# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Foreword**  
Linda Collinge-Germain

**Articles**

*Heavy Nothings in Virginia Woolf’s “Kew Gardens”*
Mathilde La Cassagnère

*Being and Time in Ernest Hemingway’s “Cat in the Rain”*
Daniel Thomières

*E.H. Young’s “The Stream,” Good Housekeeping, and the Cultivation of Active Readers*
Stella Deen

*The Power of Illusion and the Illusion of Power in Mary Orr’s “The Wisdom of Eve” and Mankiewicz’s All About Eve*
Alice Clark-Wehinger

*The First Fruits of Literary Rebellion: Flannery O’Connor’s “The Crop”*
Jolene Hubbs

*“Pariah” de Joan Williams : Femme invisible, pour qui vis-tu ?*
Gérald Préher

*Light and Change: Repressed Escapism in What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*
Paul Sweeten

*“He was a shit, to boot”: Abjection, Subjection and Feminism in “Black Venus”*
Richard Pedot

*“Spoiled People”: Narcissism and the De-centered Self in Richard Ford’s Women with Men*
Ian McGuire

*Loose Canons: Reader, Authors and Consumption in Helen Simpson’s “The Festival of the Immortals”*
Ailsa Cox

**Note**

*Parody in “Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan” by Shalom Auslander*
Morgane Jourdren
The current issue of the *Journal of the Short Story in English* is a general issue. The articles are presented in chronological order based on dates of publication of the stories studied, yet they can be considered thematically as well and fruitfully read in resonance one to the other.

A first group of articles looks at female authorship and/or female readership, the first two looking at how the female authors studied take into consideration their often feminine reading public, in some cases because the story was initially published in a magazine targeted at a feminine public. Stella Deen studies such an instance in her article entitled “E.H. Young’s ‘The Stream,’ *Good Housekeeping*, and the Cultivation of Active Readers.” In her semiological approach to the story as it was first published, Deen tries to recreate the 1932 *Good Housekeeping* reader’s encounter with “The Stream.” She argues that “readers would have drawn on the entire contents of the magazine—even of multiple issues of the magazine—as a set of intertexts for ‘The Stream,’ setting it in dialogue with topical questions interrogating man’s nature and his postwar predicament” in order to resolve enigmas in this story which is “neither about nor particularly for women.” According to Deen, the magazine considered its readers as “keepers of the cultural heritage and informed participants in contemporary society.”

Ailsa Cox also studies a feminine reading public, but more precisely at it appears in Helen Simpson’s story “The Festival of the Immortals,” a story which, in spite of its satire of literary festivals, includes “an affectionate portrait of two elderly festival-goers” whose satisfaction, having spent their lives at home, taking care of the family, comes from reading and imagining “the figure of the author.” Cox argues that “Simpson addresses the silencing of female voices and the marginalizing of women’s experience.”

In her article “The First Fruits of Literary Rebellion,” Jolene Hubbs considers female authorship, notably that of Flannery O’Connor in her portrayal of a female writer in the short story “The Crop,” a story set in the US South and used, according to Hubbs, “to critique contemporary models of authorship.” Hubbs argues that “‘The Crop’ exposes the limitations of 1920s pastoral fiction, a woman-authored form, as well as 1930s gritty social realism, a genre dominated by male writers.” “‘The Crop’ thus sets forth,” says
Hubbs, “the first fruits of the iconoclastic style that characterizes O’Connor’s body of work.” Gérald Préher, in his article “Joan Williams’ Invisible Woman in “Pariah,”” studies a female Southern author as well, one, precisely, less well known to the public than O’Connor. Joan Williams published “Pariah” in 1967 in McCall’s magazine. The story uses narrated monologue abundantly to express the subjectivity of Ruth, “a wife and mother who has momentarily found comfort in alcohol to avoid looking into the void her life has become.” Préher argues that her “descent into hell, namely reality, shows that she longs for visibility in a world where women are invisible,” perhaps echoing, he suggests, Williams’ own dilemma in relation to her mentor William Faulkner.

This question of feminine subjection is raised as well by Richard Pedot in his article entitled “‘He was a shit to boot’: abjection, subjection and feminism in Black Venus.” The “Black Venus” is Baudelaire’s muse, Jeanne Duval, whom Carter looks back to in the writing of her story. Pedot examines “Angela Carter’s disputed relation to feminism in the light of the play of the abject in her works—not only as a recurring theme often inseparable from that of the exclusion of the feminine, but also as a prevailing force within her writing.” He suggests that “much of the debate about Carter’s feminism results from the indeterminate status of the abject” as it appears in such a story and argues that this indeterminacy fosters a “more complex perception of the mechanisms of feminine subjection.”

The feminine subjection that Alice Clark-Wehinger studies in her article “The Power of Illusion and the Illusion of Power” is of a different nature in that the story written by Mary Orr “The Wisdom of Eve” and its film adaptation by Mankiewicz recount the successive manipulating of women characters by other women characters. Performance is at the heart of this manipulating as “a young actress plays on the appearance of youthful innocence to claw her way to success” and “supplant her rival.” Alice Clark Wehinger examines the trope of theatre “as a construct which contaminates both space and identity” in these works and then proceeds to consider “the aesthetic implications of theatre as a motif for the baroque aesthetics of illusion.”

A second group of articles in the present volume is devoted to the aesthetics of modern short story writing. First of all, Mathilde La Cassagnère studies Virginia Woolf’s story “Kew Gardens” in relation to Woolf’s 1919 essay on the art of fiction. “The purpose of the essay,” says La Cassagnère, “was to emancipate fiction from its conventional modes of representation so as to make it able to capture and voice all things infinitesimal and intangible, in an exploration of the hitherto neglected ‘heavy nothing(s).’” The story’s snail is one of those infinitely small beings, and La Cassagnère suggests that in the end, “the snail has become the entire short story. The snail is all the story’s spectacularly divergent tales about nothings,” from the Sartrean dialectic of being and nothingness to modern neuroscience’s “illusions of the brain.”

Paul Sweeten examines two versions of Raymond Carver’s stories from the 1970s and their relation to Hemingway’s modernist style of short story writing. Sweeten argues that Gordon Lish, the editor who published Carver’s 1980 collection What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, was more influenced by and interested in Hemingway’s minimalist style than Carver was. The recent publication (2009) of Beginners, the unedited version of those same stories, is the basis for Sweeten’s genetic study. He argues that the stories in these first drafts can be seen as “having different effects and
perhaps even as aiming at something altogether distinct from their edited counterparts.”

8 A third group of articles in this volume takes an explicitly philosophical approach to the stories they study. Daniel Thomières’ article entitled “Being and Time in Ernest Hemingway’s ‘Cat in the Rain’” considers Hemingway’s story as a series of philosophical interrogations. In his study of this story of a couple undergoing a crisis, Thomières argues that the story “can be read as a fundamental question: what are the implications of this crisis in which a woman starts questioning her desire and her identity?” Thomières writes that “perhaps Hemingway’s main discovery was that we are part of time and that the states in which we live never last long. Hemingway was concerned with what could be called the fate of our desires.”

9 In his article “‘Spoiled People’: Narcissism and the De-centered Self in Richard Ford’s Women with Men,” Ian McGuire also examines the desires of the protagonists from a philosophical standpoint. He identifies Charley Matthews’ affirmation of no longer wanting to be the “center of things” as a “desire connecting him to a long-standing tradition of American individualism, but also to a more recent strain of European postmodernism.” “Ford’s critique of postmodernism,” says McGuire, “emphasises its narcissistic and relativistic tendencies. Ford offers, as an alternative, a version of philosophical realism that may be usefully compared to the ‘internal realism’ argued for by American philosopher Hilary Putnam.”

10 The issue is concluded with a note written by Morgane Jourdren—“Parody in ‘Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan’ by Shalom Auslander”—a study which concludes that “parody and self-parody are here a way of retrieving a sense of being for a moment, away from an oppressive and dull society.”

----------------------------------------

AUTHOR

LINDA COLLINGE-GERMAIN

Linda Collinge-Germain is an Associate Professor at the University of Angers where she teaches English language and literature and is an active member of the Centre de Recherches Interdisciplinaires en Langue Anglaise. She is the author of Beckett traduit Beckett: de Malone meurt à Malone Dies, l’imaginaire en traduction (Droz, 2000), a study of Beckett as self-translator, and has also published articles on the subject which have appeared in Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui or thematic collections. Her areas of interest are the bilingual works of Samuel Beckett, reception theory and more currently, cultural in-betweenness in short-story writing, and film adaptations of short stories as a form of translation. She was co-editor of the Journal of the Short Story in English from 1997 to 2012 and has been editor since 2012.
Articles
Heavy Nothings in Virginia Woolf’s “Kew Gardens”

Mathilde La Cassagnère

In her programmatic 1919 essay Modern Fiction, Virginia Woolf announced her intention of revolutionising the art of fiction by attuning it to each and every impact of the world on the consciousness, however fleeting and evanescent each impact might be: “The mind receives [...] an incessant shower of innumerable atoms [...]. Let us trace the pattern [...] which each incident scores upon the consciousness” (The Common Reader, 150). The purpose was to emancipate fiction from its conventional modes of representation so as to make it able to capture and voice all things infinitesimal and intangible, in an exploration of the hitherto neglected “heavy nothing[s]”—as Shakespeare’s Queen Isabella puts it in Richard II (2.2.32)—that set the soul trembling.

Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small [...], what we can neither touch nor see. The point of interest lies [...] in something hitherto ignored [...], difficult for us to grasp [...]. The emphasis is laid upon such unexpected places that at first it seems as if there were no emphasis at all. And then, the eyes accustom themselves [...] and discern the shapes. (TCR 150-52)

The very same year, Woolf experimented with this new literary technique in her short story “Kew Gardens.” This paper aims to follow the artist along the text in her deliberate “grasping” of the “commonly thought small” (or little nothings of life), but then to observe how this conscious practice led her intuitive “eyes” to “discern” some of the as yet unborn major discoveries of the later 20th century in the fields of philosophy, psychoanalysis and even neuroscience—discoveries of which “Kew Gardens” can thus be considered to hold prophetic visions.

I. Mountains of nothings

Nothing could be more insignificant than a tiny brown snail-shell on the Gardens’ soil, hidden, as we read in the opening paragraph, under the profusion of vegetal forms and textures of a flowerbed. Inconspicuous amidst a hundred flower stems and, what is
more, eclipsed by overwhelming impressionistic vibrations of light and colour and by the blinding chiaroscuro of ever-shifting shades intermittently screening it from the glaring summer sun, the shell must be empty in such a heat. Doomed to oblivion, it is nonetheless mentioned, as if in passing, together with a grey pebble and the odd water drop, forming with them an invisible triad.

The forgotten shell’s reappearance, at the bottom of the next page, thus comes as a surprise. So does the existence and coming to life of its small inhabitant: “In the oval flower-bed the snail […] appeared to be moving very slightly in its shell, and next began to labour over the crumbs of loose earth which broke away and rolled down as it passed over them” (A Haunted House, 85). What is more, this is a stubborn snail with a consciousness and a will of its own: “It appeared to have a definite goal in front of it.” As if it had materialized out of the thin air inside the empty shell, off it goes “labour[ing] over the crumbs of […] earth” and among the fallen leaves. Henceforth the tiny mollusc turns into the synecdoche of a whole world, making mountains out of nothings: to him, the dry leaves trodden upon by the common run are “brown cliffs with deep green lakes in the hollows”; the ground is strewn with fallen petals turned to “vast crumpled surfaces of a thin crackling texture”; a forest of tree-like grass-blades “waves from root to tip”; and why won’t this beanpole of an “angular green insect, who attempt[s] to cross in front of [him],” give way? “To circumvent the arched tent of a dead leaf or to breast it”? Meanwhile, “the feet of […] human beings” are coming past (AHH 86), gigantic strollers oblivious to the “full life” of what they “can neither touch nor see” (TCR 151). The narrative then leaves the snail temporarily to his wavering, and reintroduces him two pages later as he is about to make a decision:

The snail had now considered every possible method of reaching his goal without going round the dead leaf or climbing over it. Let alone the effort needed for climbing a leaf, he was doubtful whether the thin texture […] would bear his weight; and this determined him finally to creep beneath it, for there was a point where the leaf curved high enough from the ground to admit him. (AHH 87-88)

Woolf’s art reveals the “weight” and density of the snail’s minute and silent consciousness, in which a leaf’s apparent flatness swells and metamorphoses into a gigantic arch: “He had […] inserted his head in the opening and was taking stock of the high brown roof and was getting used to the cool brown light” (AHH 88)—at which point it becomes explicit that the snail is not only the “difficult to grasp” object of the new vision advocated by the artist in her seminal essay (TCR 152), but also and momentarily a subject of this vision, “accustom[ing itself] and discern[ing] the shapes” under the leaf (TCR 152). Furthermore, it is not only “the eyes [that accustom] themselves,” but the ears as well: sounds of which the human perception usually makes nothing, noises which only a miniature consciousness should perceive, become audible to us via a delicate interplay of consonances and alliterations: the crunching and susurration of a dry leaf caving in or of a petal about to break up (“vast crumpled surfaces of a thin crackling texture” AHH 86), the fine antennæ softly feeling and delicately patting their way across filigreed surfaces (“he was doubtful whether the texture […] when touched even by the tip of his horns would bear his weight” AHH 87). In this world perceived from a snail’s horns, the snail is—as Jean-Jacques Lecercle observes in his own reading of the short story—a figure of the poet.
II. “Being and Nothingness”

Beyond Virginia Woolf’s deliberate realization of her program to rehabilitate the so-called “nothings” of life, one might read, in this snail’s journey published in 1919, a prophetic allegory—preceding it by more than 20 years—of Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1943 existential experience in *Being and Nothingness*. Strikingly enough, Sartre’s description of the “being-in-itself” as a “perfect equivalence of content to container” could be that of a snail’s body (the “content”) perfectly curled up in its shell (the “container”) and filling it entirely: “The in-itself is full of itself; no more total plenitude can be imagined, no more perfect equivalence of content to container” (*Being and Nothingness*, 120-21). At the beginning of “Kew gardens,” “shell” and “snail” are indeed compressed in the same nominal group—a compression emphasized by the “shell-snail” paronomasia—whose complement can apply both to content and container: “the shell of a snail with its brown circular veins” (*AHH* 84). “The density of being [...] masses within it the infinity of density [and] exists in an infinite compression” (*BAN* 120): insofar as the shape of a snail’s shell and of its content conjures up a hyperbolic spiral (whose curve never joins the pole around which it winds), it is indeed a figure of this “infinite compression [and density].”

It is, in the Sartrean existential theory, through the “ontological act” of consciousness (with which the snail of “Kew Gardens” is endowed) that the infinitely dense being-in-itself “falls towards” the “for-itself” (*BAN* 126): an act which consists in a “virtual separation,” a “detachment” of the being from itself (*BAN* 124). The snail performs this virtual self-separation the second time he is mentioned, by partially slipping out of his shell (whereby content and container are partly dissociated): “the snail [...] now appeared to be moving very slightly in its shell” (*AHH* 85). So doing, he surpasses the oneness and plenitude of the “in-itself” and achieves the “duality” of the “for-itself” (*BAN* 124).

It is through the aperture—a “crack” (*BAN* 121), a “fissure” (*BAN* 124), a “hole” (*BAN* 126)—resulting from this self-detachment or self-separation (or “decompression of being,” *BAN* 121) that the Sartrean nothingness “slips in” the being (*BAN* 121). Thus, “the for-itself must be its own nothingness” (*BAN* 125). Woolf’s snail functions as an allegory of the Sartrean nothingness as well, as “he insert[s] his head in the opening” (*AHH* 88) after he has decided to inch his way under the arch of the leaf. No wonder, then, if he no longer appears in the two remaining pages; he has disappeared into the “elsewhere” of nothingness: “nothingness is always an elsewhere” (*BAN* 126).

In *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (published two years after *Being and Nothingness*), Jean-Paul Sartre rephrased the elsewhere of nothingness as “goals one seeks outside of oneself,” as “projects” and “enterprises” resulting from responsible choices—as a “beyond” which is the only way to real existence:

> reality exists only in action [...]. Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions [...], nothing but a series of enterprises. Man is always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that [he] is realized [...]. [Man must] make his own choices, [...] it is not by turning inward, but by constantly seeking a goal outside of himself [...] that [he] will realize himself. (*EIAH* 36-38, 52-53)

The multiple routes and courses of action planned by the snail to achieve his goal, this whole series of projects and doubts weighing down upon the Lilliputian consciousness
—a consciousness fraught with the burden of a freedom which leaves him no choice but to make the decision “to creep beneath [the leaf]” (AHH 87)—are none other than this existential experience avant la lettre: outside of himself and making choices, he realizes himself. Though he may seem to be nothing, he “exists.”

III. Back to nothing: a world of shades

Ironically, while the microscopic snail achieves its own reality and existence, the human couples that stroll past his flowerbed look like unreal giants. The mollusc’s silent world contrasts with the babble of their voices, as they “talk almost incessantly” (AHH 86): a couple with two children is making casual conversation about the past; a slightly deranged elder man is prattling away beside his young and long-suffering help; two ladies are engaged in a strange verbal competition, throwing disconnected words at each other like empty shells, one might say (AHH 87); a young couple is arguing in “toneless and monotonous voices” (AHH 88) about the significance of a pronoun—“it”—and finally reaches the conclusion that, after all, it means everything... and nothing:

“What’s “it”—what do you mean by “it”?”
‘O anything—I mean—you know what I mean.’ (AHH 88)

Every now and then, though, some of these words do make sense, but even when they do, they refer to unreal ghosts or bygone shadows: as Eleanor and Simon (the first couple) pass by, a fiancée lost by Simon some fifteen years ago (“I’ve been thinking of Lily, the woman I might have married” AHH 85); further back in the past, in Eleanor’s recollection, an idealized ageing teacher (“twenty years ago [...]—it was so precious—the kiss of an old grey-haired woman” AHH 85); then, even more ancient “spirits”—some of them mere fantasies—conjured up by the elderly man hearing voices in his mild derangement and conversing with them (“He was talking about spirits—the spirits of the dead, who, according to him, were even now telling him all sorts of things” AHH 86). Thus, while the snail is intent on pursuing his aim and entirely future-bound, the strollers are regressing into the past of the ghosts that haunt them, so much so that they themselves are becoming insubstantial, as if they were about to evaporate: “[They] were enveloped in [...] green blue vapour, in which at first their bodies had substance and a dash of colour, but later both substance and colour dissolved in the green-blue atmosphere” (AHH 89). In striking contrast to the snail’s steadfast “labouring,” they are gliding like “half-transparent” shades (AHH 85) and flitting about like ephemeral creatures: “[They] straggled past [...] with a curiously irregular movement not unlike that of the white and blue butterflies who crossed the turf in zigzag flights [...]. Thus one couple after another with much the same irregular movement passed the flower-bed” (AHH 84, 89). While the snail’s microcosm slowly whirls into existence and expands, the “zigzagging” giants are dwindling as if they were about to vanish into thin air, engulfed into a void: “[They] walked on [...] and soon diminished in size among the trees” (AHH 85). Even their eyes are emptying, as suggested by the powerful echo that links the last sentences of the opening and of the final paragraph—with a tell-tale variation—: in the initial paragraph, “the colour was flashed into the air above, into the eyes of the men and women who walk in Kew Gardens in July” (AHH 84, my emphasis); and in the last paragraph, “[the] flowers flashed their colours into the air” (AHH 89), “the eyes of the men and women” erased, so to speak, as well as their anchorage in space and time (“who walk in Kew Gardens in July”).
Reduced to nothing as they may seem to be—especially in contrast with the snail’s existential experience—these men and women are all inhabited by a force, an urge, which is the hidden, fundamental drive Freud will bring out in his 1920 crucial essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (published one year after Woolf’s “Kew Gardens”) and theorize, in connection with the “compulsion to repeat” (i.e. to repeat past experiences, unpleasant as they may be), as the “death instinct” at work in every living being:

[this] instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life [...]. If we are to take it as a truth [...] that everything living dies for internal reasons—becomes inorganic once again—then we shall be compelled to say that ‘the aim of all life is death’ and, looking backwards, that ‘inanimate things existed before living ones [...]. [The] first instinct [which] came into being [was] the instinct to return to the inanimate state. (Freud XVIII: 37-38)

Woolf’s description of the human characters in “Kew Gardens” is, one might say, a visionary evocation of this “first instinct” in both its manifestations as pointed out by Freud (“compulsion to repeat” and “inertia”). Simon and Eleanor’s haunting memories of their departed are a compulsive movement backward into “an earlier state of things” which is their past, a past which is ultimately a realm of shade. Their dialogue sounds like a small *Nekyia* along which they are driven to the world of the dead which becomes their “reality”:

‘Tell me, Eleanor, d’you ever think of the past? [...] Because I’ve been thinking of the past. I’ve been thinking of Lily [...]. Do you mind my thinking of the past?’

‘Why should I mind, Simon? Doesn’t one always think of the past, in a garden with men and women lying under the trees? Aren’t they one’s past, all that remains of it, those men and women, those ghosts lying under the trees [...], one’s happiness, one’s reality?’ (AHH 85)

As for the people “huddled upon the ground” (AHH 89), they are lying in the shade of the trees “as if all gross and heavy bodies had sunk down in the heat motionless” (AHH 89), a compelling image of the Freudian “inertia inherent in organic life.”

In 1923 (three years after *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) Freud, returning to his exploration of the “death instincts,” qualified them—opposing them in his second and final theory of instincts to the “erotic instincts”—as “mute”: “The death instincts are by their nature mute and [...] the clamor of life proceeds for the most part from Eros” (*The Ego and the Id*, in Freud XIX: 46). Mute as it is in Freudian theory, Thanatos, the death instinct, makes itself heard in “Kew Gardens”: not only in Eleanor and Simon’s *Nekyia*-like dialogue, but also in the “wordless voices” rising from the “motionless bodies.” From these idle sounds, half way between speaking and humming, the hardly understandable snatches of conversation are the strange voices of Thanatos—both drowsy, fading away, and yet, for all their inertia, tense and passionate because burning with desire, that of the innermost death instinct on its way to fulfilment: “all gross and heavy bodies had sunk down in the heat motionless [...], but their voices went wavering from them as if they were flames lolling from the thick waxen bodies of candles. [...] wordless voices, breaking the silence suddenly with such depth of contentment, such passion of desire” (AHH 89).
IV. “Wordless voices”: encountering the real

The death instinct however, whatever its power, is never at work by itself, but in conflicting and complex interplay with Eros, the life instinct within every being and even—as Freud demonstrated in his investigation of masochism and of sadism—within every instinctual impulse. “Every instinctual impulse,” he will point out in *Anxiety and Instinctual Life*, “consists in similar fusions or alloys of the two classes of instincts” (Freud XXII: 104-5). The “flames lolling” from the “wordless voices” to be heard in “Kew Gardens” can thus be seen as well, in a Freudian perspective, as those of Eros: as visible or audible signs of the vibrations of unacknowledged desire flashing into consciousness, messages fraught with unutterable significance such as those Virginia Woolf saw in the fiction of James Joyce, while describing her own art: “[Mr Joyce] is concerned [...] to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain, [...] lighting flashes of significance [...] so close to the quick of the mind” (*TCR* 151). Are not indeed the “lolling flames” of “Kew Gardens,” in their intermittence, together with the “wavering voices”—their synaesthetic correspondence —, suggestive images of the characteristically discontinuous manifestation of the unconscious, of its “vacillation,” as described by Jacques Lacan in *The Seminar XI*?

“Discontinuity, then, is the essential form in which the unconscious first appears to us as a phenomenon—discontinuity in which something is manifested as a vacillation” (Lacan XI: 25).

The disconnectedness, often the incoherence, of the characters’ utterances, as they pass by the flower-bed, are as many effects of this “vacillation.” They are the features through which Woolf’s text positions itself on a borderline: an impossible borderline between the world of words—to which it naturally belongs—and a world beyond words, a world of nonsense and yet of reality. For the reiterated words and phrases brought into play in the characters’ speeches—in the conversation about the past, the old man’s monologue about the “electric battery” (*AHH* 86) to communicate with the dead, in the two elderly women’s verbal game (“‘he says, I says, she says, I says, I says, I says [...] Sugar, sugar, sugar’,” *AHH* 87), in the two young people’s metalingual dialogue (“‘what do you mean by ‘it’?,” *AHH* 89)—all those are screens woven by the symbolic order to ward off the “vacillations” of an “unsignifiable” real; while the very weaving of the screen, the very insistence of the linguistic signs betoken the imminence of the “vacillation,” the potential advent of something unutterable. That is how the symbolic construction which is the short-story attempts to situate itself on the margin of the real, the “real” in the Lacanian sense, which is, within the human being, those intimate dimensions of experience—such as *jouissance* “which is forbidden to him who speaks as such” (*Ecrits* 319)—that remain foreclosed from the field of signs. It is “the impossible” that cannot be grasped by any symbolic articulation and thereby eludes the subject whose existence is rooted in the symbolic. The real is, in human experience, the object of “an essential encounter, an appointment to which we are always called,” but which is bound to be “missed” since the real lies beyond all symbolic mediation (Lacan XI: 53-55).

Virginia Woolf’s “Kew Gardens” brings into play this impossible encounter with the real. It works at making it happen in moments when words—referring to things they have actually created, to the so-called “reality” (the “little white table,” the “two shilling piece,” *AHH* 88)—open themselves to intrusions of the unsignifiable real, as
they load themselves with the materiality of the voice, of the “wordless”—and thus meaningless—voice that enunciates them. Through the voice, the real intrudes into the signs, so that the sign—or a fragment of it—is transmuted into the materiality of the “letter,” as defined by Serge Leclaire in *Psychanalyser*. The “letter,” Leclaire explains, is the phoneme or phonic sequence sensuously experienced which, in the “swooning moment,” paradoxically “fixes and cancels jouissance” (Leclaire 76, 131, my translation), saving the subject from thoroughly “dying,” in terms of the Elizabethan metaphor.

20 Such tentative intrusion of the real into the world of words is indeed the deeper unifying drama underlying the small and apparently disconnected dramas of the strolling couples as they walk past the flower-bed. All along the dialogues, they gradually become aware of the gap between the words they utter and an innermost real they cannot articulate. Speaking, reiterating the signs of language supposed to communicate their feelings and to refer to the world around, they come alive to the impotence of those signs, to their void; until the speakers are led to approach the signs in themselves, as nonsense, in the materiality that connects these signs to the vibrations of the voice and the movements of the body. In the dialogue between the two elderly women (just after their rambling on about “sugar, flour, kippers, greens, sugar, sugar,” AHH 87), one of the ladies, “[coming] to a standstill opposite the oval-shaped flower-bed, […] ceased to pretend to listen to what the other was saying. She stood there letting the words fall over her, swaying the top-part of her body slowly backwards and forwards, looking at the flowers” (AHH 87): a vacillating moment in which jouissance (“forbidden to [her] who speaks as such”), makes itself heard “between the lines”—as Lacan further explains (Ecrits 319)—, or more exactly between the words in their sequence, as the woman no longer perceives them in their referential function, but as a “body” of sound at one with the motions of her own “body,” in a dance-like moment of being.

21 Therefore, at this point of the short story, when the last couple but one is passing the flower-bed, it is basically the experience of poetic listening which is brought into play: listening to the poem as that borderline world lying between the symbolic and the real. Such poetic listening to the words, adumbrated in the description of the elderly woman’s moment of being, is fulfilled in the drama of the pageant’s last couple, the “young man” and the “young woman”—in the utterance, the audition and the resonance of the words they exchange:

‘Lucky it isn’t Friday,’ he observed.
‘Why? D’you believe in luck?’
‘They make you pay sixpence on Friday.’
‘What’s sixpence anyway? Isn’t it worth sixpence?’
‘What’s “it”—what do you mean by “it”?’
‘O, anything—I mean—you know what I mean.” (AHH 88)

22 The dialogue is indeed an ambiguous piece: beyond manifest colloquialism it might be as well, especially to the early 20th century reader, the fragment of some modern poem (why not, for example, one of those fragmentary dialogues inserted within T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*?); an ambiguous ring which subtly conditions our reading, preparing us to hear the words in their full potential, as the two young people will do. In that initiatory moment, they waver between utterances and “long pauses [that] came between each of those remarks” (AHH 88), divided between what they say as topics of speech and their sense of an underlying intimate real, utterly foreign to the meaning of their words, “words with short wings […] , inadequate to carry them far and thus...
alighting awkwardly upon the very common objects that surrounded them” (AHH 88). And then, in the very dialogue, a word—maybe the plainest word of language—, “it,” is taken in isolation, out of all meaningful context and thus turns, as a sheer body of sound, into a thing of infinite potentialities (and one may incidentally wonder whether its phonic closeness to id is a mere accident):

“What’s “it”—what do you mean by “it”?"

‘O, anything—I mean—you know what I mean.’

In such new listening, the very sign, “the word with short wings,” may turn into something else, even into a “heavy body of meaning”; but a “meaning” fundamentally other than that in the symbolic order, since it is precisely—and literally—a “body” which (psychoanalysis tells us) is the locus of jouissance. The real, then, in this final phase of the pageant, is in the interplay between “him and her”: it is in what “he” feels as he listens to “her” voice: “something loom[ing] up behind her words” (AHH 88); and it is in the “precipices [...] concealed in [his words]” that “she” senses (AHH 88). “Down there”: the wide horizontal areas of silence that spread at first around the words in the unreal dialogue (“the long pauses [that] came between each of these remarks”) finally turn into the depths of a real opening up within the very words—in the bodies of words which are in secret relation with the body of the speaking or listening subject. “Language,” as Lacan observed, “is not immaterial. It is a subtle body, but a body it is. Words are trapped in all the corporeal images that captivate the subject” (Ecrits 87).³ Such is the initiation reached at the end of the pageant of figures passing by the flower-bed. And the narrative of this initiation is as well an implicit metalanguage in which Virginia Woolf’s text projects an image of its own reading, and hints at the ways one may listen to its “wordless voices.”

