the continent is being attended to, in view of the dramatic events that occur around the trading station. The European signs of knowledge and culture themselves become tenuous, inadequate in ‘dark’ Africa, as their derelict state suggests. The books left over by the former chief are torn and decrepit, and inappropriately evoke “Richelieu, d’Artagnan, Hawk’s Eye, Father Goriot and many other people” (90).
Likewise, the copies of a home paper mentioning the merits of “our colonial expansion” in Africa seem out of place and ring false:

It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilisation, of the sacredness of civilised work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith, and commerce to the dark places of the world (90).

The two men’s poor performance at their tasks contradicts this official declaration and the falsely sententious adage pronounced ironically by the narrator that “civilisation follows trade” (109). They can still dream of progress in Africa, and imagine “quays, warehouses, and barracks and [...] billiard rooms” (90) installed in this remote corner of the world in the future, but certainly not through their own agency.

Against this utopian evocation, a number of facts point to the bankruptcy of a system, whether it reflects an authorial disapproval of it as a whole or not. First, the trading post is itself downgraded by its managers. Then Kayerts and Carlier are unable to deal with unforeseen events, particularly the shooting of one of Gobila’s men by the armed slave dealers, a fact which puts a dramatic stop to relations with the village chief, and means no more fresh food supplies for them. Conrad adds gothic visual and sound effects to make the tale oscillate between drama and grotesque. Carlier’s pursuit of Kayerts in their house during a bout of madness shows the two men acting like “two characters in a Mack Sennet silent film” (Dowden, 1970 : 34). Further, the cross pitched on the former manager’s grave is the object on which Kayerts hangs himself after inadvertently shooting dead his colleague. And Conrad mixes horror with the morbid grotesque when he draws the image of the dead man “standing rigidly at attention” and “irreverently [...] putting out a swollen tongue at his managing director” (110). We have also the blurred picture of the steamer returning to the station enveloped in thick fog, and the “sound pictures” of the “shrieks” and “fog wreaths” and the bell rung by Makola to guide the boat to its landing. This accumulation of lugubrious details metaphorically enshrouds the colonial enterprise with a sense of gravity and ethical questioning.

At this juncture, we can turn to “the subliminal purposes of (the) imagery” disclosed by the story (Dowden, 1970: 7?) to interpret Conrad’s message through his degraded picture of the colonial world and his numerous addresses to the reader. Jeremy Hawthorn deduces from the text the writer’s “uncompromising analysis of the mechanisms of imperialism” (Hawthorn, 1990 : 168), while Lawrence Graver mentions a denunciation of “greed masquerading as philanthropy” (Graver, 1969 : 11), and Jean-Marc Moura “les incuries belges au Congo” (Moura, 1998 :70).

All those comments refer more to the moral misconduct of agents of Empire than they signify a total condemnation of a system of which Conrad was part and parcel. Edward Said relates the writer’s attitude to a feeling of shame:

His personal history was a disgraceful paradigm of shameful things, from the desertion of the ideals of his Polish heritage to the seemingly capricious abandonment of his sea life. He had become, like Kayerts and Carlier, a creature of civilisation, living in reliance upon the safety of his surroundings (Said, 1986 :37).

Possibly, the ironic picture of imperial misrepresentation deployed here may imply an authorial self-examination relating to his taking part in the imperial project. Still, the adventures described here, like those featured in Heart of Darkness, can hardly be seen as the embodiment of Conrad’s self-blame and shame in that respect. Kayerts, Carlier and Kurtz are such over-determined and peculiar examples of Empire that they cannot...
convey whatever shame may have been felt by their author. They are in the first place overpowered by an environment which they thought they could control, a “wilderness” which simply has activated their basest instincts and has led to their moral and physical annihilation. The regret felt by Kayerts with the utterance “help!.. My God”, like Kurtz’s expression “the horror! The horror”, can only convey a realisation of having acted under a malevolent influence coming from the wilderness - therefore irresponsibly.

And in fact, despite the device of uncovering and of deflating human postures, Conrad does not cross the line of ideological condemnation, and does not make colonialism a catalyst for the two men’s failure and madness. His imagery and his diction of “wilderness” and “niggers”, as part of his narrator’s parlance, never place Africans in this “third space of enunciation” (Bhabha, 1994), as imagined by Homi Bhabha, to establish a genuine dialogue between Europe and Africa. As said, the ivory has the dual function of symbolising progress and signifying the loot and violence involved for its acquisition. This quite clearly indicates Conrad’s ambivalent attitude regarding the colonial ethos in Africa.

That the old continent for Conrad should continue to rule the world is surreptitiously introduced by the collaborative role of Makola, the African assistant, in maintaining Europe’s foothold in Africa, a role that has been perpetuated in many European works of fiction.

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Images and the Colonial Experience in W. Somerset Maugham’s The Casuarina Tree (1926)

Xavier Lachazette

1 W. Somerset Maugham, one of the most-travelled writers of his generation, often used the experience he acquired and the observations he made abroad as material for his fiction. Already in 1905 he published The Land of the Blessed Virgin, a collection of enthusiastic memories of Spain, a country in which he had spent sixteen months as a young Medical School graduate. On a Chinese Screen, a series of short vignettes, came out in 1922 after a semester-long stay in the Middle Kingdom. As far as short stories are concerned, his celebrated collection The Trembling of a Leaf came out after his sojourn in the South Seas. It is therefore no wonder that the five months in 1921 which he spent in the Federated Malay States (“F.M.S.”), then under British rule, brought about the writing of another collection of stories, entitled The Casuarina Tree (1926).

2 Maugham affords a unique perspective on life in a British colony in the 1920s, in the sense that he was neither a settler, nor a British official, nor a “colonial” born of British parents in a Crown territory, nor a private individual with a sentimental stake in the country, like Kipling or Forster for instance, but rather an avid globe-trotter and keen observer of human nature. Moreover it is precisely the British experience overseas that Maugham sets out to capture in these six stories, likened to “a fine Oriental tapestry” by a contemporary reviewer1 and which Maugham himself would call exotic, his definition being that such tales are “set in some country little known to the majority of readers, and [deal] with the reactions upon the white man of his sojourn in an alien land and the effect which contact with peoples of another race has upon him.”

3 In other words, Maugham’s personal detachment and set agenda, together with his dual background, at once English and French, seemed to warrant a fresh look at things Malayan and an original way of picturing them. Indeed, to take but one example, one can only be struck by Maugham’s laying no store whatsoever by the country’s cultural and historical heritage, nor by the native populations, the local customs or even the settlers’ professional activities, and by his choosing to solely illustrate the stress
situations or innate failings which made the expatriate’s experience a litmus test of human resilience. But as I will try to show here, some of Maugham’s idiosyncrasies, his source of inspiration, and the art of the short story he developed over the years tended to work against his uniformly conveying a satisfactory literary image of colonial experience in Malaya.

As shown by the notes which he took when he visited the F.M.S., a mere stay in that Eastern part of the globe sufficed to unleash Maugham’s creative powers, with its press of variegated populations, its dense tropical vegetation and the strong daily alternations of sweltering heat and ethereal cool:

Afternoon in the tropics. You have tried to sleep, but you give it up as hopeless and come out, heavy and drowsy, on to your veranda. It is hot, airless, stifling. Your mind is restless, but to no purpose. The hours are leaden-footed. The day before you is unending. [...] The cool of the evening. The air is soft and limpid. You have an extreme sense of well-being. Your imagination is pleasantly but not exhaustingly occupied with image after image. You have the sense of freedom of a disembodied spirit. (A Writer’s Notebook, 206-7)

Something liberating about the natural environment allows, or forces, the European mind to shift its paradigm and envisage new ways of apprehending and representing reality. True, the settler’s life is pictured as a hard one in this collection. He lives on his own or in a little white community which mistrusts the natives. His prejudices make him incapable of loving his native “wife” or the children she gives him. He suffers from the “Lord Jim” syndrome, and fears nothing more than acting as a coward or shamefully breaking down in front of the natives in whom his alleged white man’s superiority should only inspire respect. The pettiness of his views and his intolerance unfailingly pit him against the rare white visitor who comes his way, as in “The Outstation,” in which one settler’s snobbishness antagonizes another’s caddishness till death puts an end to their strife.