V. The murmurs of the brain

It is true, of course, that seen in a different light, such indulgence in “wordless voices”—in common parlance, “hearing voices”—customarily arouses suspicions of madness, as it does in the two women when they catch sight of the old flower-whisperer:

Following [the old man’s] steps so closely as to be slightly puzzled by his gestures came two elderly women [...]. Like most people [...] they were frankly fascinated by any signs of eccentricity betokening a disordered brain [...]; but they were too far off to be certain whether his gestures were merely eccentric or genuinely mad. (AHH 87)

But paradoxical though it may seem to be, this “eccentricity”—literally an apparent incapacity to centre on anything—is an “act of attention” in terms of neuroscience. It seems indeed as though the “disordered brain” of the elderly man strolling in Kew Gardens were a prophetic illustration of the (Miltonic) “pandemonium” of the normal human brain nowadays observed in neurology—as explained in J. Lehrer’s Proust was a Neuroscientist:

Experiment after experiment has shown that [...] the permanent-seeming self is actually an endless procession of disjointed moments [...]. The head holds a raucous parliament of [firing neurons] that endlessly debate what sensations and feelings should become conscious. As [...] Daniel Dennett wrote [in Consciousness Explained], our mind is made up of ‘multiple channels [which] try, in parallel pandemoniums,
to do their various things creating multiple drafts as they go’ [Dennett 253-54].
What we call reality is merely the final draft. (Of course the very next moment
requires a whole new manuscript.) [...] Why does the self feel whole when it is really
broken? (Lehrer 177, 179)

To answer this question, Lehrer devotes several pages to To the Lighthouse where we
learn that in the dinner scene, Mrs Ramsay’s drifting into a reverie in front of a bowl of
fruit (an episode we may compare with the elderly man’s day-dream in front of the
flower) exemplifies the “act of attention” via which “Woolf realized that the self
emerges” from the neuronal “pandemonium,” having chosen a “draft” or “manuscript”
which will “explain away” the confusion, “weave [it] into a neat narrative,” and give
the self a “feeling of unity” (Lehrer 179-81):
Whenever we pay attention to a specific stimulus—like a pear on a dinner table—we
increase the sensitivity of our neurons. These cells can now see what they would
otherwise ignore [...], as the lighthouse of attention selectively increases the
neurons it illuminates. Once these neurons become excited, they bind themselves
together into a temporary “coalition” which enters the stream of consciousness.
(Lehrer 183)

It is when we choose one script among this mess of drafts that the nothings we would
“otherwise ignore” are “illuminated” by “the lighthouse of [our] attention.” And every
now and then, the light of attention on the stimulus is so intense, the “feeling of unity
so strong—as in contemplative reminiscing, or poetic listening or composition—that
the self transforms ephemeral sensations into ‘a moment of being’” (Lehrer 182).
Trifles like a shoe-buckle, a dragon-fly, a fleeting kiss, a flower, a flock of words, a snail,
all become tell-tale in the literal sense: the alchemy of our encounter with them results
in the manuscript—the “fiction”—of who we are, in the narrative-driven self pressured
by excited and firing neurons to “invent itself” (Lehrer 174). “Just as a novelist creates
a narrative, a person creates a sense of being. The self is [...] a fiction created by the
brain in order to make sense of its own disunity. [...] if [the self] didn’t exist, then
nothing would exist. We would be a brain full of characters, hopelessly searching for an
author” (Lehrer 182). Modern neuroscience is thus coming to terms with a poignant
and beautiful paradox: it is upon a fiction—the “illusory self” (Lehrer 183), this “mental
confabulation” (Lehrer 180)—, upon these nothings which we voice in our tales, that
our reality depends, a paradox of which Woolf, the artist, was already aware a century
ago: “Although [Woolf] set out to [...] prove that we were nothing but a fleeting ‘wedge
of darkness’, she actually discovered the self’s stubborn reality [...]. Woolf wanted us to
see both sides of our being, how we are ‘a thing that you could ruffle with your breath;
and a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses’” (Lehrer 180-81).

As for the nightingale and mermaids overheard in a flower by the elderly man halfway
through “Kew Gardens,” the “stubborn reality” of their songs is revealed when one
realizes that they were actually in preparation from the very first sentence of the text,
silently rehearsed by the flowers, already emanating from their “throats”: “there rose
perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves [...] and
unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals [...] and from the red, blue or yellow
gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar” (AHH 84). Shooting from flowers’
tongues,” seen up-close from an inebriated bee’s eye-view, pistils spring indeed from
this many-hued choir like the inaugural “bars”—in the musical sense—of a ballad
unheard by the weary and insensitive listener. But should one, in an act of attention,
stop and turn a fresh ear to this riot of colours, the silence is illuminated and becomes
audible; this is the secret told to the attentive reader in the story’s final paragraph: “Voices, yes, voices, wordless voices, breaking the silence suddenly with, [...] in the voices of children, such freshness of surprise; breaking the silence? But there was no silence” (AHH 89). No silence indeed, but a modernist version of the music of the spheres sung in counterpoint by the city voices, a harmony of embedded urban structures in perpetual rotation: “all the time the motor omnibuses were turning their wheels and changing their gear; like a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another the city murmured” (AHH 89). A murmuring city which is itself a modernist prophecy of our contemporary “murmuring brain”: “[In 1981,] for the first time science had to confront the idea that consciousness emerged from the murmurings of the whole brain and not from just one of its innumerable parts” (Lehrer 179). The background noise of the urban-brain machinery thus turns into a harmony, and then breaks forth into song from its smallest to its vastest sphere—in the microcosm of a thrush’s impending musical whistle, in the soulful tune hummed in the sky by a distant plane: “the thrush chose to hop, like a mechanical bird, in the shadow of the flowers, [...] and in the drone of the aeroplane the voice of the summer sky murmured its fierce soul” (AHH 89). This closing paragraph is actually an amplified repeat of the text’s overture. In the overture, cupolas of greenery were played piano: “[the light] spread its illumination in the vast green spaces beneath the dome of the [...] leaves” (AHH 84). Whereas in the finale, the vast domes of the Gardens’ palm house, compared to a crowd of huge green umbrellas opening in unison in the sun, are played forte: “the glass roofs of the palm house shone as if a whole market full of shining green umbrellas had opened in the sun” (AHH 89). Then, in the ultimate couple of lines, all the voices of Kew Gardens and the city join in a final chord—an intense synaesthetic moment: “the city murmured; on the top of which the voices cried aloud and the petals of myriads of flowers flashed their colours into the air” (AHH 89).

Conclusion: the spiralling text

Truly enough, the snail—who has completely disappeared—seems to be excluded from this grand finale (has the thrush eaten him?); unless one listens to the piece even more attentively to perceive its subtlest choruses. Just like some paintings by the Delaunays, the story’s composition is spiral-shaped due to its regular return—albeit with a modulation each time—to the shimmering trio of colours red, blue and yellow, whose shades, tones and arrangements vary according to the light, with every surface alteration, at every shift in point of view, and at the least syntactic play: “red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour” (AHH 84); “the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat [...] rough with gold dust” (AHH 84); “such intensity of red, blue and yellow” (AHH 84); “[the] shell [...] stained red, blue and yellow” (AHH 85); “yellow and black, pink and snow white” (AHH 89); “the breadth of yellow [...] upon the grass”; “the yellow and green atmosphere, stain[ed] faintly with red and blue” (AHH 89). Furthermore, the narrative coils around its starting point—the oval flower-bed—with a slight displacement at each loop: to begin, “From the oval-shaped flower-bed” (AHH 84); then “past the flower-bed” (AHH 84, 85); and again “in the oval flower-bed” (AHH 85), “past the bed” (AHH 86), “opposite the oval-shaped flower-bed” (AHH 87), “on the edge of the flower-bed” (AHH 88), “past the flower bed” (AHH 89). Could the never-ending spiral of the text be that of the snail’s shell and body? As the story comes to a close, it seems as though the snail and the text have merged: this slow, dense text coils upon itself in the
compact short story format just like a snail’s flesh in its shell. Although there seems to
be nothing left of him in the last two pages of the narrative, the persevering snail has
become the entire short-story. If he is nowhere to be found (as a word), it is because he
is the short story’s body of words: “is not language indeed “corporeal,” a “subtle body”
(Ecrits 87)? The snail is all the story’s spectacularly divergent tales about nothings—
mountains made of nothings, the Sartrean dialectic of being and nothingness, the
return to the nothing of Freud’s death instinct, the Lacanian impossible real, the
“dying” of jouissance, the illusions of the brain—coiled up and woven together into a
“neat narrative” (Lehrer 179). But he is also the whole body of the story’s diverging and
contradictory interpretations, as many “neat narratives” produced by countless
readers and critics on whom it keeps impressing itself in their impossible quest for its
centre. As a metaphor for how our illusory selves “instinctively explain away our
divisions [and] innate contradictions” (Lehrer 179-80), Woolf’s tell-tale snail, and the
hyperbolic spiral of its shell, are this constricted and yet infinitely open text.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


1968.


NOTES

1. Even though this paper does not intend to recapitulate the huge body of critical literature inspired by this famous story, Lecercle’s recent interpretation is worth mentioning for it is one of a few to give pride of place to the Lilliputian character, stating indeed that “the hero of the short-story is the poet snail, with his ‘snail horn perception’” (Lecercle 183, my translation). Here, the critic is quoting one of Keats’s letters to the painter Haydon, in which the poet conveys “the innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at that trembling delicate and snail-horn perception of beauty.”

2. In Black Sun, Julia Kristeva, describing the melancholic person’s “loss of all interest in words” (3), shows that it is due to a fixation on a lost “unsignedifiable Thing” (51), which estranges the person from all named object of desire.

3. This was probably a matter of survival to an artist whose depressive episodes drained her of physical energy. Her salvation must have consisted in embodying herself in written language, as suggested in this 1919 entry of her Diary (the year when “Kew Gardens” was published), which expresses her vital need, after having been bed-ridden a fortnight, for daily contact with language as a material, with its textures, its wood-like grain, the smell of its components: “the habit of writing is good practice [...]. It loosens the ligaments [...]. I must [...] lay hands on words. Something loose knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything [...]. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk [...] and find that [it] had [...] refined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light [...] and yet steady, tranquil compounds with the aloofness of a work of art” (A Writer’s Diary, 13).

4. For an alternative listening of the text’s music, see Lecercle 180-81.

5. A conclusion reached by J. J. Lecercle as well, but via a different path taken through Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in The Visible and the Invisible (of which Lecercle considers Woolf’s snail to be a prophetic embodiment): “the snail’s flesh is also the flesh of the short story. Flesh turns into language” (Lecercle 187, my translation).

ABSTRACTS

Dans la nouvelle « Kew Gardens », des couples passent à proximité d’un parterre de fleurs où évolue un invisible escargot. Hantés par des fantômes qui n’ont rien de réel, ils semblent mis par la « pulsion de mort » (telle que Freud va la décrire), alors que l’insignifiant mollusque, se traînant au milieu de miettes de terre et de feuilles, se fait la synécdoque de tout un monde, voire l’allégorie prophétique de « l’être » sartrien. Cependant, des « voix sans mots » sortent de la bouche des promeneurs alors qu’ils font enfin l’expérience de la réalité du monde. Dans ces « moments of being », les mots confrontés au poids du Réel (au sens lacanien) ne sont rien, sont sans consistance. Est-ce là un aveu d’impuissance de la part de l’écrivain dont l’art n’a rien à dire ? Bien au contraire, en ne signifiant rien qu’eux-mêmes, les mots de « Kew Gardens » deviennent...
finalement réalité — réalité paradoxalement née de ce que les neurologues appellent les « fictions du cerveau » —, générant ainsi une lecture poétique du texte. Les mots s’enroulent dans la circularité de la nouvelle, telle la chair de l’escargot dans sa coquille ; et du lent enroulement de leur palette musicale s’élèvent les voix de ce qui jusque-là n’était rien.

AUTHORS

MATHILDE LA CASSAGNÈRE

Mathilde La Cassagnère is Associate Professor at the University of Savoie where she teaches British and American literature. She is a member of the SEAC (Société des Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines) and of the LLS Research group (Laboratoire Langues, Lettres et Sociétés) at the University of Savoie. Her PhD dissertation was entitled La Vision dans l’univers romanesque d’Iris Murdoch (Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1998) and she has authored articles on the 20th century novel, short story and poetry, on Poe, De Quincey and Shakespeare, published between 1997 and 2011 in journals and critical works including Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines, Les Annales de l’Université de Savoie, Etudes Lawrenciennes, and with Ellipses Publishing.
To summarize the diagnosis Hemingway offers in “Cat in the Rain,” it could be said that the problem is: what is identity? The answer is: it is inseparable from desire, and the tool needed to reach the answer is an understanding of our position as social animals. Unquestionably, the couple is undergoing a crisis, at least from the point of view of the wife. George, the husband, as far as he is concerned, has taken possession of the two pillows and the bed... It could then be said that identity is a question. It is the question we ask ourselves when precisely we understand that our usual sense of identity has only been an illusion.¹ People who are sure of their identity do not ask that type of questions, which does not mean that they have an identity... The husband doesn’t ask

1 Like a great majority of writers, Ernest Hemingway used literature to understand what it means to be a human being. His answer was both critical and disillusioned. Perhaps his main discovery was that we are part of time and that the states in which we live never last long. Hemingway was concerned with what could be called the fate of our desires. This article will study the mechanics of desire and identity in a very short story, “Cat in the Rain.” The approach will not be biographical, except for its starting point. The story was written when the writer was staying at the Hotel Splendid in Rapallo, Italy, and steadily becoming estranged from his wife Hadley. Strangely enough, the story portrays a most unsympathetic husband... In fact, Hemingway shows himself highly critical of male traditional complacency. As it is, the story can be read as a fundamental question: what are the implications of this crisis in which a woman starts questioning her desire and her identity. Hemingway will often return to these questions in his fiction. His interrogation will find its culmination with the description of the daring sexual and mental experiments initiated by Catherine Bourne in The Garden of Eden. It seems thus important to look closely at Hemingway’s diagnosis: in what way are desire and identity inextricably bound up with time?

I. Time and Identity
the question. Life for him just goes on. Judging from what the text says, for him, it is only a series of mechanical habits, reading during the day, presumably eating and sleeping. Should we add sex? That seems to be one of the problems facing the two spouses. The “wife,” as for her, suddenly becomes a “girl,” and she symbolically feels compelled to look at herself in the mirror on the dressing table. She cannot identify with what she sees. Hemingway knows that identity is a problem bound up with our imagination. It is an image, a mental fiction which we construct and into which we project ourselves. In the mirror, the girl/wife sees herself the way she would like to look in the future, that is to say with long hair. That image remains, however, extremely tenuous, as if she knew that she is paralysed by her present situation and that she will never be able to reach that state.

More specifically, identity is not something that is given once and for all, but it is an unending mental process. As the wife cannot find in herself (or in the mirror for that matter) an image to which she can identify, she mainly tries to construct some sort of self from a number of elements outside her self, first through and outside the window, and secondly through another self. The window is like a screen, or let us say a mental surface, upon which she projects her craving for meaning and identity. The result is a complex identification to a cat she sees outside in the garden trying to find shelter from the rain under a table. She decides that the cat is a “kitty making herself [so] compact,” even though it (she?) is quite a distance away and the light is very poor. The fantasy that the cat is female clearly possesses ambivalent implications: the wife is/has the cat. On the one hand, identity is defined as identification. She craves protection, being looked after, in other words she desires love, just like she imagines that that female cat needs love and recognition. On the other hand, it is also likely she would like to have a kitty, that is a baby, of her own, which would confer upon her a new, fulfilling role: being a mother.

The wife also tries to fill up the emptiness that lies at the core of her self by projecting an image upon another person, in her case the hotel owner. She supposes that he possesses a number of specific qualities. These qualities correspond to what she desires: protection, being acknowledged by that elderly man who possibly represents a father figure for her. It is as if she now was the baby. That obviously is only a one-way process. Readers guess that the man is perhaps a good owner, in that he tries to be helpful, but it is unlikely that he feels any sort of affective duty towards his customers.

Basically, the American woman is a prisoner of her mind which is made up of a blank where a self—or an image of a self—should be. Mentally, she is also the prisoner of the room, and of a meaningless marriage, which to her boils down to the same predicament. There is no escaping. Yet, what lies outside the window pane is a temptation. There is rain. Should readers conclude that she would like to escape her barren cohabitation with her husband in order to become part of some sort of fertility associated with water? There is also nature outside, or at least green things. Readers, however, know that she will never escape into nature. Human beings cannot do so, even though they sometimes dream that they can in order to break free from constraining social situations. Thirdly, outside, she can see a monument commemorating the dead of the Great War in the middle of the square, whereas, in the room, the woman is cut off from the cycle of life and death, death and life. She tries to leave the room at one point. Immediately an umbrella appears above her head. It is then clear that will never come into contact with the outside world.
II. Time and Society

6 One hypothesis is that nature is a temptation for the wife mainly because she has no place in society, or, at least, that is what she feels in her mind. It is a fact that objectively her social world has shrunk considerably. In the story, it seems to be limited to her husband only and, in addition, there does not seem to be any kind of real relationship between the two spouses. The situation may be explained by cultural reasons. Hemingway knows that individuals do not exist apart from history. The couple in the story is typical of a certain category of Americans in the aftermath of the Great War. We do not learn exactly why this particular couple is in Europe. People used to come over chiefly because life was cheaper than in the States, and also of course because of the availability of alcohol. Many young Americans also objected to the moral sanctimoniousness prevailing at home. All we know is that the wife thinks that at first their life had been “fun.” One may reasonably suppose that it was like being on holiday. The problem, for the wife at least, seems that being on holiday all year round is no longer “fun.” Her world is now limited to a hotel room and, outside the window, she has a glimpse of another society from which she is excluded: “Italians came from a long way off to look up at the war monument.”

7 Indirectly—as always—Hemingway uses his stories to raise essential issues about life and its meaning. Behind “Cat in the Rain,” it is possible to find an underlying question concerning what society is. Hemingway’s answer is always the same. At its most abstract level, it could be summarized in the following way. There are two points of view—society’s and mine—and they have basically nothing to do with one another. The one that matters is society’s, not my own. If I focus on my priorities, I become the victim of perversion, or even madness, or at the very least, neurasthenia, as seems to be the case of the American wife. Society, on the other hand, only wants one thing: its own reproduction. That means that individuals have one sole mission, as it were, that is procreation. Whether they derive some kind of personal pleasure, or “fun,” in the process of producing children is utterly irrelevant. In other words, deep inside their unconscious, individuals are required to accept two systems of differences. First, there should be a difference between generations. There are always three generations: I have a father, then there is my own generation, and then I will become a father myself (if I am a male). Secondly, there is the difference between sexes which is of course essential if our purpose is procreation.

8 It is as if the American couple in the story had been running away. In this respect, they are not much different from the expatriates we encounter in The Sun Also Rises dating from the same period. Jake Barnes is the one exception. He is fully part of his society, he works for a living, and the money he spends is the money he has earned. What is important is that his final decision is the answer Hemingway always gives in his books: accepting our limitations is a necessity. The problem is not, in Jake’s case, that he cannot procreate. That is a physical problem. The real problem is in his mind and it concerns his desire and his identity. He knows that he cannot be united—whatever that means—with Brett Ashley, and that losing oneself in pipedreams is futile. “Isn’t it pretty to think so?”

9 It would appear that in her own way the wife of “Cat in the Rain” feels the same thing. Her mind works in terms of figures of speech, and more especially in terms of
synecdoches and metonymies. Not surprisingly, she at first does not resort to metaphor, but to figures that stress connection and a link to established reality. She feels unhappy with her present condition and her meaningless exile and she knows that she would like to be once again part of mainstream American society. She expresses that desire through two figures. First, she thinks in terms of synecdoches when she says: “Don’t you think it would be a good idea if I let my hair grow out? [...] I get so tired of looking like a boy.” Presumably, as was the case with a number of American women after the war, she bobbed her hair in order to look like a flapper. As a consequence, she now deplores that sexual difference has been abolished. Secondly, she uses a metonymy: “And I want to eat at a table with my own silver.” The synecdoche and the metonymy follow each other in her mind. The mind is never still, or, if one prefers, desire is a process. Then, and only then, thanks to her hair and/or the silver, she would be part of a whole, that is to say society with its conventions.

III. Time and Desire

Society provides a necessary framework that makes certain types of desire possible. The American wife’s concern about hair and silver is specific of the context of American society (not Italian…) in the early 1920s. Implications would of course be entirely different today. (It was different during the war. In A Farewell to Arms, Henry is horrified when Catherine wishes to have her hair cut short). It should be clear that identity is produced by the imagination. It consists in images, and, more specifically, in object relationships. That is where the paradox lies: the subject is and is only the sum total of the objects upon which it invests its cathexes, and these mental cathexes are produced by figures of speech that consist in as many relationships between the subject and objects. Without these objects, identity does not exist. It is a blank, and that is what the wife has more or less consciously discovered. What precisely is then the evolution and the fate of her desire? If one assumes that Hemingway’s short story conveys a lesson, that lesson is as usual with him extremely pessimistic. Desire is inseparable from time. Time never stops. In other words, desires never last.

The crisis means that the wife has to reconstruct for herself the history of her relationship with George, which presumably corresponds to their travels across Europe. She suddenly becomes conscious of time. She is thus able to distinguish three successive stages. The first stage is what she calls by means of a kind of hypernym, “fun,” and it belongs to the past. It is in fact a mixture of past and present, or, to put it more precisely, a construction in the present of a lost state of being of which she was not conscious when she was experiencing it in the past. “Fun” as it was then implied no awareness of time, crisis or identity. It is up to readers to imagine what the word covers: love, sexual fulfillment, to which should probably also be added alcohol, dancing, friends, as well as discovering exotic countries like Italy.

She then moves on to a second stage which takes her to her present condition. With it, desire comes to the fore in the text, and the wife attempts to satisfy it by means of these two figures of speech, metonymy and synecdoche, silver and long hair. If she could take hold of these two parts, she would then possess (have and be) the whole she desires: identity, a role, social acceptance, a new image. To a certain extent, this desire in the present apparently also includes a past dimension. The cathexes the wife produces send her back into the past in an imaginary regression to the United States.
from where she comes. Such, however, is not the case of stage three which is a
projection into the future, into a future that the woman hopes will be immediate.\(^3\)

Stages one and two are seen as irretrievably lost. As a consequence, the wife now turns
to a new figure of speech. It is reasonable to assume that the cat is a metaphor. It is not
a particular cat she may have owned back at home. It thus does not refer to something
she knows or knew, but rather stands for something which she cannot represent. In its
way, it is also a kind of hypernym referring to what she unconsciously feels happiness
consists in, or, if one prefers, to a sort of fetish supposedly hiding that one thing which
would constitute total, unending happiness for her.\(^4\) The cat is her answer to the
emptiness she discovers in her life. Like probably all human beings, she literally abhors
a vacuum, and for her the cat will hopefully fill up that vacuum. It is in fact impossible
to assign a definite meaning to what it may represent: being pregnant? Being cared for
by someone? The answer is undecidable. She herself (admittedly speaking, not of the
cat, but of the way she imagines the hotel owner is looking at her) expresses her desire
by means of an oxymoron: feeling “very small and at the same time really important.”
The cat is the expression of that irrational desire which cannot be represented. In other
words, readers know that silver and long hair are possible objects for the wife. These
objects would make her again part of society. The cat, on the other hand, is a fantasy. It
is not part of reality.\(^7\)

Behind the text, Hemingway implies a general theory of desire which readers are
meant to discover if they wish to make sense of the story. The theory is made up of two
important notions. First, there is no sexual rapport.\(^8\) That is what the wife discovers.
That obviously does not mean that sexuality does not exist, though one may presumably ask oneself a few questions in the case of a husband who seems to prefer reading—and the two pillows—to his wife’s body. That may be irrelevant, but that at
least is what and only what the story shows about their relationship. In any case,
sexuality belongs to the realm of the physical, it is about bodies touching and
penetrating each other. Rapport, on the other hand, is about the mind. The point here
is that there is no relationship between the wife and her husband, that is to say, no
symmetry, no communication, let alone no communion. They clearly do not share
anything. With the advent of the crisis, the woman has now learnt that human beings
live alone with their desires and their limitations. Imagining that it might be otherwise
is but an illusion.

The second notion is also about an illusion. Desire has no object. More precisely, when
we believe that we know what the object of our desire consists in, that object is in fact a
temporary object. Love (if that is the word) with the husband did not last. While it
lasted, the wife was not conscious of time. She has now realized that being part of time
is inescapable and fundamentally, desire is inseparable from lack. It is a kind of belief
that takes us from one object to the next in a process that never stops, or, if it stops, it
is because we are dead or because we have become mad, a risk that threatens the
American wife.\(^9\) In fact, desire follows a series of displacements, husband, hair, silver,
cat, etc. What next? The story stops abruptly and the narrator does not tell us.

It would appear that, to a certain extent, the hotel owner understands the theory of
desire. He gives the American woman a cat. In the story, a cat thus refers to two
different realities. For the hotel owner, it is a real animal. It is any cat that is at hand,
and of course the cat the maid takes to the room is not the cat (the female kitty?) the
wife saw sheltering “herself” from the rain in the garden. The owner wants to please
his customers, or maybe he is just tired of a foreign guest who is always complaining. For the wife, on the other hand, the cat is a symbol, or, more accurately, a metaphor standing in for her desire of fulfillment and escape from time.10

IV. Time and the Story

In the story, Hemingway writes about identity. He also writes about time. He knows that the two notions cannot be separated. What is identity?21 Is it identity as something that remains identical in/about me? That is an illusion and “Cat in the Rain” makes it perfectly clear. Is it not then identity as identifying to something? The wife keeps trying to do so, but she is unable to find the definitive identity/identification. Yet, for Hemingway, that second conception is, in the end, the only valid conception of identity. It is an open-ended process, it is bound up with time, and it means that, in my mind, I am constantly becoming different from myself. It consists in using figures of speech as well as investing in objects such as hair, silver or a cat. What is important to remember is that no object will stop the process for long. An object is always an illusion that temporarily conceals a gap. At this juncture, it may seem legitimate to ask oneself whether tortoise-shell cats are barren.12 If that were the case, that undeniably would be Hemingway’s final touch of irony in this story about a woman in quest of fertility...

The link between time and identity will always remain one of the central preoccupations behind Hemingway’s stories and novels. The writer will also retain a deep sympathy for his characters, especially as regards the central question of trying to understand what it means to be a man or a woman.13 How does one define one’s desire? Is it just a matter of social conventions? Hemingway’s conclusion was always a pessimistic one. Humans are social animals. They cannot remain sane outside a constant interplay with society, which means that desire and identity eventually have to submit to time and our limitations. If that is something we refuse to recognize, the risks we run are very high. The wife in this story, for instance, is mildly hysterical. There is a distinct possibility that she might develop some kind of mental disorder like anorexia or bulimia. In what is probably Hemingway’s last and unfinished attempt at solving the problem, the wife in The Garden of Eden comes very close to madness. Admittedly, the novel is deeply different from “Cat in the Rain,” if only because its male protagonist is different. He works hard as a writer and strongly objects to prolonged idleness. Catherine Bourne, however, reveals a number of similarities with the woman in the short story. “Don’t we have wonderful simple fun?” (10) she asks her husband at the beginning, as they are enjoying themselves on the French Riviera. What is “fun”?

One way of reading the novel could consist in focusing on the way Catherine carries out her experiments in order to make that “fun” last as though life was possible outside time, as well as outside generational and sexual differences. Unfortunately, David and Catherine discover that “fun” will not last. Gardens of Eden are always lost sooner or later, and time and change always impose themselves upon humans. As David tries to come to terms with the image he has kept of his father, Catherine refuses to become pregnant. At bottom, it would seem that she tries to go as far as possible in order to escape the laws and customs of society. “When you start to live outside yourself, […] it’s all dangerous. Maybe I’d better go back into our world” (54). In other words, she seems to have understood that saying “I can do anything and anything and anything” (15) means that in the end one just does nothing. The wife in “Cat in the Rain” would also
like to go back. Maybe she will. Catherine Bourne cannot and will not. Where in time is she then? Where in time are we? Hemingway never stopped asking the question.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Bennett, Warren; “The Poor Kitty and the Padrone and the Tortoise-Shell Cat in ‘Cat in the Rain.’” *The Hemingway Review*, Fall 1988, 8/1, 26-36.


---. *The Sun Also Rises*. New York: Scribner’s, 1926.


NOTES

1. The problem was obviously important for Hemingway. In the same collection, he also raises it in “Out of Season,” a story which, as its title implies, is also about time. One day, the crisis comes. We understand that the way we are trying to live is “out of season,” and that, for instance, our couple is no longer a couple. More profoundly, time is always out of season, or out of joint. Sooner or later, we realize that that is what human existence consists in.

2. How does one read and interpret a text? One possibility is to look for questions raised directly or indirectly by the text. Such is the approach chosen here: what does “Cat in the Rain” tell us in its own words about time and identity? Another (and complementary) possibility is to find echoes of the text in other texts, whether literary or theoretical. Do the two texts tell the same “story” or, should we say, do they tackle the same problems? That will be the approach used in the footnotes. The footnotes are made to look at a problem from another angle or in another context. The question raised by this article deals with the relationships between time and identity in Hemingway’s short story. The footnotes suggest echoes in modern psychoanalysis, especially in Jacques Lacan’s reformulation of Sigmund Freud’s concepts. That is of course only one critical option. Other theoretical approaches could perfectly have been selected and compared to Hemingway’s fiction. The point made is that, if Lacan helps us understand Hemingway, Hemingway conversely helps us understand Lacan.

3. In the same way, modern anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss stipulate that only humans possess one universal law: the prohibition of incest. It means that you are supposed to marry and procreate outside your family or your clan. Sigmund Freud mutatis mutandis maintained the same principle when he developed his theory of Oedipus.

4. The problem concerns the way our minds work, especially when unconscious desire is concerned. In his Interpretation of Dreams, Sigmund Freud posits two operations, displacement and condensation. Jacques Lacan inscribes these operations in his own theory when he explains that they are in fact two figures of speech, metonymy and metaphor. (Cf. “L’Instance de la lettre dans l’inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud” / “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud,” in Écrits). It should be noted that Lacan uses Roman Jakobson’s simplified model in which metonymy covers both metonymy and synecdoche in “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances” (in Fundamentals of Language).

5. What the past and the future possibly represent for the wife who feels that she is unable to acquire any sort of identity in the present is undeniably one of the essential questions raised by the story, as Breuer 2007 shows.

6. In anthropology, a fetish is an object (a stone, a tree…) hiding a god who will one day reveal himself (that is, literally tear the veil). The term is also used by psychoanalysts after Freud’s famous 1927 article. It refers to an object (a boot, panties, hair…) supposedly concealing the mother’s phallus. A phallus of course has nothing to do with anatomy. If I am sure that my
mother (still) has her phallus, that signifies that sexual difference does not exist, that is to say that we can escape from time, and that infinite bliss is a possibility provided that the veil is torn. Of course, people who are not animists or fetishists know best. The veil will never be lifted. There is no veil. And readers of Hemingway's story, just like the hotel owner, know that a cat is a cat and only a cat.

7. There is no need to return to the old debate that consisted in asking how many cats there are in Hemingway's story, one or two? Lodge 1981, Carter 1982, Stubbs 1983 and Bennett 1988 have all written well-known essays on the subject. The question does not seem to be the right question. Even if we assume that the “cat in the rain” is real, its status in the story is unquestionably not that of a factual object. A more fruitful approach consists in considering that Hemingway’s text is the realm of epistemological uncertainty, as Barton argues very convincingly in his 1994 paper. His article should be read in conjunction with Kikuchi’s extremely perceptive 2008 analysis on the gaze and the perception of space in which he shows with great clarity that the first “cat” is at bottom not a stable object, but a fiction.

8. “Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel.” Throughout his life, Jacques Lacan kept returning to this formula. Readers interested in its implications and developments are advised to turn to the published version of his Seminar XX, Séminaire XX: “Encore,” (131-132). Lacan adds by way of explanation: “Le rapport sexuel est ce qui ne cesse pas de ne pas s’écrire.” (Sexual rapport is what never stops not writing itself.) There is little doubt that Ernest Hemingway would have heartily approved: he literally never stopped writing about sexual rapport in order to tell us that no such thing will ever take place. There should be no doubt in this respect that what Aristophanes says in Plato’s Symposium is of the order of the illusion: “Love thus seeks to refund our early estate, endeavoring to combine two into one and heal the human sore” (Loeb edition, 141.) We will never discover that other ourselves which Zeus is said to have cut into two halves. Lacan repeatedly warned us: one cannot fuse two into one.

9. Perhaps the clearest exposé of Lacan’s conception of desire as lack is to be found in “La Signification du phallus” / “The Signification of the Phallus” (in Écrits). No object—whether silver, long hair or cat, for instance—will ever fill in that lack which in itself is the trace of a primordial loss forever lost.

10. In this respect, Jacques Lacan offers his well-known trilogy need/demand/desire. (Demand is a poor English translation and the term request would be more accurate). See his Séminaire V: “Les Formations de l’inconscient.” The three notions are interrelated and part of a progression. Humans have needs. They need food and sex, for instance. Needs represent our animal part and they can be satisfied. When a baby wants milk, very quickly, however, that also points to a request/demand for love, which can also be temporarily satisfied by the mother. Adults demand love and recognition too, from a husband or a hotel owner for instance. That is no longer a physical need, but something which is of the order of the symbolic. The third stage is desire. Humans cannot not go one step further. They desire objects which will not bring satisfaction if and when they possess them, even though they believe that this or that object will fulfill their desire. Hemingway’s cat is an excellent example of an object of desire.

11. Ever since Aristotle’s Topics, identity has always been seen as of two types. Admittedly, the Greek philosopher’s concern was with logic. His concepts, however, can be adapted to psychological problems, especially for the purpose of this analysis of “Cat in the Rain.” He distinguished between numerical identity (a thing remains identical with itself although it changes through time: a = a) and qualitative identity (involving a relation between two different things which nonetheless share a number of similarities, such as belonging to the same set, for instance when I say that I am a German Jew in 1933, and/or that I belong to the fans of Cecilia Bartoli, etc. In this case, we are dealing with identity as identification: a = x, y, z...).
A quick search on the internet gives two contradictory answers... Tortoise-shell cats are fertile. Tortoise-shell cats are barren. A suggestion that these animals, which are a genetic aberration, are sterile is probably sufficient in itself for our purpose. The worm is in the fruit.

Ernest Hemingway’s attitude to gender has become today an established trend of research. Mark Spilka, Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes, as well as Debra A. Moddelmog have published three especially remarkable studies on the subject. They do not address “Cat in the Rain,” except in passing. By and large, it would appear that their analyses are probably too often overly optimistic. Neither “Cat in the Rain,” nor The Garden of Eden, to limit ourselves to texts discussed here, indicate any sort of final liberation from social conventions. Trying to interpret them points to a deep-seated ambivalence. On the one hand, Hemingway seems to be attracted by women (and men...) who experiment as far as gender positions are concerned. As Catherine puts it in The Garden of Eden, “What’s Normal? Who’s normal?” and “[it’s] not perversion, it’s variety.” (Quoted by Moddelmog from two passages in the unpublished manuscript, 78, 82). On the other hand, Hemingway always ends up stressing limitations imposed by life in society.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article est une étude détaillée des implications de la nouvelle d’Ernest Hemingway "Cat in the Rain" (publiée dans In Our Time, 1925), qui est vue comme une série d’interrogations philosophiques. Il est fait l’hypothèse que l’écrivain pose la question de l’être (ou identité), laquelle ne saurait être séparée du concept de désir, lui-même lié indissolublement au temps

AUTHORS

DANIEL THOMIÈRES

Daniel Thomières is professor of American literature at the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne (France). He is the editor of the journal Imaginaires. He wrote his doctorate thesis on the novels of John Cowper Powys and has published extensively on questions of hermeneutics and on American writers.
E.H. Young’s “The Stream,” *Good Housekeeping*, and the Cultivation of Active Readers

Stella Deen

1 In E.H. Young’s1 “The Stream” (1932), two office colleagues take a summer holiday together to the Welsh coast. Halfway through their two-week stay, the young men consider an expedition into the uncharted and difficult terrain of the mountains. Alfred, the older and more responsible of the two friends, discourages the plan: no track connects the two points of civilization indicated on the map. The younger of the two men, William, obstinately decides to set out, and Alfred feels bound to accompany him. Before the expedition is over, William has pushed Alfred over a precipice, causing both of his legs to break. The next day, William returns to the scene and stones his friend to death. The story concludes with a shepherd’s discovery of William’s own body floating in the stream.

2 “The Stream” was first published in the May 1932 British edition of *Good Housekeeping*. It is the only story Young published in *Good Housekeeping*, and in its subject matter, setting, and length, stands apart from her other five published short stories.2 Young was primarily known for her novels, and indeed, the *Good Housekeeping* editors presumed their readers’ familiarity with her most recently successful novel, *Miss Mole* (1930). In a parenthesis on the first double spread of the printed story, beneath the author’s name, readers were invited to link “The Stream” to the “Author of ‘Miss Mole’” (7). In the April issue as well, readers would have found an inset announcement of “‘The Stream,’ an astonishingly clever story appearing in next month’s ‘Good Housekeeping,’ by the author of ‘Miss Mole’[,] E.H. Young” (196).

3 Reading this long and enigmatic story in its original print context, one notices that it is neither about nor particularly for women. The subheading characterized the story simply as “Strange incidents on a lonely mountainside” (6). What might “The Stream” have meant to these initial readers, and how might the textual environment of the magazine have influenced their reading? In this essay, I will adapt Jerome McGann’s concept of the “bibliographic code” to describe *Good Housekeeping* readers’ active
reading strategies and likely interpretation of “The Stream.” I will suggest that to resolve enigmas in the story, these readers drew on a composite textual environment, one that allowed them to make connections between social and cultural debates over several months’ reading of the magazine.

4 Certainly “The Stream” demands interpretation. What drove William to this cruelty? Was it a sudden psychological breakdown? Was it an index of social ills? Did William undergo a mystical experience? Good Housekeeping readers of “The Stream” would have engaged with these questions. From its initial publication in 1922, the British Good Housekeeping addressed the modern woman comprehensively, considering her not only as a homemaker, mother, and wife, but as a student of history, philosophy, and culture. She was both the keeper of cultural heritage and an informed participant in contemporary society. Every issue of Good Housekeeping in this period contained literature, book reviews, profiles of interesting professional or accomplished men and women, and opinion and commentary about both topical and enduring questions: Does money contribute to happiness? What would God make of contemporary English life? Should women run for Parliament? The Good Housekeeping reader was kept in touch with all facets of contemporary life and was accustomed to debating important questions of the day.

5 “The Stream,” I will argue, should be set in dialogue with two such topical questions interrogating man’s nature and his postwar predicament. Additionally, we should understand the appeal of “The Stream” within postwar debates about the form, substance, and future of the modern short story. Amid concerns that the short story’s dependence on magazine publication doomed it to ephemerality, Young’s story proved repeatedly worthy of rereading. Indeed, “The Stream” was subsequently reprinted four times between 1933 and 1952, three times in anthologies and once in the UK’s Argosy, a digest of new and reprinted fiction. Each of these printings gave “The Stream” a distinct material and textual environment; each facilitated a different reading practice and fostered a new interpretation of the story. The broad appeal of “The Stream,” I will argue, arose from its ability to represent a human crisis on multiple levels and to represent it obliquely. “The Stream” represented this crisis as evidence both of man’s primitive instincts and of a dead end in modernity. As well, the oblique or ambiguous treatment of the crisis—the narrator declines to interpret the strange behavior of the main character—forced readers actively to determine its meaning, and ensured that the story would be read and reread.

I. Active Reading of the Modern Short Story

6 The short story’s perceived ephemerality was at the heart of modern debates about it. The proliferation of widely circulating magazines was held responsible for the rapid production of short stories. One observer noted:

There is the closest connexion between the development of this class of periodicals and the short story. They have acted and reacted upon one another, and each has been in turn cause and effect of the increase of the other. The more magazines the more need of stories to fill them, and the more stories the wider the demand for magazines. (Walker xv-xvi.)

7 In turn, most commentators linked this demand for short stories to their decline in quality and their fleeting impact on readers. Poet, critic, and anthologist Edward
O’Brien devoted an entire volume of social criticism to the problem of the American short story in the industrial age, *The Dance of the Machines*, published in 1929. “American magazines of large circulation have no creativeness,” he complained. “They go on with their set program and are perfectly certain that creativeness is a regrettable function” (128), for it is standardization they seek (130). “The American short story is designed to be absolutely interchangeable with its fellows” (123). At the root of this standardization is money: “The magazine of large circulation being designed to make money for men, its passion is to make as much money as possible as quickly as possible.” So “it imposes speed values upon the writers who contribute to its pages, corrupting them with money in order to gain its end” (134).

8 O’Brien saw that the anthology might defend against the ephemerality and the crass commercialization of the short story. Arguably, though, the “extraverted” short story’s own form, demanding that readers actively interpret its sparse “formulas,” carried its own imperative that stories be reread and find new audiences.

9 Early twentieth-century commentators on the modern short story praised it as an intensely flavored extract, and they linked this condensation to its powerful impact on readers. Elizabeth Bowen identified an objective, “extraverted” short story, which, “bare of analysis, sparse in emotional statement—is the formula for, never the transcript of, that amazement with which poetry deals” (11). And in his classic study of the modern short story, H.E. Bates emphasized moments seen telescopically, “brightly focused, unelaborated and unexplained,” such that each moment implies something it does not state” (22). Bates linked the terse, oblique approach of the short story to the postwar mood: writers did not feel the lyricism with which prewar writers had aligned their voices. They avoided both poetry and the more didactic form of the novel. Bates saw the heyday of the short story as fruit of the war. What the youngest generation had to say “was too much the sour fruit of frustration to find expression in lyricism, and yet was too urgent to be wrapped up in the complacent folds of ordinary prose” (123).

Postwar writers sought a form between lyric poetry and fictional prose: the short story (123).

10 The obliqueness, indirectness, and condensation of the short story form came to define its art. The succinct form of the modern short story also threw onto the reader a certain burden to interpret it. Bates continually returns to the role of the reader in shaping the modern short story, which he credits with “realism and poetry” (206). Whereas the nineteenth-century novelists continually underestimated the reader, or else compensated for the genuine limits of individual readers’ knowledge and experience of others (22-23), the modern reader needs only a few telling details to complete short story characters herself, and has thus “made a greater contribution than ever before” to the “independent existence” of modern short story characters (206). In Bates’s eyes, the short story simply didn’t work without that reader’s involvement:

The story now described less, but implied and suggested more; it stopped short, it rendered life obliquely, or it was merely episodic; so that the reader, if the value of the story was to be fully realized at all, had to supply the confirmation of his own experience, the fuller substance of the lightly defined emotion, and even the action between and after the episodes. (206-07)
Bates’s insightful study delineates a theory of reader-response criticism decades before theorists laid claim to this approach to reading and interpretation. This reliance on the reader worked advantageously against the ephemerality of “The Stream.”

II. “The Stream” and Readers’ Cultural Encyclopedia

One question for 1932 readers of “The Stream” was whether William is essentially malicious or especially vulnerable. Should he be understood as a gifted, and therefore tortured, man? In the course of the day, William “hears” the mountain stream speaking. At first when he listens it is “all perfectly clear [...] we have no business here [...] specially you, Alfred” (222). As they climb, he insists that they keep the stream between them. Soon, William decides, the stream, “full of anger and desire” (224), is “shouting messages with a great voice” (224). More and more intimidated by the stream, ruled by his conviction that he must at once interpret its message and escape its wrath, William begins to outstrip Alfred, occasionally turning on the latter a face “like that of some harried animal, an animal who might snarl and spring on his pursuer” (224). When Alfred becomes paralyzed by panic as he tries to negotiate a precipice, William only urges him on: “That stream [...] is after us, I tell you!” (225). As Alfred extends his hand for help, William strikes him; the fall breaks Alfred’s two legs, and William abandons him there. Making his way down to a cottage, William temporarily feels a “deep peace” because “he had escaped the stream and propitiated it with Alfred” (226). To the cottagers who give him breakfast William claims that he and his friend got separated, and later, beginning to worry that a crime will be pinned on him, he returns secretly to Alfred and stones him to death. Back at the cottage, William eventually dissolves in tears and asks for help finding Alfred. Shortly after leading the search party to Alfred’s body, William slinks away, and is later himself found dead in the stream.

The cultural “encyclopedia” for 1932 readers of “The Stream” would have included ongoing debates about the source of myth and about the primitive nature of man. Through William, “The Stream” evokes the human will to find the natural world intelligible. In 1871, anthropologist E.B. Tylor had described a special kind of “primitive mentality” at the origin of myth. Creating myths, primitive peoples attributed a spirit both to living things and to inanimate objects, attempting to establish a relationship with phenomena outside themselves and confusing their subjective experience with objective events (Nash 179).

Young also alludes to primitive rites of sacrifice, scapegoating, purification, and burial. As many modern writers did, Young drew on the reservoir of imagery and motifs of the ritual practices chronicled by Sir James Frazer in The Golden Bough and by diverse scholars working in archaic myth, including cultural anthropologists, folklorists, classical philologists, philosophers and psychologists. Folklorist Andrew Lang, classical scholar Jane Harrison, and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, among others, offered diverse responses to questions of how contemporary Britons might still bear the traces of the beliefs and instincts of their “savage” ancestors.

William’s apprehension of gods residing in natural forms and of their demands for a scapegoat emerges gradually and ultimately violently as irrational conviction. These creative patterns, whose effect is so destructive, are preceded by William’s half-
acknowledged desire for release from the confines of modern routine to enjoy an expansion of sensuous and aesthetic experience. A fastidious aesthete—though such cultural categories would not interest him—William is displeased by his colleague’s stout form and irritated by his very presence: Alfred’s cheerfulness is “obtrusive,” his politeness “heavy,” and his clothing thick (204). William’s sensitivity soon reveals itself as a more general distaste for human beings, those lumbering, leaden bodies lacking the ethereal fineness of the birds, sky, and distant hills. Early in the story, we learn that William “was inclined to shrink altogether from the human form because he had never seen one which did not slightly sicken him” (207). William’s distaste for human beings is counterbalanced by his attraction to the distant hills; the narrator several times underscores his “wandering eyes” (207). He imagines the hills “holding tarns, like secrets, in their great arms” (205), and as he sits on the beach, he is aware that “behind him were the hill and the dim shapes of distant ones fading into each other and the sky in perfect curves” (207).

16 Naturally susceptible to the “unknown, the unimaginable,” William puts up no cultural or conventional barrier to it, developing instead the spiritual and aesthetic faculties that take him away from human moral schema as he opens himself to the animated world of the hills and their creatures. From the beginning he senses their meaningful, but mysterious existence. As he watches gulls diminish in size as they fly into the hills, William says aloud, “those mountains put out their hands and draw them right in. It’s just as if they had a message to carry and they’re let out again when they’ve done their job” (209). Later William will hear such a message uttered to him, and he will carry out a task at the behest of the stream god.

17 Many Good Housekeeping readers would have found in William’s strange conversion the residue of primitive ritual practices. Frazer describes the propitiation of animals with whom the “savage” wishes to keep on good terms; purification festivals, for example, among the Cherokees, in which tribe members send their clothing down a stream, “by which means they supposed their impurities to be removed” (Frazer 296, quoting E.G. Squire); and, of course, among ancient peoples, the sacrifice of a scapegoat, or a mock king, to ensure the fertility of the land and the well-being of the entire tribe. But William’s convictions are strikingly detached from any holistic religious significance and do not inform him of a cyclical fertility process. His behavior speaks of the bleak, and finally destructive, detachment of modern man from his God.

18 William’s violent turn on his friend constitutes one of “The Stream”’s interpretive enigmas. Another is the very basis of the two men’s companionship. Their personal histories are conspicuously absent from the story. Readers do not learn their ages, although we may infer that the men’s youth means they are not veterans of the First World War. We glimpse only something of the dynamics that brought them together first in the office environment and then for the holiday. While this reticence is one way that the modern short story demarcates its different methods from those of the novel, it throws a considerable weight of significance onto the two men’s relationship. Their contrasting temperaments, the symbiotic nature of their friendship, and the shifting valence of their strengths and weaknesses become the focus of readers’ interpretations. The pragmatic, reliable Alfred is filled with plans for “self-improvement”: in his pocket he always carries “a small edition of a great mind from which he hoped to suck wisdom” (208). Upon their arrival at the lodging, Alfred fusses over where to put his toothbrush, while William imagines how rain would change the view of sea and hill
from the rented room. In contrast to Alfred’s industry, William enjoys idleness; he lies on the beach, staring inland, and responding with arrogance to the pleasure of the sun, wind and sand, for it seems to him that “this life of indolence and keen sensuousness was rightly, and always had been, his” (208). His imagination is active; even when they take out a map, William’s eyes enrich the dullness of it (211).

Their skeletal personal history also emphasizes the archetypal opposition of the two men’s temperaments on holiday. They might be seen as nature vs. culture, egoist vs. altruist, Dionysian vs. Apollonian. The qualities that could complement one another under duress to ensure both men’s survival instead work against them. Alfred can rely less and less on the wisdom of his “small editions”; but he also does not benefit from William’s intuitive apprehension that the mountain and stream are alive; to Alfred, William is just a “funny” fellow, even when his antagonism begins to manifest itself.

From the outset, “The Stream” presents the two men’s companionship as a transaction in which each stands to gain something of value. William finds “oppressive” the “sturdy bulk of Alfred Sparkes,” but he tolerates it because of the “sense of security” furnished by Alfred’s “reassuring,” “sturdy honesty of [...] character” (204): “it was more than worth William’s while to put up with what he disliked for the sake of what he gained” (204-05). For his part, Alfred likes to feel that he is trusted and relied on (204). Yet the divergent temperaments of the two men make them an odd couple even before they face any hardship.

If the contrast in the two men’s temperaments suggests the arrangement by which each gets along in the office, it simultaneously points to the lack of visible support for either man outside the symbiotic office bond. This reticence represents a lacuna for the reader to fill with speculation. What circumstances might account for the two men’s friendship of convenience?

Good Housekeeping readers would certainly have noted the absence of young women from the story. Mrs. Macintyre, who lodges the two men on holiday, has none of the influence of a wife or mother. As well, the companionship of the two men is in one sense based on their common exclusion from the society of women. Alfred longs for “feminine society,” but “has not passed the giggling stage in such affairs,” while William is afraid of girls: “He thought that they laughed at him and he disliked the clothes, whether they were gay or dowdy, and the manners, whether frivolous or severe, of the only types he knew” (208). It is as if the two men have missed some stage in their maturation toward adulthood.

III. The Composite Bibliographic Code for “The Stream”

To understand what British Good Housekeeping readers would have made of the two men’s peculiar solitude à deux, we can consider the “bibliographic code” of the magazine, which would have furnished a socio-economic context for the two men’s plight. Jerome McGann’s “bibliographic code” refers to the “symbolic and signifying dimensions of the physical medium through which (or rather as which) the linguistic text is embodied” (56). George Bornstein suggests that we extend this understanding of the bibliographic code to include not only semantic features such as cover design, illustrations, and page layout, but also the entire contents of the periodical. In this essay, I extend this usage to include the more global bibliographic code, the composite effect of reading many months of Good Housekeeping. For Good Housekeeping shaped the
modern woman and her world in contemporary social and cultural terms. Throughout the day she negotiates a series of domestic, social, economic, cultural, and aesthetic transactions. Virtually all of the ads and articles in *Good Housekeeping* were addressed to the modern woman, often in her more specific guises of wife, mother, worker, shopper, cook, house cleaner, household manager, and decision maker. She is offered healthful and moneysaving recipes, informed of best household practices, advised about new appliances, and educated in her taste. Her opinions are solicited, and she is credited with the desire continually to educate herself, invited implicitly to enter into debate about current political, cultural, philosophical, economic, and social affairs. Ads in each issue supplement this impression. They anticipate and address women’s worries, needs, and desires. They flatter her and keep alive her fantasies of youth, beauty, and freedom. They confirm her British identity and loyalty to British industry. Either as an object or a subject of knowledge, the modern woman reader of *Good Housekeeping* is at the center of the universe.

Set within this busy, confident, and forward-looking modern woman’s world, the two men in “The Stream” would be glaringly other. They would be understood not just as literally adrift, as they lose themselves on the mountain, but socially, economically, and spiritually so. The female reader of *Good Housekeeping*, with such robust support, so much documentation of her capacity to cope with the many faces of modernity, so many articles touting her achievements, could not help but make the distinction between her life and those of Alfred and William.

Two articles appearing in the months before “The Stream” illuminate the outlook of British young men in 1932; and they might be said to supply the social and cultural milieu in which the action of “The Stream” takes place but that the reader must infer. In “A Study in Black” (March 1932), Beverley Nichols justifies his pessimism. After reviewing the “completely and finally collapsed” system of capitalism, Nicholls considers the likelihood of another war, one that “might quite possibly put an end to all life, human and animal, on the entire planet” (quoted in Braithwaite 142). Nicholls ultimately views both capitalism and world war in the context of savage nature; he sees the “‘red teeth of Neanderthal Man’ gleaming behind the polite mask of the twentieth century gentleman” (145), even in himself. “I believe that I myself am as kind and as generous as the average man,” he writes. “Yet, I have horrible instincts. Strange, latent impulses, deep down in me, are frightening. I am still half ape. So are you” (145).

Only one month earlier, Godfrey Winn’s “Why Are We Failing the Dead?” told of the “despairing” “cry” of the “younger generation—of those who were children in the days of the ‘War to end War’ (133):

Ten years ago [writes Winn], five even, I used to remind myself with a sense of tingling pride that here was my opportunity to prove to the dead and those survivors of the war who were left by it either physically maimed or mentally crippled, that the sacrifice that they had made on our behalf had not been made in vain. Together with the rest of my generation, I would dedicate myself to reconstruction. (133)

He blames their failure to undertake that reconstruction on the Great Slump, on the “present economic situation that stultifies industry” (133-34) and denies young men the positions of “trust and responsibility” they would have gained before the war (134). Their parental instinct, he believes, is “suppressed and bottled up, hidden away in the deep recesses of our heart” (134), and if they are not unemployed they are “sitting on an office stool, earning a pittance, out of sympathy with their work, the slaves of a
routine that is slowly but surely sapping their vitality and destroying their initiative” (134).

28 How might testaments such as Nichols’s and Winn’s have influenced Good Housekeeping readers of “The Stream”? Especially in consideration of “The Stream”’s narrator’s failure to explain or analyze William’s disintegration, the unusually frank attestations of Nichols and Winn would have forcefully articulated for readers of “The Stream” the bleak outlook of many young men in 1932. Even though Nicholls’s and Winn’s commentaries did not appear in the same issue as “The Stream,” these biographical statements enter naturally into dialogue with Young’s fiction. They speak of the primitive patterns guiding modern man’s behavior, and of the brutal historical circumstances that in 1932 gave these patterns new prominence.

29 This essay has not exhausted potential readings of “The Stream.” I have not, for example, done justice to its richly textured design. In particular, new readers of “The Stream” might revisit my contention that, characteristic of an “extraverted” short story, the narrator of “The Stream” offers no explanation for William’s perceptions and actions. I have described the narrator’s reticent stance, arguing that she fosters critical readers who must probe William’s most banal utterances, his most innocuous gestures. New readers of “The Stream” might deconstruct such a claim, asking what we should make of the narrator’s lavish characterizations of the landscape, her leisurely delineation of hills, heather, rocks, scree, stream, and sky. Indeed, in writing about “The Stream,” I hope to extend to new readers the rewarding experience of reading E.H. Young’s story, even as it generated prolific reading in the decades following its initial appearance in Good Housekeeping.

30 I have also explored the experience of reading “The Stream” in 1932, in Good Housekeeping. Digital archives such as the Modernist Journals Project have given new life to many early twentieth-century periodicals, enabling us to restore much of the aura of a text and opening productive lines of inquiry into the experience of its initial readers. I have argued that the miscellaneous contents of Good Housekeeping cultivated the literacy of its readers, encouraging them to treat the entire contents of the magazine—even of multiple issues of the magazine—as a set of intertexts for “The Stream.” Loyal readers of Good Housekeeping would have drawn freely on both the material and intellectual data of Good Housekeeping to fill in lacunae in the biographies of Alfred and William in much the way they would draw on their lived experience of 1932 Britain. Returning to these periodicals helps us recover one such multi-faceted experience.

31 My work also contributes to debates about the relation between literary form and textual endurance, a question that preoccupied early twentieth-century writers and critics, and that continues to elicit path-breaking responses today. I demonstrate a particular nexus between form, reader, and the ability of a text to establish its fitness for new print contexts. The modern, “extraverted” short story did not merely help to establish the short story as an art form; in addition, the sparse design it imposed on experience created a significant role for the reader to create meaning, prompting engagement with the issues it raised and ensuring its own survival within the collective memory of generations of readers.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. The eleven novels of English novelist Emily Hilda Young (1880-1947) garnered both popular
   and critical success in her day.
2. One of these, “The Grey Mare” was broadcast as a “Mid-Morning Story” on the BBC in 1948, but
   may not have appeared in print.
3. In chronological order, these republications are: Head, Alice M., ed. Twelve Best Stories From
   Putnam’s Sons, 1954.
4. For example, the Good Housekeeping text of “The Stream” was augmented with illustrations,
   captions, and editorial subheadings. Good Housekeeping readers also viewed ads, and had access to
   all of the articles and other features in the May issue. All of these semantic elements would have
   borne on readers’ interpretation of “The Stream.”
6. In Interpretation and Overinterpretation, Umberto Eco describes the importance of the cultural
   “encyclopedia” that each reader draws on to make sense of a text:
   I mean by social treasury not only a given language as a set of grammatical rules, but also the
   whole encyclopedia that the performances of that language have implemented, namely the
   cultural conventions that that language has produced and the very history of the previous
   interpretations of many texts, comprehending the text that the reader is in the course of
   reading. (67-68)
7. For a good overview of the multi-disciplinary field of analysts, see Nash.
8. Nicholls may have read H.G. Wells’s “The Grisly Folk” (1921), in which Wells vividly describes
   the appearance and behavior of Neanderthals: “They walked or shambled along with a peculiar
   slouch, they could not turn their heads up to the sky, and their teeth were very different from
   those of true men.” Wells speculates that “when his sons grew big enough to annoy him, the
   grisly man killed them or drove them off. If he killed them he may have eaten them. If they
   escaped him they may have returned to kill him.”
9. Working with Walter Benjamin’s contention that the aura of a work of art arises from its
   presence in time and space, George Bornstein argues that the aura of a text emerges in part from
   its material features. (7)
10. In a recent compelling contribution, Wai Chee Dimock’s theory of resonance posits textual
    endurance as a function of background noise that facilitates (or impedes) our ability to hear a
    given text. She draws on recent scientific studies “about the beneficial effects of random noise on
    the detectability of sounds,” showing how “a weak signal [may be] boosted by background noise
    and become [...] newly and complexly audible” (1063). The literary qualities of the text are
    likewise not fixed or static, but are those that resonate for readers past, present, and future.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article fait découvrir aux lecteurs « The Stream » d’E.H. Young, paru en 1932, et examine son
intérêt pour des lecteurs du début du vingtième siècle. « The Stream » a été republié quatre fois
entre 1932 et 1954, et le choix d’inclure cette nouvelle à plusieurs reprises dans des anthologies
vient de l’engagement des lecteurs de l’époque dans l’interprétation de son intrigue sinistre, dans laquelle un jeune homme tue son compagnon de randonnée. L’auteur de l’article puise dans les théories sur la forme de la nouvelle du début du XXème siècle et dans le contenu de Good Housekeeping pour recréer la rencontre entre le lecteur (la lectrice) de Good Housekeeping de 1932 et «The Stream ». Cette lectrice aurait puisé, dans l’intégralité du contenu du magazine et même dans ses multiples numéros, un ensemble d’intertextes pour mettre en correspondance « The Stream » et les questions d’actualité qui examinaient la nature humaine et sa situation délicate d’après-guerre. En outre, ce qu’Elizabeth Bowen appelait la forme « extravertie » de la nouvelle moderne, ainsi que la carence de « message émotionnel », obligeaient les lecteurs de « The Stream » à décider activement de sa signification et assuraient que la nouvelle serait lue et relue.