But contrary to what almost all characters unconvincingly assert, it is not the tropical climate which makes them lose their minds, take to drinking or commit murders, but a series of destructive feelings brought on by their personal shortcomings, the temptation to discard the iron corset of British conventions, not to mention the guilt and strain that “it puts upon a man to be an empire builder,” as Harold remarks in “Before the Party” (163).

As two of the stories make it clear, previous literary descriptions of Malaya and Borneo are off the mark, putting forward as they do a “dark and strangely sinister” image of them when these territories are actually viewed by Millicent in “Before the Party” as friendly and fertile under a blue sky, sweet-smelling in the morning and balmy at night (160-1). With Conrad’s “Lingard Trilogy” in mind, Maugham has Doris, the protagonist of “The Force of Circumstance,” reject the natural descriptions of the novels that she read in England and feel liberated by the open spaces and “smiling welcome” (253) that she discovers in her little outstation. Conrad’s ominous rivers and impenetrable jungles are thus replaced with images of little white clouds which look “like a row of ballet-girls, dressed in white, waiting at the back of the stage, alert and merry, for the curtain to go up” (254).

By insisting that landscape descriptions should match actual sensorial perceptions, Maugham also voices his long-standing dislike for the conventional use of literary descriptions aiming to create atmosphere or dramatic mood. In The Summing Up he reveals his surprising distrust of literary imagery, which some critics have deemed
evidence of a middle-brow approach to literature, when he alludes to the relief he felt after deciding to leave novels aside for the time being and to devote himself to the sole writing of plays. Passing the Comedy Theatre, where one of his plays was being produced, Maugham explains that he chanced to see a few clouds beautifully lit up by the setting sun, and that, though he enjoyed seeing such a gorgeous sight he couldn’t help thinking to himself: “Thank God, I can look at a sunset now without having to think how to describe it” (116). 

The problem was that Maugham, though quite able to turn out touching or poetic descriptions of Malayan or other landscapes, as his notebook perfectly attests, was plagued by a sense of what he termed his “small power of imagination” and found the rendering of landscapes quite a strenuous task. As he modestly puts it: “I have been incapable of those great, sustained flights that carry the author on broad pinions into a celestial sphere. My fancy, never very strong, has been hampered by my sense of probability. I have painted easel pictures, not frescoes” (*The Summing Up*, 81).

But more than his allegedly limited ability in this domain, one could suggest that it was Maugham’s methods of arriving at a story that thwarted his putting to paper the mental images evoked in him. Indeed, Maugham got much material from direct experience, from reading newspaper reports, and from listening to the stories which the locals were only too willing to tell him or his travelling companion, Gerald Haxton. But this also focused Maugham’s art essentially on plot, and encouraged him to leave poetic and symbolic elements out of his stories, as unnecessary, or even harmful to the form’s generic brevity.

A case in point is the story entitled “The Letter,” a barely altered account of the actual murder of a Malay settler by his mistress after he left her for a native woman. This short story enjoyed tremendous success at the time and was converted by Maugham into an equally successful stage version. Nevertheless “The Letter” has little to offer literary critics, being, as one contemporary reviewer put it, “like crimes reported in the newspaper – sensational rather than strange.” Indeed this plot-driven, dialogue-laden narrative of adultery-cum-murder does nothing to heighten Maugham’s reputation as an expert in the vagaries of the human heart. One may even regret the fact that the promise of a colorfully cosmopolitan outlook made by the opening paragraph – set in the busy streets of Singapore, “the meeting-place of a hundred peoples; and men of all colors, black Tamils, yellow Chinks, brown Malays, Armenians, Jews and Bengalis” (1) – is not kept by the narrative. Instead, the only two Oriental secondary characters that play a role in the plot never go beyond the stereotypical image of the sly, corrupt, poker-faced Chinese on the look-out for easy money.