AUTHORS

STELLA DEEN

Stella Deen is Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York, New Paltz, where she teaches courses in British literature, critical theory, and women’s literature. She has published work on twentieth-century British writers E.H. Young, Elizabeth Bowen, and Enid Bagnold. Her interest in the dialogic exchanges of literary texts assigned to diverse “brows” have led to two current research projects: a study of critic and short story anthologist Edward O’Brien and an investigation into the role played by the British Good Housekeeping in cultivating its readers’ literary taste.
The Power of Illusion and the Illusion of Power in Mary Orr’s “The Wisdom of Eve” and Mankiewicz’s All About Eve

Alice Clark-Wehinger

1 The title of Mary Orr’s short story, “The Wisdom of Eve,” calls to mind the biblical temptress. Narrative voice corroborates this from the outset by evoking Eve’s “snaky activities in a once-peaceful garden” (284). The story focuses on two actresses: Eve Harrington and Margola Cranston. Eve is portrayed as the carbon copy of the famous actress Margola, who resembles the “childish figure of a Botticelli angel” (285). Mankiewicz’s film, All About Eve, was taken directly from the short story, which appeared in Cosmopolitan magazine in May 1946. Mankiewicz’s tenuous financial circumstances in 1949 brought him to produce a radio drama from the hypotext for NBC. This radio diffusion is what probably caught the attention of Fox Studios. It later became a film in 1950. As Stephanie Harrison has pointed out in Adaptations from Short Story to Big Screen: “He saw it as the backbone for the show-business film he wanted to write and direct” (280). The short story, “The Wisdom of Eve,” can be summed up in three acts; Act I: Eve Harrington arrives on Broadway, unknown to the world of theatre, and wins over even the most hard-core New York playwrights and movie producers. She insinuates herself into the good graces of the wife of Lloyd Richards, a celebrity playwright. She goes on to capture the attention of Mrs. Richards’ best friend, Margola Cranston, a Broadway star, studies her on the sly, and finally supplants her rival by stealing her leading role. Act II: A press release reveals Eve’s sordid past, her bogus identity and she is cast out of Broadway’s paradise. Act III: Her fall proves to be a trick perspective; Eve, by an ultimate act of duplicity, rises to fame once again when Lloyd Richards succumbs to her charm, divorces his wife and marries Eve who becomes a Broadway star overnight.

2 Both character and narrative voice in the film mirror the theme of deceit, which orchestrates the plot in the short story. Indeed, the short story functions like a
miniature script, from which Mankiewicz extracts the fundamental gist of his film, which relates the rise and fall of an unknown woman to celebrity status in Hollywood. In both the short story and the film, focalization is on the figure of an actress. In the filmic adaptation of the short story, secrets about the actress’s enigmatic character and life are divulged through the polyphonic voice of friends and enemies in a long flashback. The narrative strategy adopted by Mary Orr also uses multiple narrators to tell the story of Eve’s rise to fame. The story opens with the main, semi-anonymous narrator, Mrs. Richards, telling the story about Eve. Mrs. Richards’ story is the framing narrative and encases Margola’s embedded story about Eve which gives additional inside information about how Eve Harrington became a star overnight. When Margola Cranston’s story ends, the main narrator, Mrs. Richards takes over the narration again and discloses the fact that she is married to Lloyd Richards, the playwright who has contributed to making Margola Cranston famous. It is not until the end that the reader discovers Eve used Mrs. Richards to gain access to her husband. Eve has not only become famous; she is going to marry the playwright, Lloyd Richards. This narrative twist in the short story reveals the true identity of the narrator who is the former Mrs. Richards, on her way to get a divorce in Reno. In Mary Orr’s story, the omniscient narrator (Mrs. Richards) already knows All About Eve, although she feigns ignorance and withholds information until the end. In this way, she functions as a lure, or mirror representation of Eve who embodies a figure of subterfuge. Mankiewicz’s cinematic adaptation of Orr’s short story fully exploits the trope of deceit as well, but it is incarnated wholly in the figure of the actress. All three actresses in the filmic version are mirror images of each other and function as a trope to dramatize the power of illusion. In All About Eve, Anne Baxter interprets the role of Eve Harrington who is a master manipulator of appearances; Bette Davis plays the part of Margo Channing, Eve’s rival, and young Phoebe (Barbara Bates), plays a bit part, as the treacherous doppelgänger, who will supplant Eve.

In this paper, I will argue that the paradigm of theatricality in Mankiewicz’s film, taken from Mary Orr’s short story, focuses on the stage as a means of exploring the art of illusion on several levels, beginning with questions concerning the art of performance. The performance act is inextricably linked to deception in the short story and this clearly colored the filmic adaptation as well. This commentary on the movie industry becomes metatextual in the film. Eve and Margo exemplify performers who are so at ease in the art of make-believe that they naturally impose a script on the world, regardless of its authenticity. Deceit is thus a core theme in All About Eve. We can identify several very brief, but pertinent intersemiotic allusions to the stage as a locus of deception embedded within Mankiewicz’s film. These intersemiotic references to acting and to the stage (paintings, posters and playbills) are of specific interest in my paper. They link the Broadway actress to a predatory killer, and in so doing they present the stage as a displacement for the Machiavellian political arena. These images disclose a seminal motif at the core of the film, suggesting that the power to destroy is as essential to an actress’s career as her potential to dissemble. The message resonates with violence, and thus calls for a deeper socio-political interpretation of the film. Indeed, the film questions the authenticity of a cultural referent separating man from beast. “What are the differences between theatre and civilization?” jests Margo’s boyfriend, Bill, the film director. As we shall see, All About Eve, a dialogic film, inquires into and offers responses to works ranging from Shakespeare, to Machiavelli and Freud. Bill’s quip suggests that both theatre and civilization constitute a “rat race” from which
there is no escape. From this perspective, the theatrical arena can be transposed onto a political arena where language, the locus of deception, embodies a lethal weapon without which one cannot survive. In both models, the dramatic and the political, power is derived from the art of making people believe in the truth of appearances, no matter how far removed they are from reality. And in this sense, power is illusion. Finally, this interpretation must be reframed to account for the limitations of Machiavellian opportunism and the concept of the power of appearances. Indeed, the climax of the film offers a strong suggestion that the power of illusion is merely a trick perspective, which can shift at any moment, opening up on its inverted perspective: the illusion of power.

*All About Eve* begins as the camera pans in on an elderly gentleman quoting Shakespeare at the Sarah Siddons Award Ceremony. He hands the young actress, Eve Harrington, a trophy for her “loyalty and devotion” to theatre. This scene is a follow up to everything that happened before Eve became a star. The frame functions as a means of introducing the main story, and is linked to a set of smaller framed narratives forming one long flashback sequence. Mankiewicz uses different narrative viewpoints in each flashback: DeWitt, the “manure-slinging” theatre critic; Margo, the ageing Broadway star and Karen, Margo’s best friend. In the opening scene of the film, a freeze frame stops on Eve holding the trophy, indicating to the viewer that a series of analeptic sequences are about to follow. Then Karen’s off voice can be heard and the story about how Eve rose to fame begins. The camera zooms in on Eve in a shabby raincoat waiting to catch a glimpse of Margo outside the theatre. By coincidence, she meets Karen who proposes to escort her personally to Margo’s dressing room. This chance encounter turns into a veritable performance where Eve captivates her first Broadway audience (Margo, Karen, Lloyd and Bill) by revealing intimate biographical elements about her life, and her love of theatre. This highly theatrical scene has a powerful performative function since Eve relates her life story as if she were on stage. This is just one of the numerous scenes where the trope of theatre has a dialogic function. It carries dramatic implications linked to the writings of Shakespeare—notably the concept that “All the World’s a Stage.” The trope of theatre colors the socio-political subtext of the film as well, since it alludes to the art of deception as an empowering tool in the professional arena. Mankiewicz’s cinematic technique intentionally blurs these two functions. As the film progresses they become so mutually compatible that the frontiers separating the life of the stage and the staging of life break down entirely. Eve’s performance in Margo’s dressing room illustrates the imbricated nature of theatre and life. Her life story contains little or no truth, and yet she vouches for the veracity of the narrative, delivering it with such emphasis that her life story has precisely the same effect as a script, so brilliantly staged that it provokes a dramatic effect on her audience. Indeed, Eve admits that as a child the frontier between illusion and reality did not really exist: “I couldn’t tell the difference between make-believe and the real world. I used to make believe as a child, acted out all kinds of things: unreal more real than real.” Her story continues, focusing on the pathos of her adult life, and the loss of her husband Eddy, who was in the Air Force: “They forwarded a telegram to say that Eddy […] was not coming at all […] Eddy was dead.” She adds: “If I hadn’t gone to see Margo Channing’s performances in San Francisco I would have had nowhere to go.” Mankiewicz takes this from Orr’s short story where Margola relates an analeptic scene of Eve’s life in indirect discourse:
“She said that [...] she had married a young American flier and had been living in San Francisco because he had gone to the Pacific from there. I asked her how she got along and she said that at first she had had her husband’s allotment, but then he had been killed over Bougainville and since then she had lived very meagerly on his insurance.” (288)

Dewitt’s investigation into Eve’s personal life later reveals that the war bride scenario she related in Margo’s dressing room was bogus. She staged it in order to win over her audience’s empathy. Like many scenes in the film, this particular one resonates with a sense of hypotyposis (Gk. hypotypoein, to sketch and typos impression, form). When the fictional representation of reality is so convincing that it outdoes the reality it is supposed to be representing, it can be referred to as hypotyposis (vivid, emotional word-picturing of scenes and events). In the short story, Margola (like Dewitt) comes to realize that Eve has conned her entourage into believing her tragic life story: “she had played a role in real life so convincingly that we had both been taken completely for a ride” (293). In the filmic adaptation, Eve’s carefully improvised piece of prevarication takes place in the dressing room and is an example of hypotyposis. Disregarding the improbability of a penniless, young woman coming to the same performance, six days a week, for months on end, Lloyd and the whole slew of Broadway actors are caught in the suspension of disbelief when Eve tells her pathetic tale: “Eddy wasn’t coming home at all. Eddy was dead.” She explains that afterwards, the only thing that counted in life was seeing Margo Channing’s performances in San Francisco. Eve’s performance is well received by the credulous Broadway clan and Margo, the star, actually wipes away a tear. Mankiewicz borrowed this scene from Orr where Margola recounts the story Eve told her about how she purportedly saw all of the actress’s [Margola’s] shows:

“She said she had first seen me [Margola] in San Francisco when I toured in Have a Heart. [...] She said she had followed me to Los Angeles and eventually come on to New York.” (288)

Mankiewicz’s adaptation focuses on Eve’s mythomania. He makes this one of the film’s core themes and portrays the actress as a potentially empty trope. In All About Eve, the actress is under the unspoken obligation of renouncing her identity and her personal life in exchange for the fictional representations of the stage. The metatheatrical representation of Eve’s life story in Margo’s dressing room has become a model for films about theatre. Vincent Amiel, in Joseph Mankiewicz et son double has noted:

Eve tells the story of her youth and uses it as a scenic device which gives the impression of an actress speaking to her audience; the latter is grouped together in a reverse angle shot, whereas she is alone facing them, and the cuts are done in such a way as to accentuate the impression we have of the scene as an instance of improvisational theatre. A character [Eve] comes into the scenic space by happenchance; as a result, the flow of the central narrative is interrupted much like a theatrical representation [...] . The device is all the more effective since the young woman’s story is pure confabulation, as we will learn much later. In this way, her performativity appears, in retrospect, as a sign of mythomania. (62-63)

Little by little, it becomes clear that the account of Eve’s life story was an elaborate fantasy which allowed her to play the role of a modest ingénue so as to insinuate herself into the good graces of Margo Channing and gain a footing in Broadway. In this way, her improvisation is a catalyst for transforming her dream of becoming a star into reality, but the nature of this reality is double, as we can see from the way Mankiewicz dramatizes the theatricalisation of private space. Indeed, according to Amiel,
Mankiewicz’s protagonists inhabit a dual space, symbolically fusing theatre with scenes from domestic, intimate and professional life:

All of the situations in which he places his actors are binary [...]. Thus the dramatic function of domestic space is reinforced by the inner frame of a micro scene with its stage props: from the kitchen, the living room, the dressing room [...]. Each one of the people is alternately actor, then spectator. In showing that they can move from one realm to the other, they prove, to a certain extent, that they can master the dramatic space of acting. (61-62)

In essence, Mankiewicz’s cinematic technique follows closely on the heels of Shakespearean theatre. Both are imbued with a sense of duality and metatheatricality, suggesting that life is but a metaphorical stage. The veracity of the tale is insignificant, provided one’s performance excites the imagination. In All About Eve, this duality transfers over to character in the form of an "actress-woman dichotomy," setting friends, family and lovers against the harsh demands of professional life. Margo starts her career at age four as a naked fairy in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and in her spinster years she becomes notorious for playing a role even after she has completed her performance on stage. When friends come over to her dinner party they note that the atmosphere is “Macbethish.” Bill suggests that Margo must maintain a cutting sense of wit in order to survive on Broadway:

Darling, there are certain characteristics for which you are famous onstage and off [...] They’re part of your equipment for getting along in what is laughingly called our environment. You have to keep your teeth sharp, alright.

Karen, on the other hand, has nothing but antipathy for her friend’s staginess: “Stop treating your guests as your supporting cast!” she yelps. “It’s about time Margo realized that what’s attractive onstage need not be attractive off.” Orr’s actresses display a similar penchant for metatheatricality, mixing life and stage. Margola reproaches Mrs. Richards’ interrupting her story about Eve, as if it were a script: “Don’t jump cues,” she snaps. Mrs Richards complains: “And for my impatience, I had to wait until she had drawn three or four puffs on her cigarette” (289). In the film, the binary structure of the actress-woman evolves into a predator-actress dichotomy and functions as a trope for the uncivilized world of theatre. This trope extends into the political sphere suggesting that Broadway, peopled with ambitious stars, is emblematic of a food chain where the most powerful devour the feeblest. Indeed, Mankiewicz takes a Darwinian approach to filming the power struggle on Broadway by portraying his actresses as crafty beasts and Machiavellian types. Mankiewicz’s ambitious stars are often incarnated by feline creatures with an incisive mind and bite. Margo, for instance, is metonymically associated with animals that have sharp teeth. When she begins to demonstrate a “maternal instinct” for her young fan, she does the improbable —taking Eve under her wings and acting as her mentor. Fearful for the “lost lamb in the jungle,” she lets Eve move into her flat: she lends her clothes, and allows her to become her private secretary. Eve insinuates herself into Margo’s private and cultural sphere, all the while studying her on the sly. In no time, the modest ingénue has become irreplaceable.

The figure of the Machiavellian actress-woman was directly inspired by Eve in Orr’s short story where Margola tells Mrs. Richards how Eve became her rival, studying her speech and behavior in order to become her understudy and supplant her one day.

“So I asked her if she’d like to work for me [...] Well, I gave the wretched girl clothes to wear. I gave her twenty-five dollars a week. All she had to do was tend to my
correspondence, send out pictures, and so forth. [...] Then after a month or so she began to annoy me.”

“How?” I couldn’t help asking.

“By staring at me. She stared at me all the time. I would turn around suddenly and catch her eyes on me. It gave me the creeps. Finally, I couldn’t stand it any longer. I suddenly realized that she was studying me, imitating my gestures, my ways of speech, almost doing the same things.” (289)

This inversion of roles, which is about to take place, evokes a master-servant paradigm commonly used in theatre. In the same way that Oliver Goldsmith’s Kate Hardcastle “stoops to conquer” Charles Marlow by posing as a barmaid, Eve stoops to vanquish her rival, Margo. The didactic message we can discern in Mankiewicz’s film is that Eve’s loyalty to Margo is as bogus as her devotion to theatre is authentic. By putting on a convincing show of possessing personal qualities she does not have, Eve supplants Margo. From this standpoint, the film stages the theatrical arena as a reflection of Machiavellian ambitions where the end justifies the means: “The means will always be judged honorable and praised by everyone, for the vulgar will always be taken by appearances and the issue of the event” (Machiavelli, The Prince 66). This Machiavellian scenario finds an echo in the opening scene of the film where Eve, whose life has been a string of disloyal relations, is judged worthy of receiving the highest honor based on her appearance of loyalty. The Broadway awards episode thus reads as a staged event where the most knowledgeable in the art of seeming are compensated for feigning their way to fame so as to fulfill personal aspirations for empowerment. Theatre thus forms the red line where aesthetic, professional and ethical references meet in order to test out the veracity of the performative act.

The figure of theatre in Eve is not only a cultural reference, but a moral one, in the sense that the actress embodies a question which haunted Mankiewicz: how truth is molded and shaped. (Amiel, 64)

Indeed, the trope of the actress in the works of both Orr and Mankiewicz has shifting significations. Mankiewicz’s actresses achieve fame as a result of illusion, i.e. their power to elude (“ludere” latin for play, meaning to evade, in a skilful way), and their protean capacity to take on new identities. This explains why Eve’s triumph on stage and off results from her propensity to incarnate qualities she appears to possess. Eve, whose name is etymologically linked to “evil,” demonstrates the capacity for exercising the political realism of Machiavelli’s Prince who is advised to avoid exercising zealous integrity:

It is not, therefore necessary for a Prince to have all the above-named qualities, but it is very necessary to seem to have them. I would even be bold to say that to possess them and always to observe them is dangerous, but to appear to possess them is useful. And, therefore, he must have a mind disposed to adapt itself according to the wind [...] and be able to do evil if constrained. (The Prince, 65)

The theatrical arena in All About Eve promotes a reflection on Machiavellian opportunism where the most important thing for the performer to acquire is the appearance, not the possession, of qualities such as sincerity, nobility and truthfulness: “Everybody sees what you appear to be, few feel what you are” (66). Indeed, both Mankiewicz’s cinematic paradigm and Machiavelli’s political philosophy suggest that the great majority of mankind is satisfied with appearances, as though they were realities, and is often more influenced by the things that seem than by those that are. This is illustrated by the story of Eve’s life which constitutes an elaborate lie, a script invented to give the impression that she is a lamb in an iron jungle, in need of
protection and incapable of subterfuge. Her pretense of doe-eyed naivety allows her to
dissimble the fact that her stories are destined to conceal baser truths such as the fact
that her parents haven’t heard from her in three years, or that her name is not Eve
Harrington, or the fact that she was chased out of town for having an affair with her
boss’s husband, and that her fiancé, Eddy, the war hero, never existed. Mankiewicz’s
representation of Eve as a mythomaniac corroborates the fact that life and theatre are
closely aligned in the actress’s consciousness, and are deeply rooted in the belief that
“the world of make-believe” is more empowering than the real world. All of this echoes
the conception of theatre as a mirage or a virtual reality as elaborated by Antonin
Artaud in Le Théâtre et son double.8

In the audition scene of All About Eve, the power of appearances, signified by the
capacity to elaborate and interpret a script on stage, translates into the power to
deceive and subvert. The scene stands out as a climax in the film and the reversal of
situation can be interpreted according to the Hegelian system of the struggle between
master and servant where one self-consciousness is obliged to yield to the other. If Eve
supplants her rival, it is because Margo has become more and more dependent. Indeed,
Eve has grown more and more skilled until she finally transforms into “a truly
independent consciousness,”9 capable of replacing her rival. Mankiewicz borrowed this
doppelgänger paradigm from Orr’s short story in which Margola relates a similar
“audition scene” story to Mrs. Richards where Eve supplants her rival:

“Was she really good?”
“Good?” Margola raised a penciled eyebrow. “Good? She was marvelous! Clement
even hinted she was slightly better than I am. He didn’t dare say so, of course, but
he teased me that she was.” (290)

The Hegelian paradigm can be transcribed onto this scene if we consider Margo as the
embodiment of the negligent master. Arriving too late for the audition, she sees DeWitt
and spats: “I must start wearing a watch!” DeWitt tells her that Eve did the audition:
“[…] it wasn’t a reading. It was a performance! Something made of music and fire!” He
assures Margo that Lloyd was “beside himself” and adds, in a last jab: “She’ll soon be
what you are now, Margo.” To further insist upon the power struggle that is about to
take place between the two actresses fighting to preserve their territory, Mankiewicz
inserts visual references which link the actress to a predatory beast, devil or assassin.
When Margo arrives at the theatre, the camera cuts in on the title of a play currently
running: The Devil’s Disciple, which is strangely devoid of an actress’s name. The
billboard illuminated at the entrance of the theatre thus stages a sort of play within the
play in which the name of the missing actress can be read as Eve, “the devil’s disciple,”
since she has supplanted Margo by replacing her at the audition. The camera then pans
in on a billboard where her name figures next to a play, Aged in Wood, and her
caricature. When Margo enters the theatre, she approaches DeWitt. The camera pans in
on her long enough for the viewer to notice that she is framed next to a poster where
she is caricatured as a Southern Belle, holding a half open fan in her left hand. A closer
look reveals that in the other hand she is holding a smoking gun. The semiotic
association of the gun and the fan incite the spectator to connect acting with killing.
This metatheatrical image of theatre functions as a displacement for the locus of
“civilization” where the affable manners of the Southern Belle actress disguise her
potential for doing lethal harm. This conveys the ontological position of language as a
weapon of deceit. From a semiotic point of view, Margo’s elegant gown and Southern
Belle image are incongruous with the pistol she holds in her right hand. The
intersemiotic function of this scene is to align duplicity with the performative function of acting.

If we now reconsider the signification of the titles of the two plays: *Aged in Wood* and *The Devil's Disciple*, it is clear that the semantics of wood and ageing point to the symbolic last hour of Margo's glory, substantiating the fact that the older actress is about to be replaced by her disciple, Eve, who, like the devil, possesses an infinite number of disguises. In the audition scene, Eve dissimulates her cutthroat ambition by adopting an attitude of lamblike modesty. When Margo storms in to confront her as a traitor who schemed in order to become her understudy, Eve replies meekly: “I was dreadful! I have no right to be anybody’s understudy!” Her lines display the same sense of staged iniquity as Iago’s which evoke an ontic vacuum in the place of a true identity: “I am not what I am” (1.1.65). This moment of disclosure reveals the fact that Eve is as skilled as Margo, her doppelgänger, in the art of illusion. Their struggle for preeminence translates into an allegorical pattern of repetition and doubling where the preyed upon become the predators—the tiger who protected the lamb is devoured by the lamb, and so forth. This pattern of subversion and doubling—in which the servant replaces the master—forms the backbone of Mankiewicz’s film. Eve outmaneuvers her adversary by securing the role of Cora which Lloyd had initially written for Margo. When Dewitt threatens to expose her further by revealing her real name, Gertrude Slescinsky, and her tawdry life story, Eve takes him on: “killer to killer,” an expression which was initially associated with Margo, through the poster of a smoking gun and the leading actress’s association with Lady Macbeth. DeWitt hushes up the true story and, equipped with “the inability to love or be loved and insatiable ambition,” Eve continues to trample her way to Hollywood.

In what Mankiewicz deems to be his second act—the part he added to Mary Orr’s short story—we can discern a crucial moment of anagnorisis. Margo decides that she no longer wants to be part of the Broadway “rat race” and will thus cease to compete with Eve. This puts an end to the power struggle with Eve and can be interpreted as a form of Hegelian sublation (the terminal phase of mirror-like emulation). It further suggests that Margo has come to view the power of illusion she exercised during her Broadway career as a delusion. This is substantiated by the fact that she announces, to everyone’s surprise, that she does not wish to play Cora, instead, she wants to have a life to live and be a married woman. In essence, her sudden insight into Broadway provides her with a new vision of the world of make-believe, which has the capacity of devastating a woman’s personal life: “No more make-believe off stage or on,” she affirms.

As the film draws to an end, Mankiewicz introduces a series of proleptic signs (mimetic gestures and voice inflection), suggesting that Eve’s character, now that she is a star, mirrors Margo’s cynical prima donna pose when she was at the height of celebrity. And from this perspective Mankiewicz compels the spectator to view Eve’s victory over Margo as a Pyrrhic victory. Margo has been redeemed by love, and though it is clear that Eve has triumphed, her accomplishment comes at a high price. Like Margo, Eve has become an inveterate drinker with no companion apart from the stage. Her velvet voice has grown harsh and raucous, and her gestures agitated and commanding. Indeed, Mankiewicz’s films often conclude on this no win throw of the dice where the confrontation between rivals is self-annulling.
In Mankiewicz’s films, the stakes balance out in terms of seduction and manipulation. There is always a winner and a loser [...]. So, in the end, it’s a zero sum game: the gains of the winning party are equivalent to the losses of the adversary. (Amiel, 64)

In the protasis or exposition scene, which has been repeated at the end of the film and extended upon so as to give additional information to the viewer, we are invited to (re)view the moment where Eve is awarded the trophy for most accomplished actress. Most significantly, this second viewing of her acclamation no longer conveys the jubilation it did in the expository scene. Instead, it transmits a sense of bleak deception, dark cynicism and self-delusion. The falling action (catastasis) of the dramatic forces accelerates, leading to a change of momentum as Eve approaches her anti-triumphant end. She refuses to accompany DeWitt to the party held in her honor following the ceremony, and forgets her cherished award in the taxi on her way home. With no rival to vie with any longer, Eve’s thirst for power evaporates like a mirage. In Hegelian terms this inability to savor victory is linked to the absence of an adversary, bringing the symmetry of cooperation 11 to break down. Hegel’s “Bondage and Servitude” sheds light on this Mankiewiczian scenario where power, once wrested from the adversary, is projected as delusory since it leaves the subject isolated. In other words, if one subject annihilates the other, it thereby destroys its own freedom, as there is nobody there to recognize the triumphant victory. 12 In contrast, the closing scene in the short story is restricted to maintain focus on Eve’s victory and Mrs. Richards’ loss:

Eve is on the train with her contract in her pocket. I’m going on a trip also. I’m heading for Reno to get a divorce. For in spite of her success, Eve had found the time to get engaged to a famous playwright. She’s going to marry my husband, Lloyd Richards. (295)

If Mankiewicz allows Margo a respectable exit, presenting her fall from stardom as an illusion (since being deposed will allow her to get married and find happiness), he presents Eve’s victory equally as an illusion. In so doing, he dramatizes a system of exits and entrances so complete and symmetrical that they seem to cancel each other out, leaving interpretation open to swinging doors and recalling the Shakespearean view that reality and illusion are bedfellows, and that men and women are merely players on the stage of the world. In the closing scene, the repetitive cycle of defeat and triumph continues to reverberate. Mankiewicz introduces the trope of the mirror to invoke the master-servant paradigm again. Eve’s doppelgänger, the young journalist, Phoebe, has sneaked into her room while Eve was at the Awards Ceremony. Eve comes back (having left her trophy in the taxi) and finds the young fan, Phoebe, who has drowsed off, waiting for her. DeWitt arrives at the door with Eve’s trophy. While Eve nurses her whisky, Phoebe goes into Eve’s bedroom with the trophy in hand and slips on her gown, curtseying to an invisible audience in front of a mirror which transforms so as to reveal an infinite number of duplicated images of the young woman. Phoebe’s name, Greek for moon goddess of the hunt, is another predatory reference to actresses in the film. Phoebe embodies the virgin moon goddess: prepared to sacrifice herself for the hunt 13 which constitutes the rat race of Broadway and Hollywood. Mankiewicz thus brings us full circle in the pattern of doubling, and subversion. Eve, a celebrity, is now a lonely alcoholic, an inverted image of Margo, who has purportedly found personal happiness in marriage. Phoebe, as do Eve and Margo, embodies the multi-faceted implications of the power of illusion and the illusion of power inherent to acting both on and off stage. This paradigm provides a compelling metatheatrical message which promotes a reflection on the performative function of theatre in All About Eve. Like the speech act,
the performance act is always split, and the knowledge of this gap (between object and object of desire; signifier and signified) is precisely the stuff that the creative act, i.e., illusion, needs to feed upon. This is reflected in the title of Lloyd’s new play, Footsteps on the Ceiling, (presumably the one that Phoebe will star in once she supplants Eve). The very absurdity of footsteps on a ceiling reveals something about the actress’s role, theatre and the power of illusion, which is generated from the act of performativity. Identity, as such, is dramatized as a performance act, a construct of theatre, a role to be played, a script to be learned and recited. In All About Eve Mankiewicz’s actresses double as a trope for theatre: like a hall of mirrors they reflect the liminal zone between reality and illusion. This pertains to both the short story and the film, where the actress is a no-win figure associated with a smoke-screen, an empty script, an ontic void.

21 Such, at least, is the vision of theatre, and of cinema where the stage is a metaphor for the world suggesting that we are all copies of copies. Stephen Greenblatt’s observations about A Midsummer Night’s Dream (a play, which is a dream about watching a play about dreams) finds an echo in All About Eve (a movie, which is about theatre where actresses are playing the role of actresses who deceive each other): “Whatever its meaning, its existence is closely linked to the nature of theatre itself. In the theatre, we confront a living representation of the complex relation between transfiguration and delusion.”

22 This can be carried over to the mimetic function of cinema in All About Eve and theatre in “The Wisdom of Eve,” both of which depend on the imagination as the agent of delusion and deceit.

Delusion and deception have a topical significance as well, if we consider the way in which Mankiewicz went about giving credit to people who had inspired his film. In an act of perverse subterfuge, he promised Mary Orr that her name would be on the screen credits, but when Fox Studios “purchased the story for him for 5,000 dollars, screen credit for Orr wasn’t written into the contract. As a result her name does not appear anywhere in the credits” (Harrison, 280-281). Ironically, Orr would have the last laugh. Like Eve, her starlet protagonist, Orr “retained the rights to her play, and when it was adapted into the stage musical Applause, sole credit went to Orr, and Mankiewicz’s name was left off the playbill” (281).

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY

NOTES

2. *All About Eve*, written and directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz. All quotes from the film are taken from the Twentieth Century Fox Productions' 1950 edition.
4. A case in point is the Hecuba soliloquy in *Hamlet* (2.2) where the player’s imitation of Priam’s widow is so convincing that he outdoes Gertrude’s authentic grief. Hypotyposis informs Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra. His appreciation of objects and ideas convey a postmodern sense of the potential for ‘hyperreal’ representations when reinitiating traditional aesthetic, cultural and architectural mediums from which they were originated.
5. All translations from Amiel are my own.
6. Karen Hildenbrand has commented on the fact that this dichotomy informs a larger ontological aspect of Broadway stars which opposes being and seeming: “The question of being and seeming is pertinent to all stars. It corresponds to the celebrated actress-woman dichotomy that Mankiewicz mentions often in reference to *All About Eve.*” *Figures du Double dans le Cinéma de Joseph L. Mankiewicz* (thèse, Paris III, 2002) 84.
7. Fem. proper name, from Biblical first woman, late Latin from Hebrew Hawah, literally “to breathe”; “a living being.” Like most of the explanations of names in Genesis, Eve’s name is probably based on folk etymology. In the Hebrew here, the phonetic similarity is between Hawah, “Eve,” and the verbal root hayah, “to live.” It has been proposed that Eve’s name conceals very different origins for it sounds suspiciously like the Aramaic word for “serpent.” [Robert Alter, “The Five Books of Moses,” 2004, commentary on Gen. iii 20].
8. Artaud associates the principle of theatre with the mirage of alchemical knowledge which he in turn aligns with the virtual reality of theatre (75).
9. The quote is taken from chapter four of *Phénoménologie de l’Esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993) 188-201. The chapter concerning the master and servant dialectic is translated into French as “Maîtrise et Servitude” from the German: “Herrschaft und Knechtschaft,” and translates into English as “Lordship and Bondage.”
10. The Hegelian notion of sublation corresponds to the end of the antithesis of subject and object. Hegel explains that if this moment does not occur, the two consciousnesses may become mesmerized by the mirror-like other and attempt to assert their will by entering into a struggle for pre-eminence.
12. Ibid., 188-201. Hegel describes the encounter between two individuals who engage in a “struggle to the death” before one enslaves the other—only to find that this does not give him the control over the world he had sought.

13. Phoebe is said to have her own militia of female warriors in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992) II, 400–419.


---

**ABSTRACTS**

Dans la nouvelle de Mary Orr, “The Wisdom of Eve”, la narration met en exergue les manipulations machiavéliques d’une jeune comédienne, Eve, dont l’opportunisme farouche se dissimule sous le masque de l’innocence. Lors du tournage de son adaptation cinématographique d’*All About Eve*, Mankiewicz avouera que la relecture de la nouvelle lui avait inspiré l’agencement final du scénario: “L’idée me trotta dans la tête depuis dix ans, mais le deuxième acte m’échappait.” On peut considérer que le trope du théâtre constitue le fil conducteur de la nouvelle comme du film. Nous allons donc examiner le trope du théâtre dans *All About Eve*, et la façon dont ce dernier déconstruit à la fois l’espace et le concept d’identité ; puis nous démontrerons que cette dimension théâtrale est porteuse d’un motif baroque où règne une esthétique de l’illusion et de dédoublement.

**AUTHORS**

**ALICE CLARK-WEHINGER**

Alice Clark-Wehinger is an Associate Professor of Literature at the University of Nantes. Her work on Shakespeare and Nerval: *Le Théâtre romantique en crise, Shakespeare et Nerval*, Paris: Harmattan, 2005, was short-listed for a research prize by the SAES and the AFEA. She is the author of a collection of poems in French and English (*Imaginaires*, University of Nantes, 1997) and numerous critical articles in French literary reviews. She has also co-authored a book on the Anglo-Saxon short story (*La nouvelle anglo-saxonne, une étude psychanalytique*, Paris: Hachette, 1998). Alice Clark's short story collection, *A Darker Shade of Light*, received Technikart Manuscript’s first prize award at le Salon du Livre (March 2011).
The First Fruits of Literary Rebellion: Flannery O’Connor’s “The Crop”

Jolene Hubbs

1 In Flannery O’Connor’s fiction, other scholars see the writer embracing a male literary tradition, citing as evidence her works’ “androcentric and often misogynistic characters, narrators, and plots” (Prown 159) as well as “the toughness of the narrative style and subject matter” (Gordon, Imagination 30). These critics read “The Crop,” one of the six stories that comprised O’Connor’s 1947 University of Iowa master’s thesis, as a repudiation of the role of the female author. Katherine Hemple Prown asserts that O’Connor’s experiences at Iowa taught her “that her literary reputation depended upon her ability to keep her fiction free from the taint of femininity” by “bury[ing] her female self beneath layers of masculinist forms and conventions” (38, 161). According to Prown, Miss Willerton, the protagonist of “The Crop,” allows O’Connor to distinguish herself from “penwomen” and their “petty concerns” (43). Mark McGurl echoes Prown, describing the story as an “auto-exorcism . . . of the spirit of the amateur ‘penwoman’” (538).

2 These critics are correct in contending that O’Connor uses “The Crop” to distinguish herself from certain literary forms associated with women writers. But this is only half of the story. Miss Willerton’s fiction—in contrast to which O’Connor defines her own work—represents the worst of not only sentimental pastoral fiction, a woman-authored form, but also gritty social realism, a genre dominated by male writers. “The Crop” thus represents not an exorcism of the penwoman, as others have argued, but a manifesto excoriating these generic forms. O’Connor aims to address the experiences of the South’s poor white farm folk, but in “The Crop,” she reveals the limitations of the preeminent genres for doing so.

3 “The Crop” is, as McGurl observes, “metafiction”: a “story about storytelling” (536). The tale opens with Miss Willerton, the writer-protagonist, engaged in “the hardest part of writing a story”: devising a “good subject” from her limited reading and even more limited experience (O’Connor 33, 34). Willerton evaluates potential subjects in terms of
their social import, reflecting that an “air of social concern […] was so valuable to have in the circles she was hoping to travel” (35). First rejecting bakers because they lack “social tension” and next deciding that “teachers weren’t timely,” Willerton at last settles on a suitable subject: “Social problem. Social problem. Hmmm. Sharecroppers!” (34). In her effort to write about sharecropping poor whites, Willerton invokes—indeed, models her fiction on—two central Southern modes for fictionally treating the “social problem” of rural white poverty: female pastoralism and social realism.

An unnamed novel suggestive of the work of social realist Erskine Caldwell provides the model for the first part of Willerton’s story. Social realism has been fittingly described as “not a style of the period but the style” of the 1930s (Wolfe 34), and Caldwell is the mode’s signal Southern practitioner, penning fictional and nonfictional works depicting the struggle of the Southern agrarian proletariat. Caldwell loomed large at the start of O’Connor’s career not only as a fellow Georgia writer but also as a bestselling American author: in 1946, the year O’Connor entered the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, God’s Little Acre was issued in a twenty-five-cent mass market paperback that sold a million copies in the first six months alone—an unprecedented sales figure at the time (Caldwell, Experience 224). Furthermore, Caldwell’s fiction was a touchstone for early reviewers of O’Connor, because the more established writer’s fusion of “gothic comedy and social exposé” provided one of the few points of comparison for O’Connor’s stories (Cook 276). This correlation, though, should not be overstated. As Louis D. Rubin, Jr. observes in his 1955 review of A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories, although O’Connor’s work is reminiscent of Caldwell’s in terms of its poor white subject matter and plain, direct style, the authors differ profoundly in “attitude”:

Caldwell is […] preoccupied with the poor farmer’s oppressed economic condition. Flannery O’Connor has […] no such simple approach to people. More kin to the Bundrens of As I Lay Dying, her people confront spiritual and moral problems, not economics. There is in her characters a dignity […]. All of them are […] responsible agents, not trapped automatons. (678-79)

By establishing Caldwell’s work—which “combined social realism with sex and violence” (Oakes 68)—as a model for Willerton’s fiction, O’Connor exposes the class and gender conventions of her predecessor. The book on which Willerton models her story’s opening gambit is a scandalous novel intended for male readers. Willerton’s clandestine mode of acquiring the book—she “ordered it from the publisher because she didn’t want to ask for it at the library”—hints at its male-aimed salaciousness (O’Connor 36). The response of Miss Lucia, Miss Willerton’s housemate, to the novel confirms its tenor and target audience. Lucia burns the book after finding it in Willerton’s bureau, explaining to Willerton that she thought Garner, the house’s only male inhabitant, must have put it in the drawer “for a joke,” because “I was sure it couldn’t be yours” (36). What makes this work of Caldwellian social realism “awful” is, in large part, its lurid depiction of rural life (36).

Willerton’s characters, modeled on the example of her social realist source text, personify not flesh-and-blood people but fictional types. Despite the fact that she “had never been intimately connected with sharecroppers,” Willerton feels confident that one “might reasonably be expected to roll over in the mud”—one of the first actions she has Lot Motun perform—because in the novel she read, characters “had done just as bad and, throughout three-fourths of the narrative, much worse” (35-36). Willerton conceives of poor white characters not as fungible figures who adapt in personally coherent ways to the exigencies of the plot but rather as static stereotypes who
respond to stimuli with collectively predictable actions. Thus Willerton’s plan for the plot is simply to create situations that will showcase dirtiness and degeneracy, with Lot’s exploits generalized from what one expects of “that kind of people” (36). Having quickly dispatched with the dirt—“roll[ing] over in the mud” ensures that Lot is filthy (36)—Willerton introduces degeneracy through the kind of violence endemic to Caldwell’s fiction. Willerton’s plan for the “action” of her story consists of “some quite violent, naturalistic scenes, the sadistic sort of thing one read of in connection with that class” (36). O’Connor’s work, to be sure, is violent, but Willerton’s description of “naturalistic” and “sadistic” violence evokes not O’Connor, for whom violence functions most often as a vehicle for spiritual revelation, but Caldwell, in whose novels domestic violence illustrates poor white dissoluteness writ large, and poor white women’s decadence in particular.

To distinguish O’Connor’s use of violence from the violence of Caldwellian social realism is to insist that O’Connor, far from attempting to insert herself into a violent boys’ club, is upending that club. At the start of her career, violence was widely considered a central, yet exclusively masculine, element of contemporaneous fiction. A 1946 review of Caldwell, for example, asserts that “men like Steinbeck and Caldwell and Hemingway and Faulkner in America […] have, in recent years, made violence a necessary ingredient […] in their work” (Frohock 353). O’Connor employs this “necessary ingredient” with a twist, because rather than emulating this stripe of social violence she introduces spiritual violence. In a short story entitled “Greenleaf,” for example, a violent attack—a goring by a bull—serves as a catalyst for spiritual upheaval, because it endows the assaulted character with a moment of transcendent vision. O’Connor further departs from her male predecessors by representing women as both perpetrators and victims of violence. In fiction by the authors mentioned in W. M. Frohock’s review, men are violent while women are either victimized by or virtuously opposed to violence. In Faulkner’s Sanctuary (1931), Temple Drake is brutally raped when she ventures into a masculine world of moonshining, murder, and other mayhem. In Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath (1939), Rose of Sharon’s virtuous closing act—breastfeeding a stranger—serves as an antidote not simply to her brother Tom’s violent acts but more broadly to the brutality of the novel’s dog-eat-dog world. In O’Connor’s “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” by contrast, an angry woman’s fist unsettles Julian and his mother. In “Revelation,” a young girl named Mary Grace is the story’s vehicle of violence, hurling a book at—and delivering a spirit-moving message to—Mrs. Turpin. O’Connor’s violence thus differs from the violence of male counterparts, like Caldwell, who inspire Willerton’s fiction.

Violence will be catalyzed by the poor white female protagonist, Willerton decides, because “that type of woman always started trouble,” often because of “her wantonness” (O’Connor 36). For Caldwell, indeed, a novel’s action is frequently propelled by a woman’s wanton antics. Tobacco Road (1932), for instance, opens with Ell May’s bare-bottomed slide across the sand—“like [the] old hound used to do when he got the itch”—toward her brother-in-law Lov (18). Ell May’s licentiousness does start trouble, just as Willerton’s reading of “that type of woman” predicts; her scooting seduction incites a fight between Lov, who possesses a bag of turnips, and Ell May’s family members, who snatch the turnips from Lov while he is distracted by Ell May. O’Connor is “in no sense concerned with the pornography and lasciviousness to which
Caldwell often resorts” and, through her stories, repudiates this kind of hypersexualization of the poor white woman (Rubin 678).

9 Willerton’s female protagonist makes manifest a classed misogyny seen in Caldwell’s fiction but anathema to O’Connor’s work. Willerton’s male protagonist Lot Motun is a class hybrid because he exhibits not only traits common to the archetype of the poor white Southerner such as hookworm, stooped posture, and a red neck but also attributes of the ruling class hero including nice teeth and a strong work ethic. His female counterpart, by contrast, embodies only the negative characteristics of the poor white female stereotype. Willerton imagines her as lazy and careless, noting that “she hadn’t bothered to put salt in” the grits and describing her communications with Lot by means of vituperative verbs like “yowl,” “whine,” and “sneer” (O’Connor 37). While unflattering depictions of poor white farm folk are by no means unique to Caldwell, the gender politics here suggest O’Connor’s fellow Georgian. Caldwell’s poor white men, while physically dirty and sexually degenerate, can be heroic, giving voice to socially salient sentiments like those that Caldwell expresses in his nonfiction. In God’s Little Acre (1933), for example, Will Thompson offers a socially and linguistically savvy explanation of why people who trade in cotton futures are called brokers: “Because they keep the farmers broke all the time. They lend a little money, and then they take the whole damn crop. Or else they suck the blood out of a man by running the price up and down forcing him to sell” (75). The opportunities for wisdom and valor open to Caldwell’s female characters, by contrast, are dubious at best. In the same novel, Griselda achieves her narrative zenith by praising rape as a form of male heroism and female fulfillment. While Willerton’s work conforms to the classed and gendered logic of Caldwell’s model, O’Connor’s fiction flies in the face of it, opening a Pandora’s box of poor white characters. Through her representation of Willerton’s literary apprenticeship to Caldwell, O’Connor distinguishes her own nascent fictional approach from the South’s androcentric social realism.

10 Willerton’s frustration with the vapidity of her poor white female character has an effect never seen in Caldwell: fed up with the “fool,” Willerton strikes her “a terrific blow on the head” and sweeps her from the scene, inserting herself in the woman’s stead (O’Connor 37). McGurl notes that this act represents “the cardinal formal sin of pre-modernist narration: authorial intrusion” (539). This act of intrusion is a micronarrative infraction, as McGurl argues, but it is also a macronarrative innovation, because this feat allows O’Connor to effect a dramatic shift in Willerton’s style. In order to move from representing the poor white as the third-person other to the first-person self, Willerton abandons social realism in favor of the female pastoral. This genre emerges in the twentieth-century South in response to male writers’ pastoral fiction and gives rise to novels in which women draw strength from nature and characters act cooperatively. By taking recourse to the female pastoral’s conventions for representing agrarian life, Willerton catalyzes the story’s shift in tone and focus; the “sneer[s]” and sadism that characterized the relationship between Lot and the unnamed wanton give way to the “smile[s]” and domestic accord enjoyed by Lot and Willie, the affectionate diminutive that Willerton assigns her fictional self (37). Willerton’s depiction of the labor and love of rural poor whites allows O’Connor to shine a light on the limitations of the female pastoral tradition.

11 The inspiration for Willerton’s pastoral style might be Elizabeth Madox Roberts’s novel The Time of Man (1926). Although not widely read today, Roberts’s story of a poor
Kentucky farm woman’s coming of age was a bestseller in the 1920s—one adopted by the Book-of-the-Month Club and praised by literary luminaries including Sherwood Anderson, Ford Madox Ford, and Robert Penn Warren. With “The Crop,” then, O’Connor confronts not insignificant writers but authors she admired and learned from—and Roberts and Caldwell are arguably the most skillful and successful novelists of their respective genres. “The Crop” defines the importance and iconoclasm of its author’s work by distinguishing it from all—even the best—that has come before.

12 Roberts’s and Willerton’s tales offer sanguine pictures of the hardscrabble lives of small farmers in the South. Ellen Chesser, the protagonist of *The Time of Man*, finds much to be happy about as the wife of a sharecropper. Returning to a plot of land that she and her husband previously tilled with “less goods than when they [first] came, but two children more,” Ellen nonetheless envisions (and, to be sure, finds) a life of plenty, including a food storage cellar, a pig contributed by the farm owner, and “a fine garden” (337, 339). Willie likewise finds pleasure amid the privations of tenant farming: “Even with as little as they’d had, it had been a good year. Willie had cleaned the shack, and Lot had fixed the chimney. There was a profusion of petunias by the doorstep and a colony of snapdragons under the window” (O’Connor 38). O’Connor critiques the female pastoral by inserting discordant narrative elements that draw attention to the dubious nature of the form’s soft-focus take on the physical deprivations of poverty. In this instance, Willie’s vision of “a good year” is rendered absurd in its elaboration, because the advantages Willerton offers by way of illustration instead betray her ignorance of the realities of farming. In fictional and nonfictional accounts alike, a good year for a tenant farming family in the US South is one in which successful struggles are waged against droughts, floods, boll weevils and other agricultural pests, market prices, and employer chicanery in order to see a profit from the year’s toils. Defining a good year with reference to petunias and snapdragons is a jarring non sequitur that represents the story’s most significant act of authorial intrusion: neither “intimately connected with sharecroppers” nor imaginatively able to conjure them, Willerton imposes her domestic experience onto her fictional self, erasing the myriad duties and disappointments of the farm wife and focusing instead on a fantasy of tidying a shack: the metonymic equivalent of crumbing the table, Willerton’s “particular household accomplishment” in the frame story (35, 33). Roberts and Willerton treat simplicity as a euphemism for scarcity, enveloping their characters in a bucolic bounty that sanitizes the harsh realities of sharecropping.

13 O’Connor critiques not only the material bounty enjoyed by the heroine of the female pastoral but also her impregnable physical and psychological health. Although Roberts acknowledges the physical deterioration of other farm women, whose teeth “go snaggly” and whose backs grow “crooked” after a few years of marriage, Ellen Chesser, mother of five children, looks like “a girl” and “walk[s] proudly erect,” “her feet light” (49, 156, 376). This bodily vigor is intertwined with Ellen’s emotional stability. In the final pages of the novel, for example, Ellen is described as “living lightly and freely with the passing days” despite the fact that she has just learned that her husband stands accused of burning a barn—a charge that will lead to his midnight beating at the hands of neighbors and her family’s hurried exodus from home (376). Willie’s unflappable optimism is of the same order. When the year’s crop is destroyed at the same time that a daughter is born—extinguishing Willie’s hopes of giving the child “a good start” in life—Willie is left marveling at “all I got” (38, 39). O’Connor’s typical poor white protagonists take a decidedly less sanguine approach to their troubles than Roberts’s or
Willerton’s characters. Farm worker Mrs. Pritchard’s response to her employer’s optimism in “A Circle in the Fire” provides an especially droll example: in reply to Mrs. Cope’s assertion that “we have everything,” Mrs. Pritchard declares, “all I got is four abscess teeth” (177).

In an essay titled “The Regional Writer,” O’Connor wrote that “the best American fiction has always been regional” because the region affords “the possibility of reading a small history in a universal light” (58). Aiming to use the rural South’s “small history” to address big questions about religion, morality, and society, O’Connor opened her authorial career with a story that surveys—and ultimately skewers—two leading methods for representing Southern farm folk. In this way, “The Crop” makes manifest the rebellious sensibility that characterizes O’Connor’s body of work: the “radical reality” (Gretlund and Westarp) and “imagination of extremity” (Asals) most commonly attributed to her 1950s-1960s fiction. “The Crop,” written in the 1940s, launches a spirited salvo against dominant modes for addressing her oeuvre’s central subject matter—Southern agrarian life. In “The Crop,” we glimpse the first fruits of O’Connor’s iconoclastic style.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. For other articulations of the penwoman thesis, see Asals (16-17) and Gordon, “The Crop” (99-100).

2. Sarah Gordon also notes this evocation of Caldwell’s stripe of fiction, but contends that “O’Connor indirectly attacks the emphasis in mid-twentieth-century fiction on social and economic realism” (“The Crop” 99). I, on the contrary, define this as not an indirect attack but a full frontal assault: a repudiation of her literary forebears that lays the groundwork for O’Connor’s own approach to Southern sharecroppers.

3. The relationships among the characters in “The Crop” are not clear. Although it seems that the main players are related in some way, because Willerton refers to them as “the family” (36), the ties among them are not made explicit. It is plain, in any event, that they live together.

4. This definition comes from Harrison (10-15). While Harrison’s study offers a crucial point of entry to this genre, her analysis proposes a liberatory politics for the female pastoral at odds with my reading, because Harrison treats women’s social visions as broadly emancipatory. For example, Harrison argues that the Southern woman author, freed from the patriarchal order, replaces hierarchical values with communal ones and works to surmount barriers to sexual, socioeconomic, and racial equality. I suggest, instead, that the genres of social realism and female pastoralism—deemed socially and sexually progressive, respectively—represent rural poor whites’ experiences in androcentric and naïve ways incommensurate with the aims of O’Connor’s fiction.

ABSTRACTS

« The Crop » donne ainsi à voir les premiers fruits du style iconoclaste qui caractérise l’œuvre de Flannery O’Connor.

AUTHOR

JOLENE HUBBS

Jolene Hubbs (PhD, Stanford University) is an assistant professor of American Studies at the University of Alabama. She studies the literature of the US South, paying particular attention to modernist fiction and representations of poverty. Her forthcoming publications include a study of how Charles Chesnutt’s conjure tales challenge the racial and socioeconomic politics of 1890s America and an analysis of Rosa Coldfield’s narrative clout in William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!
“Pariah” de Joan Williams : Femme invisible, pour qui vis-tu ?

Gérald Préher


2 Le titre de la nouvelle qui donne son nom au recueil publié en 1983, “Pariah”1, a donc une dimension fort ironique, d’autant plus que l’ouvrage est dédié à William Faulkner, responsable indirect du manque de reconnaissance dont Williams a souffert—certains critiques ayant même sous-entendu qu’elle a usé de ses charmes pour être publiée. Ce choix pourrait marquer le désir de reconnaître la place de Faulkner dans sa carrière tout en fermant un chapitre de sa vie—les dates de mort et de naissance du Mississippien sont d’ailleurs indiquées, peut-être pour rappeler que Faulkner n’est plus là depuis bien longtemps et qu’il faut lire Williams pour ses qualités d’écrivaine et non à travers le prisme de ses accointances. Le désir d’émancipation que l’on s’entoure dans la dédicace à *Pariah and Other Stories* se confirme avec *Pay the Piper* (1988), son dernier roman, dans lequel Williams réutilise “Pariah” et libère son personnage du carcan familial qui l’étouffait.

3 Dans “Pariah”, d’abord publiée en 1967 dans le magazine féminin *McCall’s*, Joan Williams met en scène Ruth, une mère de famille qui se réfugie momentanément dans l’alcool pour oublier qu’elle est devenue invisible aux yeux de ceux qui l’entourent. La nouvelle invite à réfléchir sur les notions de transparence et d’opacité, de visibilité et...
d'invisibilité, traits qui évoquent le roman *Invisible Man (Homme invisible pour qui chantes-tu ?)* de Ralph Ellison dont je me suis inspiré pour donner un titre à cet article. Narrée à la troisième personne tout en rapportant les pensées du personnage, “Pariah” se veut le théâtre d’une crise identitaire ; le lecteur bénéficie d’un accès privilégié au monde de Ruth, à ses frustrations et ses espoirs secrets, tandis qu’elle devient étrangère à elle-même et spectatrice de l’échec de sa vie :

If she had not left college to marry, or had not married Dean, or had not married at all, and had not had a baby the first year, or had gone to secretarial school, or had been a nurse—wouldn't her life have gone somewhere? (P 105)

L’effet cumulatif des formes négatives reflète le sentiment de vacuité de Ruth—elle a atteint un point de non retour et ne parvient pas à voir les aspects positifs de son existence. Le mariage lui a retiré son statut de femme pour lui imposer celui de mère ; ses actions se limitent à préparer les repas, ranger la maison, attendre son époux, s’occuper des enfants et jouer au bridge avec des amies. Le récit est centré sur la crise que traverse Ruth qui, de mère dévouée se transforme en paria. Williams met ici en pratique les conseils que Faulkner lui prodiguait sur le genre de la nouvelle : “A short story is a crystallised instant, arbitrarily selected, in which character conflicts with character or environment itself”.

Après avoir étudié les moyens mis en œuvre pour traduire la distance qui se crée entre la Ruth publique et la Ruth privée, on s’intéressera à la manière dont le personnage devient étranger à lui-même avant de se plonger dans un songe qui conduit à une dernière crise.

### I. Une salade qui tourne mal

Comme *Mrs Dalloway* de Virginia Woolf, “Pariah” porte sur une journée au cours de laquelle les souvenirs des jours passés définissent le cadre de l’action. Le récit s’ouvre sur une référence à la salade en gélatine que Ruth a confectionnée la veille pour la partie de bridge qui doit avoir lieu chez elle : “The salad seemed jelled, a success; she had now to dread the moment of turning the ring onto a platter and prayed it would come out in one piece” (P 97). Le verbe “seem” introduit la notion d’apparence qui est rapidement remise en question par les craintes de Ruth. Le substantif “ring”, lu à travers les pôles syntagmatique et paradigmatique dont parle Jean-Jacques Lecercle, permet d’entrevoir les éléments clé du récit : le cercle renvoie tout autant à l’enfermement et à la répétition qu’à l’institution du mariage.

Si Ruth suit sa recette à la lettre, il lui faut également ajouter un ingrédient pour que le plat soit une vraie réussite : le fromage blanc. Pourtant, au lieu de terminer la préparation, Ruth décide de vérifier l’organisation de la table qui lui avait parue impeccable la veille au soir ; elle se rend compte que plusieurs choses manquent à l’appel (“There were no serving spoons and no mayonnaise ladle” P 100) et pense à une conspiration : “Someone, it seemed, had taken things off the table later, to make her feel rattled today” (P 100). Le texte suggère à la fois une forme de dépression névrotique, voire un délire paranoïaque, et le vide existentiel que Ruth associe à sa vie : “The table’s not being right, the house’s silence seemed to reproach her, and depression seemed a pendulum hung heavily inside her, ticking away her life” (P 100). Un sentiment d’inquiétante étrangeté envahit le texte, les objets s’animent dans l’esprit de Ruth qui perd peu à peu ses repères. La référence au balancier évoque le passage du temps et l’idée que Ruth est piégée dans un lieu qu’elle ne reconnaît pas, élément
confirmé plus tard lorsque le narrateur observe : “Ruth went into the kitchen that, suddenly confronting her with closed cabinets, was as inexplicable as someone else’s kitchen” (P 103). La personnification de la cuisine renforce l’idée de défamiliarisation tandis que les allitérations insistent sur l’enfermement (“confronting her with closed cabinets”) et l’opacité (“as inexplicable as someone else’s kitchen”). La cage de Ruth est devenue une tombe et en regardant par la fenêtre, comme l’on regarderait à travers les barreaux d’une prison, Ruth prend conscience de sa solitude: “Outside, in the sun-brightened snow, tiny brown-and-white birds hopped about, and she had the feeling suddenly that, except for Peter, who was young, she was alone” (P 100). La formulation syncopée montre que pour le personnage toute cohérence a disparu ; la luminosité imposée par le reflet du soleil sur la neige crée un effet de transparence qui la force à voir le véritable visage de sa vie.

Par ailleurs, le lecteur est invité à explorer la conscience de Ruth qui relit le passé à travers le prisme du présent : “she recalled that she was singing about loneliness to Peter when Dean arrived last night” (P 100). La solitude qu’elle ressent s’amplifie tandis que les événements de la veille se rejouent. L’arrivée tardive de son mari, Dean, marque la séparation plus que l’union maritale puisqu’il lui enlève violemment leur fils qui devrait être au lit: “The suddenness of having him snatched away had thrown her against the wall” (P 100). Après cette scène, le silence envahit la maison, rendant impossible tout accès à la conscience des autres personnages car, comme l’indique le narrateur, “they communicated by silence” (P 101). Ruth est alors confrontée à l’opacité du monde qui l’entoure et au vide affectif qui définit sa relation avec son mari et avec sa fille—pour elle, “le silence n’est pas l’absence de voix. Il est au contraire le vide qui permet à toutes de résonner”". Un tel résonnement n’amène pas un raisonnement chez Ruth mais renforce sa confusion, ses doutes.

C’est grâce à diverses stratégies narratives, que Dorrit Cohn regroupe sous l’appellation “transparence intérieure”, que Williams permet au lecteur d’avoir accès aux pensées de Ruth. L’impression de vacuité que Ruth ressent est palpable lorsque ses craintes sont formulées par l’intermédiaire du discours indirect libre ou monologue narrativisé (“narrated monologues” dans la terminologie de Cohn) : “she was dying and there was no one to care. What vacancy would she leave? A bridge fourth could easily be found. And Dean would marry someone beautiful and younger, who knew how to play tennis, and Cynthia would have a companion. She regretted never having taken up tennis, as Dean and Cynthia had urged her to do” (P 101). Ruth sombre peu à peu dans l’abîme de la dépression et s’imagine même une remplaçante, guère plus significante qu’elle puisque son seul rôle serait de servir de lien entre les autres membres de la famille. Les attributs qu’elle prête à celle qui lui succéderait relèvent de l’artificialité et montrent combien il est difficile pour Ruth de donner un sens à son existence.

C’est uniquement lorsqu’elle regarde par la fenêtre que l’avenir se dessine dans un horizon utopique : “her thought drifted until she knew quite well that someday she was going to be a champion tennis player. Taking up tennis, quickly becoming a champion, she would show them all…” (P 104). L’absence de ponctuation dans la première phrase ainsi que la forme “-ing” montrent bien la visée de Ruth et son besoin de combler un manque. Par ailleurs, le recours à l’aposiopèse laisse planer le doute sur ce que le personnage tente de prouver, laissant ainsi l’opacité prendre le dessus sur la transparence à laquelle le lecteur s’était déjà habitué.
Le détour narratif dans les profondeurs psychologiques de Ruth permet de mieux saisir l’importance d’éléments apparemment anodins. La salade sur laquelle s’est ouvert le récit est finalement démoulée et le lecteur apprend qu’elle correspond aux attentes de Ruth (P 104). Les invitées sont ravies mais Ruth se rend compte qu’elle a oublié les sauces : la mayonnaise, tout d’abord, puis le fromage blanc—un oubli de trop qui fait resurgir ses angoisses :

... the great pendulum of depression swung inside her again, she wanted to weep, for the salad had not been glorious, after all. What was she accomplishing standing here trying to mound cottage cheese into a gelatin ring with only two sides left to hold it? Tears did come, and she looked in despair at the four cocktail glasses. To put her head down and sob mournfully over all things gone wrong seemed her only hope. (P 105)

Le narrateur utilise à nouveau l’image du balancier et l’associe à la sphère domestique, au rôle de la femme au sein du foyer. Il semble que le fait d’être une bonne maîtresse de maison soit l’unique raison de vivre de Ruth mais elle ne parvient pas pour autant à maîtriser la situation. La scène devient emblématique d’un problème plus large si l’on prend en compte le nombre de verres qui correspond à celui des membres de la famille. Une lecture féministe suggérerait que la maison n’est pas un lieu où la femme peut s’épanouir et cela confirmerait l’idée que Ruth ne parvient pas à exprimer à haute voix et qui demeure secrète :

Why didn’t they realize, she wondered, [...] how seldom she spoke of inconsequential things like recipes? Her thoughts were deeper than anyone realized. These women were never going to do anything, while she had a great long list of things she was going to do. (P 104)

Ruth est victime de son apparente transparence et le lecteur est le seul à pouvoir cerner le problème. Un jeu entre le moi public et le moi privé se met donc en place dans le récit, introduisant non pas une mais deux formes de transparence.