It therefore seems that perfection of form, which Maugham believed to be within reach of the short-story writer if not the novelist, does not necessarily make for a great story. Especially, one could argue, when a writer deliberately keeps to a minimum natural imagery or metaphors and other tropes for the sake of a self-imposed truthfulness-to-experience principle, which partly deprives stories of their potential for tension, tends to tone down their poetic capabilities, and rather underlines the difficulty of turning anecdote into art.

As always Maugham was conscious of this limit to his art, and he later made the case that his being “very much at the mercy of [his] anecdote” changed in time to a situation in which he was able “so to arrange [his] material as to attain the result [he] wanted.” This indeed seems to have been the case, but that two such dissimilar stories
as “The Letter” and “P. & O.” should coexist in one collection rather proves Maugham’s reluctance to translate into art the images that are nonetheless the source of his inspiration. A passage from *The Summing Up* reveals his refusal to consider images as an inferior form of experience. Maugham writes:

> The psychologists tell us that with the ordinary man an image is less vivid than a sensation. It is an attenuated experience that serves to give information about objects of sense and in the world of sense is a guide to action. [...] To the writer this is not so. The images, free ideas that throng the mind, are not guides, but materials for action. They have all the vividness of sensation. His day-dreams are so significant to him that it is the world of sense that is shadowy, and he has to reach out for it by an effort of will. His castles in Spain are no baseless fabric, but real castles that he lives in. (*The Summing Up*, 226-7)

Yet as the preface to this collection shows, Maugham was simultaneously attracted to, and diffident of, the idea of using the symbolist potential of images. When looking for a general title for his work, foregrounding the casuarina tree that is indigenous to that region initially struck him as a powerful idea (which it truly is) in that this single image encapsulated many facets of the colonial experience as he saw it. Local legends assert, Maugham tells us in the preface, that this tree is associated with contrary winds or perilous storms, with bad omen or dangers of various sorts, and thereby aptly heralds the instances of human misery or physical violence that the stories contain.

Another legend, Maugham continues, associates the casuarina tree with mystery and prophecy, while a third gives it an intermediary role in the local ecosystem. Allegedly, once the mangrove has colonized estuary regions, casuarina trees tend to take over and fertilize the soil, at least until “the ruthless encroachment of the myriad denizens of the jungle” causes their disappearance from the scene. In this Maugham sees a striking parallel with British rule in Malaya in the sense that, however serious and numerous their personal failings, settlers were mostly for him a group of average, honest people on a commercial enterprise or carrying out a pacifying mission in a formerly troubled country.

Unfortunately, as he later came to discover, this intermediary-position theory was not based on scientific fact. Though Maugham does not explain why, one might suppose that the fact that casuarina trees thrive in sandy soils and cannot stand to remain waterlogged for long makes their growth in mangrove areas unlikely. Nevertheless Maugham held on to his title because, as he pragmatically remarks, titles are hard to come by and the best ones have already been used. More seriously, his preface also enlists the help of Rabelais’ *Gargantua* to make the point that symbols “can symbolize anything.” Other metaphorical associations with that tree species are then suggested: it could symbolize the peace brought by British planters and administrators, for the casuarina tree often act as windbreak on Malayan shores; or even the settlers’ exile from England on the ground that such a hardy tree, “grey, rugged and sad,” could remind them of a Yorkshire moor or a Sussex landscape.

In other words, meaning either too much or too little, visual representations or symbols have a way of twisting themselves around and of evading control which put Maugham off, as if the arbitrariness of projecting feelings or connotations onto inanimate objects irked him or struck him as contrived in a work of fiction.