II. “Je est une autre”

Le récit repose entièrement sur un va-et-vient entre une narration à la troisième personne et une focalisation interne, mettant ainsi en valeur le sentiment d’étrangeté de Ruth. Elle entend les conversations de ses amies sans en comprendre le sens, comme en atteste le passage suivant :

From upstairs, Didi’s rather dry voice said “...again before we even got here,” and she felt contented, glowing, thinking they spoke of her having things ready. Instead, Madge said, “If she can’t keep her mind on the cards again today, I’m through,” and Ruth moved swiftly away as they came down to the living room and Didi called, “You-hoo, can we help?”

“I’m organized,” she called back, keeping her voice steady and asking herself how she could be furious when she did not have the faintest idea what they were talking about. She doubted that they themselves knew. (P 103-104)

Le lecteur, qui dispose des informations nécessaires, est conscient que Didi et Madge font référence à l’ivresse de Ruth. Bien avant l’arrivée de ses amies, Ruth s’était affaire à la confection de cocktails alcoolisés qu’elle avait goûtés, “To taste one Bloody Mary, after all, might help her headache” (P 102), même si au départ, elle s’était interdit de le faire (“she must not sample a drink” P 102, je souligne). Prise dans l’engrenage, Ruth reprendra même un autre verre quelques minutes avant que ses convives n’entrent chez elle (“she had another short Bloody Mary, satisfying herself quickly that the
cocktails had enough celery salt” P 102-103). Les effets de l’alcool se font vite sentir et la confusion du personnage est marquée dans le texte :

   For Ruth, too many things seemed to be happening at once, and she felt confused. Should she put the candy in the living room now, and would she remember to return the platter, and was the coffeepot ready to be plugged in? (P 103)

15 Les nombreuses questions qui occupent l’esprit de Ruth sont toutes en rapport avec l’organisation pratique et non avec l’image que Ruth renvoie à ses amies. Il est donc logique qu’elle ne suspecte aucun sous-entendu dans la conversation entre Didi et Madge—même si son attitude physique laisse penser qu’elle a compris ce à quoi les deux femmes font référence. La situation suggère que ce qui est a priori opaque pour Ruth est transparent pour le lecteur.

16 Paradoxalement, Ruth joue aussi avec les notions de transparence et d’opacité en faisant semblant d’être heureuse que ses amies soient là : “She walked carefully into the living room and set down the tray, feeling them watch, and she smiled at them beautifully, knowing herself to be slightly bored by their conversation” (P 104). Le paraître est ici important comme le montre l’usage d’adverbes de manière. La focalisation intervient également pour rapporter les commentaires de Ruth sur ses invitées dont elle ne s’explique pas la futilité : “Wouldn’t they tell her how they managed to sit here, the day beautiful and tiny birds hopping in the snow, without longing to drink all the dregs in the glasses in the kitchen?” (P 105). La question de l’ennui est soulignée par l’opposition entre les verbes d’état et les verbes d’action qui renvoient à l’antagonisme spatial entre le dedans et le dehors. L’alcool offre à Ruth l’évasion qu’elle ne peut s’offrir car elle se doit, malgré ses frustrations, de rester une parfaite femme d’intérieur.

17 Les références à des miroirs réels ou symboliques suggèrent également une forme d’enfermement. L’autre devient miroir du moi lorsque Ruth observe son mari : “he looked old, and she wondered, frightened, if she looked that old” (P 101). Le besoin de distanciation est marqué par l’adverbe de quantification “that” qui atteste de l’effort de Ruth pour se convaincre que l’autre n’est pas le même. Le passage du temps dont Ruth prend conscience met en valeur la perte et la tentative de déni qui caractérise le personnage. En effet, l’analepse qui présente la première rencontre de Ruth avec l’alcool met l’accent sur son besoin d’échapper à une réalité difficile à accepter : elle ne peut pas aider sa fille à améliorer ses résultats scolaires car elle a abandonné ses études trop tôt. Le récit présente cela comme un détail insignifiant, mettant en valeur le fait que Cynthia ne veut rien avoir affaire avec sa mère dont elle semble avoir honte (P 99). C’est à nouveau dans la tension entre opacité et transparence que se crée le sens car elle donne au lecteur accès aux secrets du personnage, et révèle sans dire un mot où s’origine le problème.

18 De la même façon, lorsque pendant la partie de bridge Ruth s’absente pour se rafraîchir le visage, elle ne fait pas le lien entre la couleur de son teint et l’alcool qu’elle a consommé : “Had she a fever? A cool cloth helped to subdue the flush slightly” (P 106). Ruth tente de faire illusion, pour ne pas reconnaître l’autre qui est le même dans le reflet, mais il est déjà trop tard puisque ses convives ont décidé de prendre congé et, comme le suggèrent les mots de Madge, qu’elles risquent de ne pas revenir : “[she] said she was not sure she could play next week” (P 106). Ruth devient à ce moment-là la paria du titre : “they seemed to have gone away in a huddled threesome to which she did not belong” (P 106). Ainsi, en dépit de sa place au centre du récit, Ruth est reléguée
à la marge du monde social. Une fois la maison vide, Ruth s’oublie à son tour ou, pour reprendre l’expression de J.-B. Pontalis, elle se “sépare d’elle-même” (2010, 47), en s’accordant une sieste qui, au lieu d’être bienfaitrice, la plonge plus profondément dans ses ténèbres puisque lorsqu’elle se réveille, celle qu’elle voit dans le miroir est une étrangère : “She sat up, and in the dressing-table mirror saw a woman in disarranged satin slip, with tousled hair and swollen eyes” (P 107). En parfait écho à ce que décrit Pontalis, le saut du lit précipite Ruth “hors de l’espace du dedans et du hors-temps pour [la] projeter dans le monde extérieur. Séparation, coupure” (2010, 51). Le texte met en évidence la distance entre le moi rêvé et le moi réel dont l’apparence extérieure confus n’est que le miroir de la confusion intérieure : le rêve interrompu a projeté Ruth dans l’inquiétant.

III. Rêve d’émancipation ou répétition du cauchemar

Pour Ruth, les lieux et les objets ont une âme : “the house was melancholy” (P 106), “in the middle of the table, the salad [was] forlorn-looking” (P 105). Dans les deux cas, les sentiments que prête Ruth à ces éléments font inconsciemment écho aux siens. Le sommeil devient une solution pour échapper à la violence du présent dont les contours sont brouillés : “Whatever hour it was, the day was growing dark and it was beginning to snow” (P 106). La neige symbolise peut-être le dernier espoir pour Ruth de retrouver la pureté—la blancheur—originelle. Substance diaphane, la neige n’offre que l’illusion momentanée d’une résolution ; si elle permet d’éclaircir le paysage, sa présence n’en demeure pas moins éphémère et l’obscurité s’impose toujours. De la même manière le rêve est connoté positivement même si, comme l’observe Pontalis, “loin d’accueillir nos désirs et nos nostalgies, il n’est plus que le lieu d’une persécution interne” (2010, 43). C’est vers cette idée que le récit amène le lecteur puisque loin de libérer Ruth de ses peurs, il ravive ses démons.

L’image qui accompagne Ruth au moment où elle se glisse dans les draps, son bracelet à breloques, pris dans le dessus-de-lit, fait retour pour mieux être perdu :

she dreamed about the bracelet, that she had lost it, and every person she went to asking for it had given it to someone else; and at last she cried in her sleep, “But don’t you realize how much I’ve lost, that the charms are everything?” (P 107)

Dans une étude sur le rêve, Pontalis, observe qu’au moment où “de la mise en images se trouve converti dans une mise en mots, quelque chose se perd […] : toute conquête se paie par un exil, et la possession par une perte”. Le psychanalyste met ensuite l’accent sur l’écart qui se creuse entre les deux notions (images/mots) et constitue selon lui, “presque une mise à mort” (Pontalis, 1972, 413-414, 423). Ces commentaires prennent d’autant plus de sens si on les lit à la lumière du texte de Williams : quand Ruth comprend que chacune des breloques résume un épisode important de sa vie, que le bijou occupe finalement une place centrale dans son monde de femme, dans son mundus muliebris:

She saw distinctly several dangling charms: two baby shoes; a house; a tree (to symbolize the first they owned, when they bought the house); a miniature wedding ring; a cat (now full of cottage cheese); a tiny pack of cards... And suddenly she understood the bereft mood of her dream: to lose the bracelet did mean losing everything” (P 109)

Comme les breloques, Ruth est en suspens, prise entre le passé et le présent. Le bracelet devient une limite entre deux temps : le temps de l’autre, cette femme qu’elle ne
reconnaît plus, et le temps du moi, symbolisé par son corps. Perdre le bijou serait alors le signe d’une perte plus grande, celle d’une part de son être. La menace vient de l’extérieur, de l’environnement direct, espace que Ruth doit maîtriser pour y trouver sa place. À l’instar de la virgule qui sépare les paires d’adjectifs dans une description du dehors, “The night was enormous and dark, cold and snowing” (P 107), Ruth est prise entre deux états qui ne présagent rien de bon. L’aspect symbolique de la scène est mis en évidence par l’utilisation de “snowing”, qui introduit un hiatus (s’agit-il d’un participe passé utilisé comme adjectif ou de la forme verbale qui est éliminée?) puisque dans tous les cas de figure ce n’est pas la nuit qui neige. L’association des deux idées vient donc renforcer la négation existentielle dont souffre celle qui regarde.

En mettant son rêve en mots, Ruth devient l’agent de sa propre persécution : “le persécuteur se révèle être plus qu’un locataire abusif, il est devenu notre propriétaire, il s’est approprié jusqu’au peu qui nous restait de liberté” (Pontalis, 2010, 43). Le personnage s’impose la transparence et incite le lecteur à lire l’épisode qui suit comme une autopunition : Peter, le fils de Ruth, a disparu et, si elle songe à téléphoner à la police, elle craint aussi d’apparaître sous un jour peu favorable :

she put on her shoes, thinking she would have to call the police, and in that moment saw what they would see, coming in. There was the table full of dirty dishes, the salad dissolved… (P 107-108)

C’est par le prisme de l’autre que Ruth se perçoit, comme c’est le cas lorsqu’une voisine l’appelle pour lui dire qu’elle a recueilli Peter, “thinking surely Mrs. Parker would be home soon” (P 108). L’utilisation du discours indirect dans une forme que Genette appellerait “discours transposé” (191-192) permet au lecteur de rencontrer une autre Ruth, Mrs. Parker. Pour la première fois, Ruth apparaît sous son nom marital, élément clé qui suggère que la scène qui s’est jouée a révélé une identité qui, aussi transparente qu’elle puisse être pour les autres, demeure opaque pour le personnage. Cela est confirmé lorsque le narrateur rapporte le reste de la conversation téléphonique au cours de laquelle Ruth se sent jugée : “she […] realized from the silence at the other end of the phone that she could not win back Mrs. Goodwin, who, from observation, had formed an opinion of Peter’s mother” (P 108). Le narrateur joue sur le mot, associant le verbe “gagner” au nom de famille transparent de la voisine—ce choix porte à croire que Ruth serait, de manière métaphorique Mrs. Badlose, épouse et mère incapable de tenir son ménage. Le discours transposé permet d’entrevoir deux facettes du personnage qui n’avaient pas jusqu’alors été introduites de manière directe : elle n’est pas seulement Ruth mais également Mrs. Parker et la mère de Peter (et Cynthia).

Le retour du mari impose finalement une certaine stabilité puisque Ruth comprend qu’elle ne peut pas échapper à ses diverses obligations, qu’elle ne peut pas être l’une sans être l’autre :

She went on cooking while he washed his hands. In other rooms, she heard the children moving about, getting ready for supper. To make life exciting, she had escaped it altogether. But now she had accepted its hardest lesson: It was ordinary, and this moment held no more than putting a platter of food on the table.

Tomorrow at this time, the moment would be repeated. (P 110)

Rien de très valorisant ici puisque Ruth accepte de réintégrer la sphère domestique. C’est à travers le prisme de l’ordinaire qui, comme l’écrit Michel Braud, “compose la part transparente de l’existence” (11), qu’elle envisage de voir l’avenir. L’accent mis sur la répétition ramène le lecteur au cercle parfait dans lequel devait être versé le fromage blanc, cercle qui suggère plus l’enfermement que l’ouverture. Le dernier paragraphe du
récit présente une nouvelle Ruth qui, même si elle semble heureuse d’être redevenue la femme du dedans ("she was glad to be indoors"), garde à l’esprit le parcours difficile de ceux qui, comme les oiseaux, tentent de survivre à l’extérieur : “Leaning forward, she pressed her face in sympathy against the cold pane and thought, how incredible they survive, when there’s so much to keep them from it” (P 110).

“Pariah” présente les efforts oniriques d’une femme qui tente en vain d’échapper au rôle qui lui est imposé par la société, de vivre pour elle. Si elle finit par accepter l’échec de son entreprise, le récit de son histoire constitue néanmoins une première étape vers la libération. À une période où les idées féministes font recette aux États-Unis, le texte de Williams semble proposer une contre analyse, un retour à une famille plus conventionnelle. En effet, chez elle, ce n’est pas la société qui s’adapte à la femme mais la femme qui s’adapte à elle. Williams irait donc à l’encontre des idées de NOW, l’organisation nationale pour les femmes, qui souhaitait “l’intégration des femmes [...] comme membres à part entière” de la culture américaine. Il serait pourtant prudent de voir dans l’histoire de Ruth l’espérance d’un avenir meilleur qui doit se construire pas à pas, ce que suggère l’une des dernières images de la nouvelle où la neige se transforme en pluie : “Against the windows the snow was turning to rain; hitting, it melted in slow drops” (P 110). La transparence de la vitre permet à Ruth de voir le changement de la neige en eau à partir de l’intérieur, action qui épouse les stratégies narratives utilisées dans la nouvelle. En portant son attention sur le monde intérieur de Ruth, Williams suit les auteurs qui “s’attachent à décrire une réalité présente” plutôt que de “montrer le monde tel qu’il devrait être” (Fraisse et Mouralis, 152).

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES

1. Toutes les références à la nouvelle, précédées de l’abréviation P, renvoient à l’édition de Pariah and Other Stories indiquée en bibliographie.
2. Lettre de William Faulkner à Joan Williams datée du 8 janvier 1953 (Blotner, 345).
3. Julia Kristeva écrit : "Lorsque les deux phénomènes de l’abattement et de l’excitation sont de moindre intensité et fréquence, alors on peut parler de dépression névrotique" (19).
5. Lecercle observe d’ailleurs que “la nouvelle […] offre un crystal temporel […]", elle rassemble la totalité du temps dans l’intuition de l’instant” (6).
7. Cohn le définit ainsi : “A transformation of figural thought-language into the narrative language of third-person fiction” (100).
8. Cette comparaison se confirme plus loin, lorsque Ruth fait l’état des lieux : “The kitchen smelled of liquor, and there stood the empty vodka bottle and the four drained glasses. In a house where children lived and a husband was soon due, no one had started dinner” (P 108).
9. L’identité de Ruth lui est niée, elle devient “no one”, indigne, semble-t-il, d’être reconnue comme mère ou épouse.
10. On pense aux analyses de Claire Kahane.
11. Le lecteur aura noté que la salade se trouve au centre de la table mais que son centre est vide.
12. Je dois cette idée à Héliane Ventura que je remercie.
13. Pontalis dans une section intitulée “objets perdus” montre dans quelle mesure la perte peut être envisagée comme le point de départ de la dépression car elle signifie l’effacement (Pontalis, 2010, 52).
14. On pense à l’idée de Philippe Delerm qui interprète la neige comme une “négation douce du réel” (40).
RÉSUMÉS

In “Pariah,” published in 1967, Joan Williams describes Ruth, a wife and mother who has momentarily found comfort in alcohol to avoid looking into the void her life has become. This short story offers an opportunity to reflect upon the notions of transparency and opacity, visibility and invisibility. “Pariah” also provides a fine illustration of Dorrit Cohn’s narratological theory as presented in Transparent Minds since Williams uses narrated monologue throughout the text. The reader is allowed into Ruth’s inner world, s/he is made aware of her frustrations and of her secret hopes as she slowly descends into the abyss of depression, feeling more and more estranged from herself. This description of one day in the life of Ruth stages the return of the past in the present. Now a married woman, Ruth has lost her femininity and become an object in her family home. A study of her descent into hell, namely into reality, shows that she longs for visibility in a world where women are invisible. The use of a transparent mind thus enables Williams to picture two Ruths: the public one and the private one. Although she finally decides to give up on her hopes, this day has made her realize that there is room for change and that the fight has only just begun.

AUTEURS

GÉRALD PRÉHER

Gérald Préher is Assistant Professor at the Institut Catholique de Lille, France and a member of Jacques Pothier’s research group Suds d’Amériques (Université de Versailles–Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, France). He defended a doctoral dissertation entitled “The Timelessness of the Past in Southern Literature as Presented in Works by Walker Percy, Peter Taylor, Shirley Ann Grau and Reynolds Price” and has written several essays on southern literature, more especially on women short story writers. He has also co-edited books on southern short stories and on writers such as Ernest Gaines, Richard Ford and John Steinbeck. He is currently at work on a monograph devoted to Elizabeth Spencer.
Light and Change: Repressed Escapism in *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*

Paul Sweeten

1 On July 8, 1980, shortly before *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* was due to be published, Raymond Carver wrote an impassioned letter to his editor, Gordon Lish, imploring him to stop production of the book. Carver describes how he had been up all night reading the seventeen stories, as well as Lish’s proposed edits to them. He concludes:

If I don’t speak now, and speak from the heart, and halt things now, I foresee a terrible time ahead for me. The demons I have to deal with every day, or night, nearly, might, I’m afraid, simply rise up and take me over (quoted in Campbell, J).

2 Lish was recommending dramatic alterations to the original material. He had significantly cut the length of many stories (on two occasions by as much as fifty per cent), added many of his own sentences, altered endings, and changed the names of characters and titles throughout the collection. Carver’s concerns were eventually placated, and *What We Talk About* was published according to Lish’s design. It was only in 2009, with the release of *Beginners*, that the original drafts became available, and the extent to which Lish shaped Carver’s minimalist style was brought to light.

3 Carver wrote in *Fires*: “maybe it’s nothing more than a working marriage of necessity and convenience that has brought me to writing the kind of stories I do in the way that I do” (30). Indeed, when reading *Beginners* alongside *What We Talk About*, one cannot help imagining that the “marriage of necessity” was that between the author and his editor.

4 Since we have had access to both texts, questions of qualitative comparison have arisen. The response from literary publications, for the most part, offered the view that while *Beginners* is interesting, Lish manifestly improved the majority of Carver’s stories. Craig Raine of *Areté* said that “Both Carver and Lish are copying Hemingway, but Lish is better at it” (38). Rather than arbitrate on statements of this kind, it is perhaps more interesting to consider the nature of comparison when faced with two drafts of the
same work. Do Lish’s edits enable Carver’s stories to become “realised” versions of themselves, or is this the wrong question entirely? When considering these matters, it is worth recalling a distinction made by the critic G. Wilson Knight between the terms “criticism” and “interpretation”:

‘Criticism’ to me suggests a certain process of deliberately objectifying the work under consideration; the comparison of it with other similar works in order especially to show in what respects it surpasses, or falls short of, those works...’Interpretation,’ on the contrary, tends to merge into the work it analyses; it attempts, as far as possible, to understand its subject in the light of its own nature. (1-2)

These are, he clarifies, his own “personal uses” (2) of the terms; nonetheless they are helpful in separating two approaches in responding to any work of literature, and are particularly enlightening in cases such as Carver’s, where one is dealing in matters of “versions,” rather than in definitive examples of this or that work of art.

It is worth asking whether the original drafts, rather than having a diluted nature, have in fact an entirely distinct character of their own. T.S. Eliot noted that one can be “original with the minimum of alteration” (212-214), and so in considering the nature of revision it is often unhelpful to imagine a linear writing process—a notion of there being a singular life of a story or poem from its conception to its final draft. It is better to understand that editorial changes, even minor ones, create new works: original pieces which must be considered in the light of their own nature. On inspection, many of Carver’s early drafts can be seen to be doing very different things from their edited counterparts—having different effects, certainly, but perhaps even aiming at something altogether distinct.

Let us look first at some of the differences in style between the two texts. While Carver’s prose in Beginners is written, to use his own words, in “common language, the language of normal discourse” (Fires 37), it does not possess the heightened—even exaggerated—minimalist quality of What We Talk About. When Carver opened “The Calm” with these lines:

It was Saturday morning. The days were short and there was a chill in the air. I was getting a haircut (159)

Lish removed all but the final sentence. The What We Talk About version opens, simply: “I was getting a haircut” (97). In Lish’s edit, the day is irrelevant and the weather beside the point. What matters is that we are (presumably) in a barber’s shop, and that we are there via the viewpoint of a first-person narrator—an “I”—something which we do not discover in Carver’s original draft until the third sentence. The effect of Carver’s opening is that of closing in on a scene from a wider lens, whereas Lish’s follows the pattern of what may be called the Chekhovian opening, that which places a reader within a scene already underway, providing vital information with little or no wider context. For example, Chekhov’s “Dreams” begins:

Two soldiers are escorting to the country seat a vagrant who refuses to give his name. (42)

The effect of these openings reflects the overall nature of short fiction. They establish, at the earliest point, that the narrative is in some way restricted by the form it inhabits. Stories in this vein are dominated not by their turns of plot, nor by their scope of exploration, but only by their premise: the single situational point of conflict to which all other developments relate.
A story’s premise, which should be made distinct from its plot, is often made clear in a single sentence:

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. (89)

This is a near-perfect summary of Kafka’s Metamorphosis, and presents the basic fact from which poor Gregor is unable to separate himself, despite his varied efforts. In this contained focus, revealed through the myopic porthole of simple, declarative sentences—so often concentrated on the singular, whether on one character or one event or one scene—that short fiction is defined as a monolithic form, carrying the suggestion that the narrative destinations of stories are ultimately fixed from their outset. Lish’s decisions about where to begin a story uphold this fatalistic interpretation of short fiction, and provide a framework within which the rest of Carver’s text is required to operate.

One discovers very quickly that Lish’s edits infused Carver’s natural sentences with an almost ideological brevity, an unrelenting dedication to saying as little as possible. Ernest Hemingway wrote in A Moveable Feast that:

You could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood. (75)

This, Hemingway’s “iceberg principle,” became Carver’s most distinctive signature following the publication of What We Talk About. Throughout his career, however, Carver rejected the label “minimalist” and would underplay his debt to Hemingway. In Fires he wrote:

On occasion it’s been said that my writing is “like” Hemingway’s writing. But I can’t say that his writing influenced mine. (28)

Carver’s reluctance to pair himself with Hemingway was understandable given that it was in fact Lish who applied the “iceberg principle” so regimentally to the collection. As we shall discover, whenever a story’s overall brevity is applied to its very sentences, the effect provides a narrow cage in which the lives of characters can seem impounded. Lish’s edits to Carver’s drafts made great use of this device. Indeed, all of his changes, from employing Chekhovian openings to a pronounced incarnation of the “iceberg principle,” uphold the notion that within short fiction, characters are thrown along a one way street down which they have no place to turn.

In “Why Don’t You Dance?” a young couple come across a man who is selling his possessions in a yard sale. The couple sit and get drunk with the man who, at the end of the story, dances with the female character in a quiet, yet disturbing scene. When considering the two versions available to us, one can see that Carver’s signature one-sentence paragraphs, although present in the Beginners draft, are used as a key structural device in the revised copy, appearing far more frequently. Here the “iceberg principle” is at work again. Carver’s original long opening section is cut into six paragraphs in the edit. These dissections lend a staccato tone to the telling, drawing attention to the minimal language already in use. Without the white spaces which Lish inserted by spreading out the text, the minimalism of the story is not so apparent. Consider the section from Beginners:

Except for that, things looked much the way they had in the bedroom—nightstand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, a night stand and reading lamp on her side. His side, her side. He considered this as he sipped the whiskey. (1)
And then Lish’s edit:

Except for that, things looked much the way they had in the bedroom – nightstand and reading lamp on his side of the bed, a night stand and reading lamp on her side.

His side, her side.
He considered this as he sipped the whiskey. (3)

In the first extract, although the execution is sharp and spare, it does not convey that barren style for which *What We Talk About* was praised. Simply by dispersing the text and removing italics, the effect is, as critics have noted, “monotone” and “deadeningly sparse,” having both verbal “anorexia” and “stunning inarticulateness” (Eichman 86; Bell 67; Houston 23).

In removing italics, Lish removed emphasis, inviting that monotone reading. These edits reduce Carver’s conventional, more expansive style into something of a list; a presentation of information akin to stage direction that not only lacks any stylistic flourishes or turns of phrase, but obsessively seeks to avoid them. As the young couple in “Why Don’t You Dance?” consider their unusual situation, the inarticulate narrative developed by Lish works together with the brevity of the sentences to create a narrow world within the story. “She could see the evening star (4)” becomes “She thought she could see a star” (7). Similarly Max, the character selling his possessions, becomes simply “The man.” Leaving details vague or unmentioned emphasises the sense of threat the story carries, creating that “purity of emptiness” (77) Jayne Anne Philips attributed to the collection. Here, Lish’s approach removes a level of connection, even empathy, between the reader and the fictional world. The sections describing the “tender” expressions of the couple as well as the girl’s “unbearable happiness” (5) while dancing are altogether removed in the final version. Following these adjustments, the story is one which presents a world immune to any notion of sentimentality, one that is harsh and detached for the characters which inhabit it.

In *Beginners*, tears flow as often as alcohol. After the narrator of “Want to See Something?” tells her sleeping husband that she loves him, she goes on: “I wiped the tears off my cheeks and lay back down” (37). “Tell the Women We’re Going” features a woman who, having been attacked, “leaned forward and began to cry, quietly, holding the back of her hand against her face” (92). The attacker, Jerry, eventually kills the woman in a jealous rage before rejoining his friend, Bill. The men embrace, and here it is Jerry’s turn to cry: “…he began to pat, to stroke the other, while his own tears broke” (94).

In these examples, which are by no means exhaustive, Lish’s edits remove the acts of crying. *What We Talk About*’s characters become mute in their dealings with grief and horror. In the revised version of “Want to See Something?” (renamed “I Could See the Smallest Things”), the narrator’s feelings are expressed only with the sentence: “I opened my eyes and lay there” (30). It is not only tears but emotion in general that Lish cut from the stories. The revised version of “Tell the Women We’re Going” omits Jerry’s reaction altogether, ending:

Jerry used the same rock on both girls, first on the girl called Sharon and then on the one that was supposed to be Bill’s. (56)

Yet it is perhaps a mistake to assume that sentimentality was the prime target of Lish’s paring. In accordance with the “iceberg principle,” it could be more accurate to say
that the edits remove the inclusion of any kind of reaction. By omitting reactions to shocking or otherwise moving events, we leave characters not at their first stage of repentance or with the beginnings of hope, but at the very nadir of their suffering.

From traditional ghost stories and Brothers Grimm folk tales to more recent examples such as John Cheever’s “Goodbye, My Brother,” the threat of violence has often been used as an atmospheric force driving short fiction. Lish’s edit of “Tell the Women We’re Going” reflects this tradition, while Carver’s original draft, which includes Jerry’s remorse, leaves its reader with the catharsis of regret, and in some sense a return to sanity for the central characters.

A comparison of the title stories highlights Lish’s omission of reaction even more starkly. In both versions, “Beginners” and “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” two couples sit around getting drunk while telling each other anecdotes about love. As in “Tell the Women We’re Going,” Lish’s edit imposes a disturbing ending on Carver’s more optimistic draft. In “Beginners,” Herb leaves the room after he tells his story about a couple who were involved in a car crash. He gets up and has a shower. The narrative viewpoint remains in the room, where Herb’s wife Terri breaks down in tears after she becomes upset while talking about the two loves of her life, one of whom is Herb and the other an ex-husband who we then discover committed suicide. As the narrator looks out of the window, the view echoes the sorry situation indoors: “The blue layer of sky had given way now and was turning dark like the rest.” “But,” he adds, “stars had appeared.” He goes on:

I had to keep still a while longer, keep my eyes out there, outside the house as long as there was something left to see. (198)

There is a sense here that Nick has not given up on the world, despite the fact that it may have given up on him.

The contrast in “What We Talk About” is striking. Lish’s edits create a story in which Carver’s characters, as well as his readers, are completely trapped in the world contained within the room (with only gin and a menacing atmosphere for company). Mel (the renamed Herb) tells a stripped-down version of the car crash story, and before long we are reminded that the gin is still making its way around the room. At the end of Lish’s revision, Terri is denied her crying scene, meaning that for her, as well as for the other three players, there is no release of pressure. The only things to which they can turn are alcohol, silence or, as we have seen elsewhere in the collection, violence. We find that Mel and the others are grounded by their miscomprehensions of love, unable to do anything at all. Lish’s edit even denies them the simple relief of standing up:

Terri just sat there. She did not get up to get anything ... I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark. (129)

Here, there is no discharge of emotion whatever. Violence looms in the background throughout due to Mel’s instability, but the story is left with the characters having exhausted themselves with alcohol.

When considering the overall effect of Lish’s edits, one may see that the cutting of material is in itself an act of circumscription: it silences that which was at one time expressed, imposing limits and drawing boundaries around an existing universe. This supposition hints at Lish’s central contribution to Carver’s drafts, namely the claustrophobic atmosphere from which What We Talk About’s demoralized cast seem unable to escape. By employing a uniform style, constricting the imaginations of
characters, forbidding them the catharsis of reaction, and by ending stories on an
ominous note rather than a hopeful one, Lish’s revisions bind each story to a common
pattern, but also lend the collection a sense of cognisance: the impression that each
narrator is somehow aware of his own laconic craftsmanship, and of the futility of
attempting to change a world which seems, by its very brevity and monotony,
unchangeable. Lish gave the collection high style, and in doing so he crafted succinct
and well-polished stories; however this came at the expense, as we shall discover, of a
narrative device retained only in the original drafts—one which Carver would go on to
employ masterfully in subsequent collections.

28 We have seen how Lish’s edits constricted the cast of What We Talk About in their
abilities to articulate their frustrations, as well as prevented them from imagining a
world beyond their respective plights. Carver’s original drafts, on the other hand,
emphasised a more varied landscape, one of greater intricacies and, with them, an
expansive world wherein characters could, if only momentarily, escape from their
troubles. We see that, above all, Carver had drafted stories of faint hope, scattering tiny
fragments of light among otherwise monotonous lives. One can imagine that these faint
rays of optimism were precisely the kind that drove Carver out of his poor existence
and, eventually, out from under his alcoholism. With this in mind, let us consider how
aspects of Beginners support the collection’s more redemptive outlook.

29 Notably, Carver’s naturalistic model of plain storytelling did not restrict his writing to a
uniform style. In stories such as “Pie,” “The Calm” and “Mine,” Carver employs his
signature brand of terseness. There are no surprises here; the style is that which is used
throughout What We Talk About: short sections, short paragraphs and short sentences.
Lish made very few changes to these three stories. Some sentences are cut and others
reshaped, but the latter versions are generally no shorter than the origina ls, with the
style of narration retained in each case. Yet, consider the opening paragrap h of “The
Fling”:

It’s October, a damp day outside. From my hotel room window I can look out and
see much of this gray Midwestern city; just now, lights are coming on here and
there in some of the buildings, and smoke from the tall stacks at the edge of the
town is rising in a slow thick climb into the darkening sky. (38)

30 This opening section adopts a tone not often seen in Carver’s stories. The narra tor is
playful, indulgent in detail, and at times almost whimsical:

It could be asked that if it is important enough to warrant the telli ng – my time and
energy, your time and energy – then why haven’t I told it before? I’d have no
answer for that. (38)

31 The revised version, renamed “Sacks,” opens:

It’s October, a damp day. From my hotel window I can see too much of this
Midwestern city. I can see lights coming on in some of the buildings, smoke from
the tall stacks rising in a thick climb. I wish I didn’t have to look. (31)

32 “Much” is now “too much,” two sentences have become four, and the description of the
view is severely restrained. Now consider the original opening to “I Could See the
Smallest Things,” which again seems bespoke to its story—in this case characterised by
Nancy’s measured, intimate first-person approach:

For a minute I stood there and wished I could get back that time. Then with my next
thought I understood clearly that I couldn’t do that. No. But it came to me then that
my life didn’t resemble the life I thought I’d have when I had been young and
looking ahead to things. (31)
Her voice is entirely distinct from the poetic descriptions of the city in “The Fling”; distinct also from the narrator of “The Calm,” who Carver endows with ample terseness:

I liked this barber. We weren’t acquainted by name. But when I came in for a haircut, he knew me. He knew I used to fish. (31)

In the revised versions, Lish’s edits pull every story in line to match this style. The narrators of What We Talk About, whether first or third person, are virtually indistinct from one another in their delivery. A few stylistic signatures remain—the abundance of “he goes/she goes” in “Gazebo” and the uses of both forename and surname for every character in “After the Denim”—but the overall sentence length and inattention to detail are regimentally fixed across the stories. Because of this, the collection appears to speak with one voice, of one place, coiling itself around one particular theme. The stories may be considered together to reveal a world “darkened by havoc and loss […] with little light at the end of the tunnel, or no light at all […] rife with fear and frustration and brooding violence (Nesset 31).” By maintaining a particular style of narrative throughout, Lish’s edits ensure that even we, as readers, are trapped within the tunnel.

Beginners, conversely, attends to the individuality of each case it explores. Besides variation, as has already been hinted, what marks Beginners as distinct from What We Talk About is detail. Carver’s early drafts used contextual information to give his characters pasts, futures and, consequently, character. In “I Could See the Smallest Things,” Nancy tells us:

Cliff had to get up too, but he’d gone to bed hours ago and would be okay when the alarm went off. Maybe he’d have a headache … four aspirin and he’d be all right. (31)

Here we are projected into Cliff and Nancy’s futures, if only for a sentence. Later, when we meet a man called Sam Lawton, Nancy gives us a long history of his life, including an anecdote of when she had seen his albino baby. All of this context, from Cliff’s possible headache to the albino’s “poor little finger tips” (33), are cut in the revision. Sam’s history is a whistle-stop paragraph: “Sam had lost Millie, gotten married again, and became a father again all in the space of no time at all” (28). No time at all indeed.

While Lish often targeted Carver’s redemptive endings and sentimental reflections, the characters of Beginners in their original states—rounded, complex, with their lives cast out before and beyond the events in their stories—earn their emotional output in the roundness of character they are given, and in the broader spectrum of time and geography to which their narratives give rise. It is not that Lish removed unwarranted inclusions of sentiment, but that his vision for the collection was grounded in an entirely different emotional register to Carver’s: Lish’s being one of claustrophobia over escapism, stark reality over imagination, and suppression over catharsis.

“A Small, Good Thing,” revised as “The Bath,” underwent Lish’s heaviest edit in the transition between Beginners and What We Talk About. “The Bath” begins with a mother ordering a birthday cake for her son, Scotty. Soon after, Scotty is hit by a car and taken to hospital where he falls into a coma. The anxious parents fret over his condition. On a trip home the father receives a threatening telephone call from the baker, who says, “There’s a cake that wasn’t picked up” (41), without so much as saying where he’s calling from. Back at the hospital, Scotty is still unconscious. The father returns and tells his wife, Ann, to get some rest. She does, but not before encountering a couple who
are at the hospital for their own son, Nelson, who too is in a critical condition. The mother of the family mistakes Ann for a doctor and begins pleading with her for news. Ann finally gets home, disordered with worry for her son and by the strange encounter with the other family. The baker calls the house again, and when Ann asks whether the call is about Scotty, the voice replies, “It has to do with Scotty, yes” (47).

This story, Lish’s edited version, is driven by Scotty’s condition—will he or won’t he regain consciousness?—yet the baker’s looming presence lends “The Bath” its most powerful effect: that of menace. We are left to imagine Ann’s reaction to the baker’s last call—her sense of bewilderment and panic as she believes the news of her son’s deterioration (his death, even) is about to be delivered by the sinister “voice” (47). In this mould, “The Bath” is a story about inarticulateness, misunderstanding and the loss of control.

Where “The Bath” ends, “A Small, Good Thing” goes on to detail the mother’s reaction. She returns to the hospital in time to witness her son’s death, then, while grieving, the Weisses are again called by the baker. This time the mother recognises the voice, and demands that her husband drive her down to the bakery in the middle of the night. The couple confront the baker, but following a cathartic release of grief and guilt, the three people sit down and eat freshly baked bread.

Unlike Carver’s typical cast, the characters of “A Small, Good Thing” seem entirely unused to disaster and cynicism. These are good parents, living in a pleasant community, who are undone by this single event. The transition from their middle-class contentment to the tragedy of their son’s death is so markedly drawn that the parents’ inability to deal with the situation becomes the central focus of the story. Before Scotty’s death, Ann Weiss is persistently hysterical in the presence of medical staff, exclaiming, “Oh, no,” or, “My God” (72), whenever doctors are unable to answer her questions. After seeing her son die, she cannot find a way to express her emotions:

She heard herself and thought how unfair it was that the only words that came out were the sorts of words on the TV shows where people were stunned by violent or sudden deaths. (74)

In a short space of time she expresses guilt, sorrow, denial and anger. Just how unforeseen this tragedy was in the light of their happy lives is stated again and again. The atmosphere of “The Bath,” however, is not so turbulent. The edits ensure that What We Talk About’s established forces of cynicism and menace are so domineering that any attempt by the parents to express hope or sadness are at once recognisably futile. No amount of praying or crying will cure the state of things.

Following from the characters of “A Small, Good Thing” seemingly having access to a broader range of emotions, the couple in Carver’s original draft also make use of their extended lives by stepping outside of the hospital, outside of their home, and outside of what, at first glance, seems to have been the short story’s premise—that of a boy fighting for his life. Their visiting the baker is an unanticipated turn which refocuses our perception of the story’s first half: what we have read is not a tale of menace or mistaken identity, but one of a couple struggling to pause in their lives long enough to appreciate “small, good” things. The contrast of the baker’s kindness in the final scene is vital to the story’s effect, as is its sense of being unexpected, both for the characters themselves as well as for the reader. The introduction of a segue or alternative perspective, a narrative divergence that seems at first to be almost irrelevant to that
which has come before it, was a device Carver eventually used with powerful effect in his next collection, *Cathedral*.

It is clear that Carver himself was often troubled with feelings of hopelessness. In his essay “Fires,” he recalls a bleak epiphany at a time when he had been working long hours in menial jobs to support his wife and children. After waiting half an hour in a laundromat for a dryer to become available, he sees that a machine has stopped spinning and plans to “get rid of the clothes and replace them with [his] own” (32). But just as he is about to do this a woman opens the dryer, feels the clothes, “closed the door and put two more dimes in the machine” (32). He goes on:

> Up to that point in my life I’d gone along thinking, what exactly, I don’t know, but that things would work out somehow—that everything in my life I’d hoped for or wanted to do, was possible. But at that moment, in the laundromat, I realized that this simply was not true. I realized—what had I been thinking before?—that my life was a small-change thing for the most part, chaotic, and without much light showing through. (33)

This anecdote is told in the vein of *What We Talk About*: a bleak situation made bleaker by a sense of hopelessness. Yet despite his predicaments, Carver remained, at least in his writing, a man of subtle optimism, drafting stories of desperate souls who nevertheless glimpsed distant horizons, ways out, or could take some comfort from simple things. Carver wrote in his essay “On Writing” that:

> ...extremely clever chichi writing, or just plain tomfoolery writing, puts me to sleep. Writers don’t need tricks or gimmicks or even necessarily need to be the smartest fellows on the block. At the risk of appearing foolish, a writer sometimes needs to be able to just stand and gape at this or that thing—a sunset or an old shoe—in absolute and simple amazement. (23)

As we have seen, by removing *Beginners*’ redemptive endings—from the “something left to see” (198) in the title story to the friends’ embrace in “Tell the Women We’re Going”—Lish removed Carver’s “stand and gape” reflections, paring language to a degree that could even be considered “chichi.” The desolate voice of *What We Talk About* takes Hemingway’s “iceberg principle” to its formal limits, and could even be understood to qualify for Carver’s definition of “formal innovation,” writing that displays:

> a licence to try to brutalize or alienate a reader. Too often such writing gives us no news of the world, or else describes a desert landscape and that’s all—a few dunes and lizards here and there, but no people; a place uninhabited by anything recognizably human (24)

By the time *Cathedral* was published in 1983, Carver had insisted that Lish play a supporting, rather than leading, role in suggesting alterations. As such, “A Small, Good Thing” was reinstated in its original form, Carver’s landscape was populated by a more expressive and arguably more human cast, and narrative turns—from states of inarticulateness to the suggestions of something understood—were used as key devices throughout the collection.

Carver’s most famous story, “Cathedral,” begins with the narrator struggling to empathise with a blind man who comes to stay with him and his wife. The narrator doesn’t know what to say to the blind man. “I started to say something about the sofa. I’d liked that old sofa. But I didn’t say anything” (296-297). When the blind man says something about the color television, the remark fails to illicit any reaction whatever: “I didn’t know what to say to that,” the narrator confesses. “I had absolutely nothing to
say to that. No opinion” (300). From this inarticulate beginning, reminiscent of Lish’s design, the story takes an unusual turn of events, and our narrator begins to let down his guard. During the scene in which, together, the men draw a cathedral on the back of an old paper bag, there is a sense that something has been understood, and that the barriers of the narrator’s prejudice, his “small change” life, and of his own inarticulateness are lifted, if only for a moment. This effect is dependent on and owing to the unexpected—even bizarre—nature of the scene:

First I drew a box that looked like a house. It could have been the house I lived in. Then I put a roof on it. At either end of the roof, I drew spires. Crazy. (306)

The exclamation “Crazy” speaks not only of the unusual scene itself, but also of its intervention in the narrative course of the story. There is a sense that we are off-road here, the trajectory of events side-tracked and overshot by this unexpected turn, just as in the final scenes of “A Small, Good Thing,” “Tell the Women” and others in Beginners.

The scene in which the blind man guides the narrator’s hand in drawing a cathedral was understood by Craig Raine to be analogous to the relationship between Carver and Lish:

It is a story about writing, a story about the editorial process—in which someone without talent is used by someone else to write. The major contributor is the blind man. He can’t do it without the boobus, but it is clear who does the writing. (44)

Raine paints Carver’s writing “Cathedral” as a “brave” (44) admission of the debt owed to Lish’s editorial talents. It is difficult to reconcile this reading, however, given that “Cathedral” is essentially a cathartic story. It is a redemptive account of how a man’s repressed life and cynical outlook is liberated by the brief affinity shared between the central characters. Taking Raine’s allegory along its natural course—supposing that Carver really was writing about his own situation—one is required to advance the notion that Lish’s interference was in some way an exalting experience for the author, and that the editor’s guiding hand infused Carver’s stilted imagination with expressions he had never previously known, rather than, as his letters show, something which caused him much anxiety and frustration. Is it not more accurate to say that “Cathedral,” if at all analogous to the relationship between Carver and Lish, is a story about turning away from restraint and cynicism, a tale in which instinct breaks free from propriety, wherein the drawing of the cathedral presents a celebration of unpolished expression; of first drafts, even. Having broken from his “demons” (quoted in Campbell, J.) by subduing Lish, there is a sense beneath the final line of this transitional story that Carver’s “marriage of necessity” (30) has been shaken loose, and a new beginning intimated.

“Cathedral” may be understood to be Carver’s declaration of independence. It is clear that during his early career, the longing to change the trajectory of his increasingly stifled circumstance as a writer (and, of course, as an alcoholic) engendered stories in which characters abandon, often recklessly, the proscribed orbit of their lives.

To illustrate the effect further, let us examine a similar “off road” turn found in the writing of Tobias Wolff, Carver’s friend and contemporary. In Wolff’s much- anthologised story, “Bullet in the Brain,” the murder of Anders (a curmudgeonly English professor embroiled in a bank robbery) is so markedly distinct from the story’s segue that the disparity between the sections becomes a pronounced divide, two scenes bookending a life. Running through the final paragraphs is a sense of unreconciled
nostalgia; as the bullet begins its trajectory towards Anders’ head, time slows, and he recalls an episode from his childhood.

“Shortstop,” the boy says. “Short’s the best position they is.” Anders turns and looks at him. He wants to hear Coyle’s cousin repeat what he’s just said, but he knows better than to ask. The others will think he’s being a jerk, ragging the kid for his grammar. But that isn’t it, not at all – it’s that Anders is strangely roused, elated, by those final two words, their pure unexpectedness and their music. He takes the field in a trance, repeating them to himself. The bullet is already in the brain; it won’t be outrun forever, or charmed to a halt. In the end it will do its work and leave the troubled skull behind, dragging its comet’s tail of memory and hope and talent and love into the marble hall of commerce. That can’t be helped. But for now Anders can still make time. Time for the shadows to lengthen on the grass, time for the tethered dog to bark at the flying ball, time for the boy in right field to smack his sweat-blackened mitt and softly chant, They is, they is, they is. (268)

54 Here, Wolff provides a beautiful example of the off-road short story, which, when considering all the differences we have noted between Beginners and What We Talk About, can be considered one of Carver’s central motifs, and the device most often struck from the original drafts by Lish. In Beginners, for so many of Carver’s players, “the bullet is already in the brain” (268): their predicaments, whether through inescapable grief, alcoholism, tedium or wrongdoing, will remain permanent aspects of their conditions. Yet in the unexpected details of life—details which seem brought to prominence by the constrained artifice of storytelling—these predicaments, though they “won’t be outrun forever,” may be momentarily outshone. In these moments of reflection Carver allows his cast to “make time,” to indulge in escapism and to, above all, “just stand and gape” at the introduction of something which may at first seem peripheral, uninvited, or perhaps even against the strictest principles of concise storytelling.

55 While, in Lish’s model, the short form bestows its constricted nature upon the situations it describes, Carver’s harnesses his cast’s minimalist lives to emphasize “small, good things”—such things as a dog’s bark, the smell of bread or the majesty of cathedral spires—things which, in such repressive landscapes, are able to exceed the reach of their grasp, and the apparent scope of short fiction itself.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Ne faudrait-il pas considérer les ébauches d’un écrit comme une œuvre à part entière plutôt que comme une version diluée de l'œuvre finale ? Selon TS Eliot, on peut être « original sans procéder à beaucoup de changements » : lorsqu’on considère la nature de la réécriture, il ne sert souvent à rien d’imaginer un processus d’écriture linéaire selon lequel une histoire ou un poème n’aurait qu’une seule vie, de sa conception à sa version définitive. Il vaut mieux considérer que les changements éditoriaux, même les plus mineurs, engendrent de nouvelles œuvres : des œuvres originales qui doivent être considérées en tant que telles. En comparant de près les premières versions des nouvelles de Carver et les versions proposées par son éditeur, on observe que beaucoup d’entre elles ont non seulement des effets différents sur les lecteurs, mais ont peut-être aussi été écrites dans des buts différents.

(Résumé traduit par Emilie Piarou et Lucie Collas)

AUTHORS

PAUL SWEETEN

Paul Sweeten was educated at the University of Kent and Oxford and has published fiction in Ramble Underground and Ambit Magazine. His essays have appeared in the Oxonian Review, Wave Composition and Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal. He is a senior editor at the Oxonian Review.
“He was a shit, to boot”: Abjection, Subjection and Feminism in “Black Venus”

Richard Pedot

How can I put it; although I might have liked to write poetry like Baudelaire’s, I certainly would not, for one single minute, have wanted the kind of life that Baudelaire lived. His poetry is the product of terminal despair, and he was a shit, to boot.

(Carter 1997; 41)

They are photographs of dead bodies for the most part. This morning’s collection contains the photograph of what might be a man’s body, or a woman’s; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig.

(Woolf 13-14)

Focusing on abjection as a means of discussing Angela Carter’s feminism, I obviously do not claim any precedence since, as Anna Hunt recently noted, “Julia Kristeva’s theory [of abjection] is becoming a familiar terrain in Carter criticism” (Hunt 135).¹ Such interest in abjection and its theorisation seems to follow quite logically from a thematic insistence throughout her works on—to put it mildly in her own words—“subterranean areas behind everyday experience” (Carter 1995; 459). The monsters thus unleashed have been a source of discomfort for readers and critics alike, feminists included, who wondered whether the post-modern revisiting of the male canon were not eventually a colluding with it.¹ Abjection, therefore, whether tackled explicitly under that name and understood in Kristevan terms or not, has been a moot point for Carter studies and a challenge for those seeking a way to articulate it in an unambiguous discourse.

In the following, I will argue that abjection, thematically and structurally, defies articulation or re-articulation even, as far as Carter is concerned, in its most common
form—i.e. a Bakhtinian reading of the grotesque or the carnivalesque. It does so in particular because, by definition, it resists binarism. Consequently, although it has a lot to do with gendering, it cannot be gendered, which is despairing news for those who would like to define the author’s work in hard lines but should encourage critics to look at it as a truly critical engagement with the issue of subjection, inseparable from that of abjection. For want of space, I will focus my argument on Black Venus’ eponymous story.

Let me first introduce as briefly as possible the main terms of abjection and subjection. It has become nearly impossible to consider the former in philosophical, psychological or literary studies without due mention of Julia Kristeva’s *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*, a book that probably owes more to Mary Douglas’s seminal *Purity and Danger* than the scant, but highly relevant, allusions to it in its follower. At stake is an on-going debate between anthropology and psychoanalysis over the relative weight of the social or the individual factor in human phenomena. It need not detain us too long but has implications for the way we may envisage our present concern which bear consideration.

The gist of Douglas’s argument is that taboo has to do with social order and what it excludes to maintain itself. What she variously calls impurity, pollution, dirt, uncleanness—or the abject—is “matter out of place” and must be understood in terms of the social symbolic system: “if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained” (Douglas 40). Instances include, among others, food taboos (e.g. on the meat of animals standing in-between two classes), pollution by death or fear about what pertains to or issues from bodily margins, such as spittle, blood, milk, menses, skin, nails, and so on (Douglas 121). To Douglas, then, “the body is a symbol of society” and “the powers and dangers credited to social structure [are] reproduced in small” on it (Douglas 115). It is easy to see how Kristeva’s theory falls in with her predecessor’s, as when she defines the abject in her first pages—“Abjection is not caused by lack of cleanness or of health, but by that which disturbs a given identity, system, order. That which ignores boundaries, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the hybrid” (Kristeva 12)—or when she returns, as she frequently does, to bodily margins and images of waste. But she parts company with Douglas—quite explicitly in the two occasions mentioned above—over the issue of subjectivity.

Kristeva approves of the “structuralo-functionalist” reading of pollution as a threat to social order, as an indication of what society must exclude to persist. But, to her eyes, this begs the question of why should bodily waste, like menses or excreta, represent or metaphorically embody “the objective frailty of the symbolic order” (Kristeva 85). Neither can Kristeva disagree that nothing can be considered repulsive *per se* but only in contravention of the classificatory rules of a given symbolic system. Yet, she is still wondering about “subjective structurations” within each speaking subject which would correspond to a given “socio-symbolic system” (Kristeva 111). How the notion of subjective structuration should be read or how independent of social structuration it is supposed to be is not stated. Like Mary Douglas, with Bruno Bettelheim in mind, we might conclude: “the relation between culture and individual psyche are [sic] not made clear” (Douglas 115). However clear the relation, Kristeva’s contribution should not be thrown out with Bettelheim’s bath-water, since her most significant contribution to the theory of abjection results from her stress on subjectivity, or rather imperilled subjectivity. For her, indeed, the abject constitutes what the subject must ceaselessly
reject in order to exist separately: it is a form of jouissance—in Lacanian parlance—threatening to engulf the subject who is rescued from drowning by the Other who makes it repulsive to the subject (Kristeva 17). Abjection both summons and annihilates the subject (Kristeva 12) and this can explain why "so many victims of abjection (l’abject) are fascinated, if not docile and willing, victims" (Kristeva 17).

From Douglas to Kristeva, then, there is a shift in emphasis which does not reconcile the anthropological and the psychoanalytical views, but their theories seem to concur that the abject reveals the powers and the dangers of society. Similarly, there emerges from both theories an image of the abject as part of a process of rejection (lat. abjectus: rejected) and subjection—a symbolic system of hard and fast lines (Douglas) which prescribes position through the exclusion and subjection or annihilation of what lies in the interstices, etc. (Douglas). Hence, in phallocentric societies, the feminine body is found to be a prominent site of pollution—see the frequent, though by no means universal, taboo on menses—as the abject other of the semiotic construction of the male subject. The apparent contradiction between the image of woman as Virgin Mary or as Whore in fact illustrates the conjunction of rejection and subjection which defines abjection: it is one and the same thing to reject the whore as the abject source of contamination of the social order, and to subject woman to the ideal representation of dis-embodied purity, each process upholding the other.

One can see then that the theory of the abject can both sustain and complicate feminism. Studies of the abject can bring to light a given group’s or society’s symbolic and semiotic scaffoldings and thus contribute to define which position those ascribe to the feminine. Yet they cannot suggest definite outlines for a feminist agenda since the abject is that which has no contours, not even being an object. My argument is that much of the debate about Carter’s feminism results from the—by definition indeterminate—status of the abject. Simply put, we might either go by Carter’s quote about Baudelaire as “a shit” (my first epigraph), reading it as a definite indictment of the abjection of masculinity—which, we may fear, is too peremptory to tell the whole story; or build on Woolf’s allusion to photographs of war atrocities in Spain (second epigraph) which suggests that abjection ignores identity divides (man/woman, human being/animal—or animat/inanimate) and therefore cannot be aligned with either the feminine or the masculine.

In Carter’s pronouncement about Baudelaire, no precautionary steps (“How can I put it; although I might have liked […]”) can temper the finality of its conclusion. Her view here, on the face of it, is shared by many critics of “Black Venus.” Readings of the tale usually highlight Carter’s depiction of Baudelaire’s bastardly behaviour towards his mistress and his prejudiced vision of women. Her strategy relies for a great part on the contrast between, on the one hand, the image of woman as Ideal (the muse) and, on the other, the pointed allusions to the squalor of her and the poet’s condition and to the power relationship between muse and poet. Thus, Carter deflates the rhetorics of Baudelaire’s “agonised romanticism” (10) and its denial of reality or—closer to our concern—of a fascination with the abject associated with the feminine and the alien. Here is one instance of Carter’s strategy:

His lively imagination performs an alchemical alteration on the healthy tang of her sweat, freshly awakened by dancing. He thinks her sweat smells of cinnamon because she has spices in her pores. He thinks she is made of a different kind of flesh than his. (10)
In other words, Baudelaire is shown to sublimate his fear of and attraction to the abject—bodily excretions, in this case—into poetical images, thus rejecting the feminine other twice: as abject and as exotic sublime. The feminine turns out to be a foreign body around which the poetic oyster secretes its pearls—or jewels. The strength of abjection in the poet’s universe is nowhere more strikingly illustrated than in the episode where witnessing Jeanne’s straddling the gutter and pissing “as if it was the most natural thing in the world,” not even letting go of his arm, makes “his Lazarus [arise] and [knock] unbidden on the coffin-lid of [his] trousers” (11). True to either Douglas’s or Kristeva’s definition, the dissolving power of abjection is imaged in the fantasised corroding effects of the flowing excretion:

It seemed to his terrified, exacerbated sensibilities that the liquid was a kind of bodily acid that burned away the knitted cotton, dissolved her petticoat, her stays, her chemise, the dress she wore, her jacket, so that now she walked beside him like an ambulant fetish, savage, obscene, terrifying. (11)

Abject then is the poet’s love of abjection, fetishised as a black female savage. Here then, in the gutter, shambles the princely albatross leaving a less than pleasant memory of him, unless you count the gift of that other abjection, “the veritable, the authentic, the true Baudelairean syphilis” (14), as a fond keepsake. Just like Poe’s father in “The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe” who “melted clean away, leaving behind him in the room as proof he had been there only a puddle of puke on the splintered floorboards” (34), the poet becomes the very source of abjection (in the dynamic sense of the word) as coupled to the rejection of the feminine.

Baudelaire’s example, then, amongst others in the collection, corroborates readings that tend to consider abjection in Carter’s works as part of a feminist argument against the subjection of women and more specifically an attempt at “re-presencing Jeanne Duval” (Mumford) as a woman existing in history—the long history of male domination—by bringing out the abject from under the idealisation of woman as muse. We might say that here Carter is in fact following up on the demythologising agenda she set out in The Sadeian Woman. Of particular interest to us is her “Speculative Finale: The Function of Flesh,” her last chapter, in which she opposes—or tries to oppose—flesh to meat. Her main argument rests on that very distinction: between what is “usually alive and, typically, human” and what is “dead, inert, animal and intended for consumption” (Carter 1999; 137)—at least, we should add, in certain conditions, to circumvent, if possible, its abject character. Carter is interested in how, with Sade, “the garden of fleshly delights becomes a butcher’s shop” for the “satisfaction of scientific curiosity in dissection” and the exploration of “the inhuman sexual possibilities of meat” (Carter 1999; 138). Sade, she offers, “writes about sexual relations in terms of butchery and meat” (Carter 1999; 137).

Sade, probably, figured among “those rare, precious volumes, the jewelled missals, the incunabula, those books acquired from special shops that incurred damnation if you so much as opened the covers” (7) that you browse through on the poet’s shelves and from which he could learn to untangle “the history of transgression” (12). So, yes, Baudelaire, seeing in Jeanne “a different kind of flesh,” “savage, obscene, terrifying,” was a shit, all the more so since he contaminated her with his venereal disease eventually telling on her body “the ghoulish litany of the symptoms” (5), a litany of abjection—at first, black stumps for teeth, “a persistent vaginal discharge that smelled of mice” (6), until the teeth are gone and her hair falls out, that wonderful hair so
revered by the poet, and then nothing remains but a crippled body and a face to "terrify the little children" (12).

13 Read on/from the front line, Baudelaire cannot hope to escape unscathed, no more than his American counterpart whom Clare Hanson, in a reading associating Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler, unblinkingly calls “the abject Poe” (Hanson 62). In this light, “Black Venus” is “engaged and interested in challenging the assumptions of the sexualized woman as dark, diseased and corrupting” (Matus 19) and in re-historicising Jeanne Duval in the context of nineteenth-century representations of female sexuality.

10 However, as either Douglas or Kristeva remind us, abjection is that which blurs lines, hard and fast lines, and a mere reversal of abjection from a female to a male position—the shit, the abject male—will not suffice, no matter how sound it is, socially or ethically, to grapple with the unconscious implications of abjection and rejection and the resulting process of subjection.

14 To acknowledge the issue’s complexity, I will now consider abjection in one of its ultimate manifestations which, as can be guessed from the above, has no chance connections with “Black Venus”: death. As Woolf intuited, in response to the photograph of a dead body, the image of a corpse—the more so when maimed or decaying—loosens the knots of identity. Saying this, however, is not to eschew the gender issue but to be in a better position to face a crucial paradox, which Elisabeth Bronfen, in her discussion of Poe, states as follows:

Paradoxically […], this obliteration of gender [in a corpse], along with all other socially constructed features, is represented in western culture through a gendered body, the superlatively beautiful, desirable feminine corpse. (Bronfen 64)

15 Death and the feminine are thus inextricably mixed but the relationship is not easily unfolded. Indeed, to the paradox just underlined, another one can be added. Linked as it is to death, the feminine is synonymous with abjection but at the same time is a metaphor of sublimation, standing both for abjection and its sublimation—while death, by the same process, is both abject and beautiful. This doesn’t cancel out the vision of woman’s body as the site of abjection, but complicates it significantly. The equation of the feminine with the abject becomes less straightforward, more of a cultural construction, more an ambivalent representation of what escapes hard and fast rules. Imagining the dead female body as the most poetical image thus is one way of coping with the danger of the abject—which is neither male nor female—by gendering it, that is to say by inscribing the a-semiotic within a semiotic system, and for further protection by sublimating it in a positive and static image.