Interestingly no such hesitation marks the comments which he jotted down in his notebooks, and one immediately perceives the difference between those comments and the afterthought which led him to give his third collection such a title. It is easy to
oppose the absence of actual references to casuarina trees in the six stories – unless Maugham has that particular species in mind when he alludes to “trees with feathery foliage like the acacia” at the very start of Izzart and Campion’s ill-fated journey down the river in “The Yellow Streak” (215) – and the strongly visual impression they made on him during his stay. Like a flimsy veil placed before his eyes, now altering now heightening his perception of reality when the veil was suddenly drawn aside, an actual row of casuarina trees provided him with a staggering optical experience:

In front of the veranda were casuarina trees, and through them you saw the sea and the island beyond. Long after the sun set there was a blood-red glow over the sea and the casuarina trees were silhouetted against it. They were lace-like and graceful and unreal. The picture reminded you of a Japanese print. At last the fitful breeze swayed them a little more and there sprang into sight, only to disappear again, a white star.

The casuarina trees were like a veil of phantasy that pleasant thoughts obtrude between you and the sight before your eyes. (A Writer’s Notebook, 200-1)

Interestingly however, Maugham does occasionally resort to such protean images. He does so for instance when he creates a peaceful riverside oasis at the bottom of the Resident’s garden in “The Outstation,” whose sweet-smelling flowers and moon-lit trees first instill peace into Warburton’s heart before denying him that same serenity a short moment prior to the murder of his hated rival. Breaking the previous Eden-like quality of his fictional garden, Maugham then switches to internal focalization to write: “The river flowed ominously silent. It was like a great serpent gliding with sluggish movement towards the sea. And the trees of the jungle over the water were heavy with a breathless menace” (86). At some point in most of these stories a quick reference to snake images is also used, but most interestingly in “Before the Party,” a story set in England and in which the horror of the protagonist’s Malayan murder is gradually impressed into the minds of her parents and sister, before they all set out for a clergyman’s garden party. Mrs. Skinner jumps into the corner of her sofa “as though she had been told that a snake lay curled up beside her” (171) when it is revealed that Millicent cut her alcoholic husband’s throat with a parang, or short sword, similar to that which has been hanging like a framed painting over her couch for years, a gift from her deceased son-in-law.

What Maugham stresses in this story is the morbid strength suddenly acquired by familiar exotic objects (like a Malay sword, a toque with egrets’ feathers or a wooden hornbill) when they are viewed in an unusual light. What Mrs. Skinner took to be mere knick-knacks or three-dimensional images of the boring colonies – objects/images whose name she did not care to learn and whose power she felt to be neutralized by their new English context, though they did seem to her “a little odd and barbaric” (146) – surprisingly spring to life and force her to examine the human and moral implications of the nation’s empire-building effort.

But the best illustration of the inherent moral implications of imperialism is to be found in Maugham’s masterpiece, “P. & O.,” in which a Malayan woman casts a spell on the longtime companion who suddenly leaves her to start a new life in his native Ireland. Mrs. Hamlyn, a traveler on the same “Peninsular & Oriental” steamship and the story’s focalizer, becomes obsessed with an image that she creates of this Malayan woman, sitting on the steps of her deserted bungalow – an image whose recurrence gives the story a striking cadence, as if the seduction then desertion of the Malayan woman epitomized the evil that empires do. Though she boarded the ship in Japan and
may never have visited the Federated Malay States, Mrs. Hamlyn’s own estrangement from her husband allows her to picture the scene of Gallagher’s departure quite vividly, both from an imaginary bird’s-eye view that allows her to mentally picture the Irishman’s complete drive from his bungalow to the station and from the Malay woman’s perspective. The paragraph in question is worth quoting in full:

Mrs. Hamlyn saw the bright and sunny road that ran through the rubber estates, with their trim green trees, carefully spaced, and their silence, and then wound its way up hill and down through the tangled jungle. The car raced on, driven by a reckless Malay, with its white passengers, past Malay houses that stood away from the road among the coconut trees, sequestered and taciturn, and through busy villages where the market-place was crowded with dark-skinned little people in gay sarongs. Then towards evening it reached the trim, modern town, with its clubs and its golf links, its well-ordered resthouse, its white people, and its railway station, from which the two men could take the train to Singapore. And the woman sat on the steps of the bungalow, empty till the new manager moved in, and watched the road down which the car had panted, watched the car as it sped on, and watched till at last it was lost in the shadow of the night. (62-3)

When Gallagher falls sick and threatens to die from unstoppable hiccup fits on Christmas Day, thereby spoiling the whole community’s planned festivities, tension and a definite malaise settle onboard, making passengers irritable. The Malay woman’s spell and image, together with the unaccustomed vibrations coming from the ship’s forced engines, diversely affect them and refuse to “pass into each one’s unconsciousness,” as the narrator puts it (66), as if the community now found it impossible to repress its feelings of guilt and the disturbing images born of its colonial empire.

It is unclear how much of a moral, or a political, statement Maugham meant to make in “P. & O.” After all Maugham was always vocal against the idea of writers setting out to “educate” readers. Though admiring of Bernard Shaw’s talents, for instance, he never swerved from his conviction that short stories, novels or plays were no fit pulpits for propaganda or the putting forward of a political or social agenda. Yet in his assessment of Kipling’s short stories, Maugham insists on the fact that, willingly or not, all writers necessarily convey a vision or philosophy of life which lends itself to all kinds of interpretations, including moral and political ones. For him Kipling’s Plain Tales from the Hills, to quote an example, may well have been written by a young man who was dazzled by the apparent magic and elegance of the British rulers of India, but the fact remains that these stories can undoubtedly be read as an indictment of their power and a prediction of their fall.16 What is clear, though, is that in stories like “P. & O.” and “Before the Party”, Maugham pushed back his usual, self-imposed limits and gave the reader new subjects to ponder, like collective responsibility and a questioning of the moral foundation of colonialism. More than that, Mrs. Hamlyn’s staggering feeling of solitude and her final decision to forgive her husband’s betrayal – a decision set in opposition to the Malay woman’s fatal curse – prove that Maugham was considering broader matters even than the colonial experience, namely the human experience and the need for universal tolerance that it calls for, in the face of the leveling influence of death. Critics therefore cannot see the forest for the trees when they stress Maugham’s irony or warped vision to the exclusion of anything else, as does Hartley when he writes of the “ruthless insight into and insistence upon the ignoble motives [which] distinguish these ‘Plain Tales of the Ills.’”17

Similar in this to the reaction of Forster’s Adela Quested when hearing a primitive echo in one of the Marabar Caves, Mrs. Hamlyn’s experience on the ship boils down to a
brutal reminder of the meaninglessness and ferocity of life, especially for those who, like her, feel “as lonely as the ship that throbbed her hasting way through an unpeopled sea, and lonely as the friendless man who lay dying in the ship’s lazaret” (70).

Critics have occasionally deemed such images and notions in Maugham’s fiction none too elevating or original. They are nonetheless some of the heart-felt convictions which Maugham arrived at after a life that was rich in experience and that he wished to share with his readers. As he writes at the end of a preface to his complete works:

“When he [the writer] succeeds he has forced you for a time to accept his view of the universe and has given you the pleasure of following out the pattern he has drawn on the surface of chaos. But he seeks to prove nothing. He paints a picture and sets it before you. You can take it or leave it.”

Note: The easiest way today to read the six stories contained in *The Casuarina Tree* is through the two collections of Maugham’s stories quoted above: *Far Eastern Tales* and *More Far Eastern Tales*. Still, it is necessary to get a copy of the first edition of *The Casuarina Tree* (London, Heinemann, 1926, 310 p.) or a later edition like that published by Éditions du Chêne if ones wishes to read Maugham’s preface (and postscript), not anthologized elsewhere.

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Cheuse, Alan. “Reading the Archipelago.” *The Antioch Review* 60.4 (Fall 2002) : 551-68. [also available online from findarticles.com]


NOTES

2. See Maugham’s introduction to an anthology entitled Tellers of Tales (1939), quoted in Selected Prefaces and Introductions of W. Somerset Maugham, 114-15.
3. In these stories, a contemporary critic heard a “droning symphony of fatalism that beats on the emotions like a tomtom [sic].” See Edwin Muir’s review of The Casuarina Tree, published in Nation and Athenaeum on 9 October 1926; cited in The Critical Heritage, 171.
4. Conrad’s trilogy comprises Almayer’s Folly (1895), An Outcast of the Islands (1896), and The Rescue (1920).
5. For a more detailed discussion on Conrad’s and Maugham’s representation of Malaya and Borneo, together with allusions to the works of numerous other fiction writers both in Dutch and English, see Alan Cheuse’s “Reading the Archipelago.”
6. Still on the subject of literary renditions of sunsets, Anthony Burgess writes the following in his introduction to Maugham’s Malaysian Stories (xiii): “Faced with the task of describing a Malayan sunset, a “literary” writer feels called upon to throw words about as a painter throws paint – “an apocalyptic accession of hushed luminosity, the reds and purples and oches blasting like archangelic trumpets” – that sort of thing. Maugham is content to say: “The sun went down. I went to the club for a stengah and a game of billiards.”
7. See L.P. Hartley’s review of The Casuarina Tree in The Saturday Review, 18 September 1926; cited in The Critical Heritage, ed. A. Curtis and J. Whitehead, 169. I would certainly agree with Hartley when he states on the same page: “we do not think the author’s business is finished when he has assimilated them [i.e., fact and event] into his private system. Even at the expense of mistiness and ambiguity he should surely aim at some larger, more impersonal correlation.”
8. Caricature is not a characteristic of Maugham’s fiction. On the contrary, Maugham considered caricature to be typical of “the old novelists who saw people all of a piece,” whose “heroes were good through and through, their villains wholly bad” (A Writer’s Notebook, 180). The point here, then, is that the use of stock characters negates the strikingly cosmopolitan opening of this particular story and lessens its attractiveness.
9. See his preface to East and West, the first volume of The Complete Short Stories of W. Somerset Maugham; quoted in Selected Prefaces and Introductions of W. Somerset Maugham, 57.
10. See Maugham’s preface to The Casuarina Tree (Paris, Chêne, 1942, 7) and the “Note” under Works Cited below.
11. Ibid., 7-8. Maugham’s arguments about symbolism and landscapes, to which I refer in this same paragraph, also come from Maugham’s preface (Paris, Chêne, 1942, 8).
12. See the tenth chapter of Gargantua, entitled: “Of that which is signified by the colors white and blue.”
13. The casuarina tree was originally named after the cassowary, the large flightless bird native to tropical forests whose drooping feathers the tree’s twigs were found to resemble.
17. Ibid., 169.
18. See Maugham’s preface to East and West (the first volume of his Complete Short Stories), quoted in Selected Prefaces and Introductions of W. Somerset Maugham, 64.

ABSTRACTS

Dans The Casuarina Tree, recueil de six nouvelles préfacées publié en 1926, W. Somerset Maugham évoque la vie des colons britanniques qu’il a croisés en Malaisie cinq ans plus tôt. Il s’attache aussi à montrer que l’image littéraire de ce pays, véhiculée par des auteurs comme Conrad, ne correspond en rien à la réalité qu’il a rencontrée. Pourtant, en raison de sa défiance envers métaphores et descriptions, de ses sources factuelles d'information et de l'art de la nouvelle qui s’est imposé peu à peu, qui laisse peu de place consciente au symbolisme ou à l’engagement politique, Maugham hésite devant la tâche de rectification qui le tente. Le présent article analyse cette tension.

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