16 What is called for, then, with texts like Carter’s—belonging with what Kristeva calls “the literature of abjection”—is a revision of the muse figure. For, both in Poe’s and Baudelaire’s case, it is poetry which is the ambivalent medium between the abject and the beautiful. The coincidence of the Whore and the Virgin Mary then has its counterpart in the ambivalent figure of the muse. The image of dead woman as muse—or of muse as dead woman—is a disturbing instance of a conflation of purity (the idealised, etherealised muse) and abjection (the corpse as the ultimate source of pollution). One of the most striking representations of the said ambivalence in Carter’s works might be the moment in which the young heroine of “The Bloody Chamber” encounters the embalmed corpse of the opera singer in her husband’s secret vault which she depicts thus: “The cool, sad flame of the candles flickered on her white, closed eyelids. The worst thing was, the dead lips smiled” (Carter 1979; 28). It would be
wrong, I think, to see the smile only as a sign of the victim’s disturbing complicity with her torturer. It equally betrays an uncomfortable awareness of a poetic embalmment of the abject—the murdered body as a still life picture of the muse—or of the poetic scribble of a smile on the face of abjection—since, for all we know, the smile might as well be the embalmer’s creation, the product of some “Poe-etics” of decomposition, to borrow Maggie Tonkin’s phrase.  

Because of this combination of the a-symbolic with the symbolic which can give way to no stable synthesis from which one might draw a definite moral stance, we must also revise some critical trends in Carter studies. I am not thinking of readings that may feel so much unease at Carter’s texts that they end up suggesting a complicity with patriarchy. If we agree that abjection points to “the slipperiness of subjectivity, the messiness of existence which the social subject must attempt to delineate and disavow” (Hunt 146), then it becomes obvious that one cannot merely fall back on the hard lines that the text challenges to put an end to the reader’s discomfort. We have to acknowledge the ideological unease but also be weary not to come up too readily with rather more sophisticated ways of accommodating it. It is on such readings that do not entirely avoid the temptation and eventually try to salvage a stable feminist position in Carter’s works that I would like briefly to focus now to conclude my argument.

Rebecca Munford is obviously hedging her bets when, in her introduction to her reading of “Black Venus” she concedes that:

Certainly, there is a sense in which Carter’s exuberant intertextual interweaving of a decadent poetic [sic] raises uncomfortable questions about her potential complicity with a male-centred aesthetic structured around the objectification of the female body. (Mumford 2)

But her admission is largely qualified by the rest of her argument that Carter “re-presences” Jeanne Duval, and the conclusion that “the relentless subversion and explosion of [the male-centred] tradition invests her re-visioning with a feminist politics” (Mumford 11). Now, much as we can agree that Jeanne Duval’s figure is given a fuller historical status by the author’s re-visioning strategy, we still have to question her “presence” in what amounts to a “utopian” re-presenting of her life after Baudelaire’s death—as the narrator imagines it in the last pages. It is difficult to reconcile the assertion of “presence”—a tall order, especially in a post-modern context—and the awareness of a textually-mediated (re)creation with so many blurred frontiers. There is, of course, the unsettling insistence of the abject on the feminist agenda, along with the author’s equivocal engagement with her male model and muse but also with her heroine. Speaking for Jeanne, rather than letting her voice be heard—how could she?—the narrator/author is representing her as a deputy or a solicitor would rather than represencing her: not unlike Baudelaire whose rhetorics and imagery stick to hers, “[her] eloquence denie[s] her [Jeanne] language” (9). Lastly, if presencing then means focusing on the abject as that which lies outside poetic language and therefore debunks the poet’s agonised romanticism, then it becomes difficult for Jeanne Duval to stand as a subject, if we remember Kristeva’s argument that the abject engulfs the subject.

Jeanne then is more willed into being/presence than present, which implies indeed that it behoves the reader to take up the cudgels Carter scattered through her text in not unambiguous ways—not an easy task, on any terms. Clare Hanson’s objection to “The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe,” in many respects a companion piece to “Black Venus,”
illustrates the problem. Drawing on both Butler and Kristeva, Hanson argues that “a resignification of the domain of the abject/excluded will ‘force a radical rearticulating of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all’” (Hanson 61). Carter’s story is found to be wanting in this respect, moving rather towards stasis and a re-inscription of the phallocentric archetype of the maternal-feminine equated with death.

Should we agree that the story is such a stasis, there would still arise the question of what happens to the notion that “for Butler the zone of exclusion offers a vantage point from which the heterosexual symbolic can be challenged”? Or, otherwise stated, who failed to take up the challenge: the author or the reader/critic? We may in fact wonder how the abject can be made to re-signify for a subject when it lies outside the symbolic to begin with, as “an attractive and repulsive magnet [which] places the one haunted by it [the abject] literally beside oneself” (Kristeva 9). Besides, Hanson’s reading also begs the question of the signifying medium: the compactness of the tale format—to deal “directly with the imagery of the unconscious” (Carter 1995; 459)—may not be comparable in this respect to the far lengthier format of the novels, usually a more discursive or even didactic vehicle.

Generally, any attempt at re-signification shuns seminal tensions in Carter’s works, as can be seen in the vogue of Bakhtinian criticism. Betty Moss, for instance, reading “Peter and the Wolf,” assimilates the unease elicited by the Gothic—one of Carter’s models—with the ambivalence which Bakhtin considers is provoked by the grotesque, and goes on underlying Bakhtin’s view of this ambivalence as regenerative (Moss 190-1). The Bakhtinian grotesque relies on strong binaries, i.e. hierarchies—high/low, mind/body, the elite/the people, the masculine/the feminine—whose reversal is equated with a subversion of social order. However, there are both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons why we should not take Bakhtin’s views for confirmation of the subversive power of the Carterian grotesque. As is known—and as Carter herself was aware—the grotesque overthrow of social hierarchy is but transitional, and eventually leaves it intact, being something of a safety valve. Moreover, as soon as the grotesque stands in indefinite kinship with the abject—which is more often than not the case in Carter—then we have to drop any idea of its regenerative power, as abjection is not on the side of désir but of jouissance, that is to say engulfment, the fading of the subject (Kristeva 17). In other words, the grotesque body—seen through Bakhtinian lenses—is not the bodily abject, as it is already part of a signifying structure which abjection puts to task.

Let us consider “Black Venus” again. Undeniably, even the relatively short space of the story can accommodate grotesque elements and those may farcically serve a social critique, as when the poet is said to make “a performance worthy of the Comédie Française out of a fuck,” a “five-act drama with farcical interludes” and then he cries and “talks about his mother” (12) or when Jeanne warns him he should let “the bloody cat out, before it craps on your precious Bokhara” (3). The low and the feminine can then overthrow the high and the masculine. But how are we to “re-articulate” the episode in the gutter? Are we prepared to see an image of Jeanne’s regeneration in her buying false teeth and a wig thanks to the sale of a manuscript or two? And what about the description of her finding herself and coming down to earth? It would be heartless, if not downright cynical, to read it without a qualm about its bitter ironies: “You could say that Jeanne had found herself; she had come down to earth, and, with the aid of her
ivory cane, she walked perfectly well upon it” (13). What could “her self” be with such a prosthetic body? and what her stance or status thus supplemented with a cane, whatever its monetary value? How far she has strayed from the albatross, “sooty” as it was (9). How far from “carnivalesque liberation” (Wisker 193), from Gothic, Poe-esque horrors, too.

24 The grotesque in “Black Venus,” especially in the concluding section, is more than contaminated with the abject, so much so that it can hardly be an instrument of social and personal transformation. Therefore, “the carnivalesque energies” of Carter’s works should not obscure “the ambivalences and tensions that these energies mediate” (Britzolakis 56)—i.e. the tensions and ambivalences characterising abjection. But there is yet another paradox, on which I would like to conclude, which is that there might be more regeneration in store for Baudelaire, if we consider his poetic legacy, including to writers like Carter. Carter’s ambivalent relation to the French poet has often been noted and Carter’s dismissive comment on his being a shit is no less ambiguous, as the excluded abject remains artistically attractive—remember: “[she] might have liked to write poetry like Baudelaire’s.” Indeed, Carter here, to borrow Lucy Armitt’s words, “flirts with textual danger on her own untamed terms” (Armitt 98) and risks contamination by the literature of abjection.

25 Consider the end of the story. To most readers, it will coincide with the last, seemingly uncompromising, allusion to “the veritable, the authentic, the true Baudelairean syphilis.” However, those are not the story’s very last words as it goes on with “Sed non satiata,” given in the original French, followed by a short note referring to the other poems in the Black Venus Cycle. This suggests a parallel between Baudelaire’s venereal gift and his poetry. Is poetry, then, the true Baudelairean syphilis, infecting readers and writers beyond his grave? The poem is not only at the end of the text, it is there, with many others by Baudelaire, from the very beginning, interlacing its image and fantasies with Carter’s own writing—and resonates to the end as a call to embark for Cythera in search for an ever-receding reflection in a mirror, telling us of abjection and the difficulty for the self to emerge and stand free:

Dans ton île, ô Vénus! je n’ai trouvé debout
Qu’un gibet symbolique où pendait mon image
—Ah ! Seigneur ! donnez-moi la force et le courage
De contempler mon cœur et mon corps sans dégoût!
(Baudelaire l. 57-60)

26 I do not wish to imply that Carter is merely, uncritically, reduplicating her literary ancestors in the literature of abjection (Baudelaire, Poe, Sade...). Her own interpretation of Sade as a moral pornographer who “might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes” (Carter 1979; 19) shows how concerned she was both with abjection and its critical potential and how difficult such a position is bound to be. Her re-visioning of the male canon cannot escape being, in the true sense, equivocal. But the equivocation is also part of the literature of abjection, one of its “virtues,” as Kristeva suggests. She relates abjection to perversion in that the former neither ignores nor bows to a law, a prohibition or a rule, but rather twists or corrupts them. The same obtains for the literature of abjection, which plays with and circumvents Religion, Ethic, Law—proving them both necessary and absurd—but at a distance from the abject: “The writer, fascinated by abjection, will represent its logic, project himself/herself into it, introject it and pervert language—form and content—accordingly. But on the other hand, just as the feeling of abjection is both abjection’s
judge and accomplice, so is literature when it comes to terms with it” (Kristeva 23). So, Kristeva concludes, what such literature calls for is “an easing of the Superego,” of those necessary but untenable hard and fast rules which, as Douglas also implies, deny the messiness of existence.¹⁹

We have to see equivocation in Carter’s literature of abjection as such a call, and see its critical potential for a more complex perception of the mechanisms of feminine subjection, and consequently forego any hope of defined answers. Abjection is an exacting muse.

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


NOTES


2. I borrow here from Joseph Bristow and Trev Lynn Broughton’s introduction to The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: “Carter delved into the most unsettling depths of Western culture, only to transmogrify its myths and unleash its monsters.” (1)


4. Though Kristeva’s awareness of and debt to her predecessor’s book is obvious throughout, it is not until p. 84, in her third chapter (“De la saleté à la souillure”—“From Dirt to Pollution”) that she first and last mentions it, and the anthropologist’s name will return briefly only once in the
Cet article examine les liens compliqués de l’œuvre d’Angela Carter au féminisme à la lumière de la place qu’y joue l’abjection, non seulement comme un thème récurrent, souvent indissociable de celui de l’exclusion du féminin, mais aussi en tant que principe innarrant son écriture. L’argumentation, appuyée sur «Black Venus,» passe par la discussion d’une tension fertile entre, d’une part, une dénonciation (féministe ?) de l’abjection comme moyen d’assujettissement afin de forcer les individus à occuper des rôles sociaux définis et, d’autre part, une plongée dans ce que Carter appelle le débarras de l’inconscient, au prix d’une perte de subjectivité séduite par l’abject littéraire.
Le débat autour du féminisme de Carter résulte du statut indéterminé de l’abject et nulle réponse définitive n’est à espérer de sa littérature, bien plutôt une perception plus complexe, dérangeante et stimulante des mécanismes de l’assujettissement.

AUTHORS

RICHARD PEDOT

Richard Pedot is professor of British literature and literary theory at the University of Paris Ouest. His publications include *Perversions textuelles dans l’œuvre de Ian McEwan*, *Le Sceau de l’inhumain: Heart of Darkness*, *Le Seuil de la fiction : essai sur le secret* and numerous articles on A. Carter, I. McEwan, G. Swift, J. Conrad, K. Ishiguro, J. Joyce, N. Hawthorne…. He is co-founder and editor of *L’Atelier*, an on-line peer-reviewed journal on English literature and arts.
“Spoiled People”: Narcissism and the De-centered Self in Richard Ford’s Women with Men

Ian McGuire

1 In an important moment in “Occidentals,” the third and final story of Richard Ford’s 1997 collection Women with Men, Helen Carmichael asks Charley Matthews, her boyfriend and the story’s protagonist, what he longs for and Matthews answers: “I’d like for things not to center so much on me” (171). Afterwards this phrase is returned to more than once as a way of explaining what Matthews may or may not want. Not to be at the “center of things” we learn means, in part, seeking a “less governed life,” (157) a life not bounded by social or cultural conventions:

   He longed to be less the center of things. He realized this was what a foreign country—any foreign country—could offer you and what you could never get at home. The idea of home, in fact, was the antithesis of that feeling. At home everything was about you and what you owned and what you liked and what everybody thought of you. He’d had enough of that. (174)

2 The desire to escape from domesticity and all it represents is a standard enough trope of male American writing. Leslie Fiedler pointed out more than half a century ago that an urge to “light out for the territory” in one form or another is central to many of the most significant works of the American canon, while, more recently, Philip Fisher and Ross Posnock have both argued, in different ways, that America and its literature aspires to a condition of permanent immaturity.1 Charley Matthews has already gone some way to responding to this apparently typical American urge by leaving his job and his marriage and taking a trip to Europe with Helen; as the story progresses, however, it becomes clear that his notions of escape do not follow what we might consider, after Fiedler and others, to be the orthodox patterns.2 Although Matthews occasionally uses a language of Jamesian self-expansion (he wishes at one point to “convert himself into someone available to take on more of life” [223]) his strongest desire is actually to dissolve or escape from the self rather than to create or embrace a newer or larger identity. Matthews finds Paris, where they are vacationing, baffling and ungraspable, but as the story proceeds he becomes increasingly attracted to it precisely because it is a
place in which he will never fully understand, and where he could, therefore, never fit in. To live in Paris as he imagines it would be to self-consciously occupy a liminal or marginal position—to be forever undefined and indefinable:

This had to do, he understood, with wanting not to be the center of things, with wanting to get lost in events, with conceivably even fitting into the normalcy of another country—though normalcy of course was foolish to think about. Look around (he said this unexpectedly out loud). He could never fit in in Paris. Except that was no reason why you couldn't, with the right set of motivations, be here.

In this imaginary—selfless and decentered—state, cognitive and communicative disconnection are the necessary preconditions for a deeper, more satisfying kind of experience. Matthews comes to regard his limited knowledge of the French language and his lack of curiosity about French culture and history as a means of freeing himself from any kind of social role or responsibility:

Yet he found there was another good side to it: since when he would listen in on some conversation Helen was having with a clerk or a flower vendor and would try to figure out from this word or that what either of them were saying he got almost everything wrong. [...] It could get to be addictive he believed, not understanding what people were saying. Time spent in another country would probably always be spent misunderstanding a great deal, which might in the end turn out to be a blessing and the only way you could ever feel normal. (180)

Matthews here associates feeling “normal” with being alienated and being alienated, in turn, with being free. The basic elements of this linkage may be familiar enough from the various forms of European modernism in which “angst” is imagined as the unavoidable price of humanness, but Matthews crucially differentiates himself from those traditions by imagining this alienation/normality not as a burden to be endured, but rather as a “blessing” to be hoped for. Matthews’ desire not to be the center of things is, in other words, much more postmodern than it is modern—and it connects, therefore, not only to an established line of American literary individualism but also to a more recent postmodern championing of the decentered subject in contrast to the “centered” or Cartesian self.¹

If we recognise the literary individualism described by Fiedler, Fisher and Posnock as being one aspect of a broader Emersonian tendency in American letters⁴ then it becomes perhaps easier to understand the particular combination of ideas which emerge in Matthews’ Parisian musings and the particular set of confusions or uncertainties they cause. Emerson’s work inaugurates an American pragmatist tradition, a tradition which in turn connects to European postmodernism genealogically (via Nietzsche’s reading of Emerson) and intellectually via a shared anti-foundationalism. Both ways of thinking reject the notion of a fixed, pre-existing, Truth and argue instead for some version of constructivism.² However, while American pragmatism replaces metaphysics with an interest in everyday, contingent, truth-making processes—what Hilary Putnam has called “our sense of the common” (Putnam, Realism 118)—European postmodernism (in the work for example of Foucault and Derrida) frequently pushes onwards towards something closer to a full-blown relativism in which knowledge becomes merely a function of power and truth becomes, therefore, something to be avoided or undermined rather than pursued. My contention in this essay is that in Women with Men Ford is alert to the ways in which such relativistic, postmodern tendencies have emerged out of a more home-grown tradition of philosophical scepticism and is concerned with mapping the psychological effects of
these tendencies and with suggesting (in terms which ultimately refer back to the American pragmatist tradition) their fundamental weaknesses.

The link between Charley Matthews’ views and the perspectives of contemporary postmodernism is suggested most strongly by his relationship with Paris. If Matthews is, or aspires to be, a decentered subject, then Paris, as he sees it, is a decentered and decentering city. From Matthews’ perspective there is “nothing natural” (179) about Paris—mainly because, for him, everything about it is mediated through prior representations. Although he has never visited France before, he has already used the city as a setting in his novel The Predicament and has already discussed it in his classes on African-American literature. The result of all this prior textualisation is to make Paris deeply unreal for Matthews—“I don’t really know where any of these places are,” Matthews said. “I just read about them. They aren’t real to me. They never were” (166)—an effect which he sometimes finds irritating but just as often welcomes as a form of liberation. In the following passage, there are elements of Emersonian mysticism (the famous transparent eyeball) but also of a testier, more Nietzschean, irrationalism:

In the meantime he felt better about everything. And walking up the wide, congested Boulevard Raspail—a legendary street he knew almost nothing specific about, bound for some unknown destination, with little language available, no idea about currency, distances or cardinal points—made him feel a small but enlivened part of a wider not a narrower experience. (222)

Matthews’ difficulty in finding his way around the city, which he unsuccessfully attempts to navigate with the help of a Fodor’s guidebook, is one of the story’s running jokes. His confusion testifies in part to his New World provincialism, but also, the story suggests, to something inherently puzzling about the city itself. During his final long walk Matthews wonders whether Paris has a center at all or whether “downtown was an American idea, something the French would all laugh at if they knew what he was thinking” (237). The contrast here is not simply between the planned space of the American city and the more organic unplanned space of a European city (since Paris after Haussmann is certainly not unplanned) but rather between different forms or degrees of planning. Philip Fisher, in an unashamedly free-market revision of Henri Lefebvre’s critique of capitalist abstraction, argues that the purpose of the American grid system inaugurated by Thomas Jefferson is to eliminate geographical distinctiveness in favour of democratic homogeneity. The grid facilitates movement (both social and physical) by making everywhere more or less the same. Every point on the grid is equal—therefore every point is, in some sense, the center. The center, in other words, is everywhere. According to Fisher, this means it is, symbolically at least, almost impossible to get lost: “This is the special intelligibility and transparency of ways of life that conquered the geographical variety of the American continent, making the American suburb broadly similar from Boston to Los Angeles. It feels ‘like’ home everywhere” (Fisher 49). Fisher’s version of a homogenous and democratic America is, to a large extent, a pro-capitalist fantasy but it is a telling one. If the American grid system aspires to make everyone feel at home, to make them feel, in other words, perpetually centered, then Paris for Matthews does and means exactly the opposite—it is the place where he can never feel at home, but where as a result he might, possibly, feel most free. Fisher intriguingly describes the new democratic social space created by the American grid as “Cartesian” and this linkage between geography and philosophy is reinforced towards the end of Matthews’ walk when he observes that:
Ahead of him [...] was St-Germain-des-Pres and, he’d deduced, the Deux Magots, the 
Brasserie Lipp, the Café de Flore—one of the great confluences of Europe. There was 
no more famous place. *Descartes was buried in the church.* It would have to be the 
center of something. (236 my emphasis).

If St Germain has to be “the center of something” we might deduce, from its particular 
philosophical associations that it is, for Matthews at least, the center of a kind of 
centerlessness—and this moment is indeed the apogee of his efforts at urban self-
erasure. It is followed by an awkward phone call to an ex-lover and then by his 
discovery that Helen has committed suicide in his absence—the moment of climactic 
reversal in which the moral failure of Matthews’ strategy is definitively exposed.

It is the failure of his relationship with Helen which most clearly expresses within 
“Occidentals,” the philosophical inconsistencies of Matthews’ postmodernist position. 
Matthews’ fantasy of escaping from the self is unfavourably contrasted with Helen’s 
desire to hold onto life in the face of a serious, possibly terminal, illness. Quite soon 
after Charley’s statement about not wanting to be at the center of things, the two of 
them have the following exchange:

> “Do you love Paris now?” she said. “Do you feel like you’re not the center of 
everything? Because you’re certainly not.”  
> “I don’t feel much like it’s Christmas.”  
> “That’s because you’re not religious. Plus you’re spoiled,” Helen said. “For spoiled 
people the real thing’s never enough. Don’t you know that?”  
> “I don’t think I’m spoiled,” Matthews said.  
> “And spoiled people never do. But you are though.” [...] “Not to want to be at the 
center of things, that’s what spoiled people think they want.” (180-181)

This conversation takes place in a religious curio shop where Helen has just discovered 
and purchased (to Matthews’ bemusement) a tea towel with the slogan “THE GLORY OF 
GOD IS TO KEEP THINGS HIDDEN.” If Matthews’ viewpoint is broadly postmodern, 
Helen’s, as suggested here and reinforced elsewhere, is common-sensically Kantian—she 
believes there is something like an ultimate Truth but she is also well-aware that she 
does not have direct access to it. Whereas Matthews sees Paris as pleasingly 
unknowable, Helen sees it as the repository of a kind of seriousness she envies but 
cannot hope to emulate:

> “You know what people want when they come to Paris?” Helen said, still staring up 
at the glowing dome with the white sky in the background.  
> “I don’t,” Matthews said. “I have no idea.”  
> “To be French,” Helen sniffed. “The French are more serious than we are. They care 
more. They have a perspective on importance and unimportance. You can’t become 
them. You just have to be happy being yourself.” (177-178)

If to be French is to be inherently serious, then to be spoiled it seems may be typically 
American–Helen importantly admits that *she* is spoiled too, “I’m the same way, just not 
as bad as you are” (181). Although Helen may not be free of this besetting problem, she 
is certainly alert and self-conscious enough to accurately diagnose and describe it. For 
Matthews and people like him, she tells us, the “real is not enough”—in other words his 
postmodern desire to escape from himself (and from meaning more generally) is based 
on a lack of appreciation of what he already has, and a consequently unrealistic or 
childish yearning for something else. Helen’s diagnosis here is a home-spun version of 
the arguments of more sophisticated anti-postmodernists such as Hilary Putnam and 
Jurgen Habermas. For Putnam and Habermas contemporary relativisms are inherently 
contradictory since if *everything* is relative then relativism itself must be relative also.
Therefore, in arguing **against** the universal claims of reason and Enlightenment and arguing **for** the superior claims of relativism, relativists implicitly (or ungratefully in Helen's terms) assume the existence of the very rational and transcultural standards of proof which they explicitly try to reject.¹⁰

The cultural and psychological sources of such postmodern relativism are many and complex, and any attempt to precisely define or fix them is far beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, Hilary Putnam makes a passing remark about this subject which in the context of Ford's work is both relevant and suggestive. Having noted that contemporary scepticism about interpretation is based on an “adolescent sort of error” which imagines that because descriptions can never be complete they are therefore worthless, he then goes on:

> It must be conceded that the error has deep roots. Talk of “otherness,” “exotopy,” and “incommensurability” would not be as widespread as it is if the ideas of perfect knowledge, of falling short of perfect knowledge, and of the falsity of everything short of perfect knowledge did not speak to us. What those roots are is a matter for speculation. Certainly there is a desire for what psychoanalysts call “fusional” relationships. It is a commonplace to say that the tragedy of life is that we are “alone,” that such relationships are impossible; but perhaps as one grows older one comes to feel that separateness as a blessing as well as a curse. (Putnam, _Realism_ 120)

Putnam’s suggestion here interestingly illuminates Helen’s assertion that Matthews is “spoiled.” If the postmodern rejection of the real originates in a frustrated desire for metaphysical “oneness,” then it is plausible to see the postmodern gesture as not only a rebellion **against** metaphysics but also (and I suspect this is Putnam’s point) as a displaced version of it.¹¹ Matthew’s apparent desire to be nothing, in this context, becomes only a modified version of the standard narcissist’s desire to be everything, since both tendencies are based on an unwillingness to recognise the reality of a separate, limited self existing within a world of external objects—a world which contains other people who are both distinct and real. Matthews’ desire to escape from himself is, in other words, as Helen’s comments perceptively suggest, based on a refusal to be satisfied with what he has and what he, like everyone else, inevitably is.

According to Melanie Klein (following on from Freud), narcissistic disorders are a result of the infant’s unsuccessful separation from the mother due to a failure of the Oedipal process. This developmental failure produces feelings of overpowering rage and fear within the patient, feelings which are dealt with by a form of splitting whereby the bad part of the mother is externalised and the good part is introjected and thus forms the basis of a delusional and grandiose self-image.¹² If Matthews’ desire to lose himself in, and be absorbed by, Paris is, as I have suggested, a displaced form of narcissism, then we must trace these narcissistic tendencies back not literally to the months of early infancy (rarely a good subject for realist fiction) but rather more simply to Matthews’ feelings of emotional abandonment subsequent to the departure of his wife Penny and the failure of Blumberg, his French editor and a symbolic father figure, to offer him any adequate compensation for this loss.¹³

Early in the story he remembers his marriage in terms that strongly recall the symbiotic mother-infant bond: “the two of them had once been so close as to be two parts of one person. That was years ago. Whatever he’d liked then she’d liked. Though that was over now.” He then immediately compensates for this painful recollection of primal loss by reimagining Paris **itself** as a kind of substitute mother/wife: “Paris […]
seemed to lie forth more the way he would’ve wanted had he ever let himself want it. A metropolis of bounteous issue; a surface to penetrate; a depth in which to immerse oneself, even reside in” (171). In merging or potentially merging with the city, Matthews escapes in fantasy from the loss of Penny and from the murderous anger which that loss has provoked in him—a tactic we see in full in the final movement of the story. Within this complicated psychic drama Helen becomes (in symbolic opposition to Paris) another version of Penny, i.e. the “bad” or failed mother whose own needs and desires oppose and take precedence over those of the child (Matthews):

Helen dominated life, shoved other interests aside, visualised her own interests clearly and assumed his were the same.

The best thing to say about Helen was that he wasn’t adequate to her needs or demands, due to needs and demands of his own, and that he should let things go on as they now would then quietly part company with her once they were home. He’d felt the very same—that he’d barely escaped with his life—when he left behind being a professor. (222)

In this context, Matthews’ oddly casual attitude to Helen’s cancer (“Helen had had cancer of the something a year before” [158]) can be understood as in part a result of his unconscious feelings of aggression towards her—feelings which are themselves a projection of his more fundamental anger towards Penny. The fantasies he enjoys while walking alone in Paris, fantasies of never going back to the hotel, of abandoning Helen entirely—“just having a long lunch alone, buying the cigar he’d imagined and setting off on a very, very long walk” (239)—suggest that her eventual suicide, although literally unexpected, may also express Matthews’ deeper matricidal desires. (This possibility is reinforced by the fact that Helen’s actual death in Paris echoes Penny’s fictionalised death in Matthews’ novel The Predicament where Greta, who is an “unflattering” version of Penny, is killed off in a traffic accident.)

The possibility, suggested by “Occidentals,” that postmodern relativism and regressive anxiety are linked responses to a contemporary male experience of loss or absence is also explored in the collection’s first story “The Womanizer” via the relationship between Martin Austin and Josephine Belliard. Austin, like Matthews, has separated from his wife and is defined by a general dreaminess and lack of intellectual and emotional fixity. Vacillation and uncertainty are his dominant characteristics throughout the story. He second-guesses himself compulsively:

He almost said “I love you” into the receiver. But that would be a mistake, and he didn’t say it, though part of him furiously wanted to. Then he nearly said it in French, thinking possibly that it might mean less than it did in English. But again he refrained. “I want to see you very much” he said as a last, weak, compromise. (39)

Josephine has, in contrast, we are told, “a greater sense of responsibility than he had, a greater sense of life’s importance, its weight and permanence” (91). (In other words, within the logic of the story, and perhaps of the collection as a whole, she is characteristically French). Austin’s attraction to Josephine lacks the kind of unconscious aggression we see in Matthews’ relationship with Helen, but is nonetheless peculiar in ways that suggest it is equally regressive and narcissistic. First, his desire for Josephine is almost entirely oral—they never sleep together and the most physical intimate moments of the relationship are all to do with kissing. Second, Josephine is throughout extremely, perhaps definingly, resistant and/or indifferent to his oral advances. As a result of these two linked tendencies Austin spends a significant time in the story trying to manoeuvre Josephine into kissing him and then once he has
in some sense succeeded, considering in detail the (usually disappointing) nature of that experience. One example out of several will suffice:

“I want to kiss you the right way, not that way,” Austin said. He pulled her firmly to him again, taking hold of her soft waist and pushing his mouth towards hers. He kissed her as tenderly as he could with her back stiff and resistant, and her mouth not shaped to receive a kiss but ready to speak when the kiss ended. Austin held the kiss for a long moment, his eyes closed, his breath travelling out his nose, trying to find his own wish for tenderness igniting an answering tenderness in her. But if there was tenderness it was of an unexpected type—more like forbearance. (71-72)

Josephine persistently denies Austin the oral satisfactions he craves. She is in that sense, and much more explicitly than Helen Carmichael, the “bad” or withholding mother, just as Austin is (again much more explicitly than Matthews) the disappointed/angry/terrified infant. Austin’s unspoken, infantile fears of abandonment are, in the story’s final section, partially projected onto Josephine’s actual son Leo who is abducted and assaulted after Austin takes him out to a nearby park. The projection is only partial because in passages such as the following it is clear that the fear of the absent mother is as much, if not more Austin’s, as it is Leo’s:

a darker thought entered his mind: of Josephine never coming back, deciding simply to disappear somewhere en route from the lawyers. That happened. Babies were abandoned in Chicago all the time and no one knew what happened to their parents. He knew no one she knew. He knew no one to contact. It was a nightmarish thought (77).

If, according to the Putnam passage quoted earlier, both metaphysical Realism and postmodern scepticism can be aligned with forms of developmental failure in that both are motivated by an urge for pre-oedipal “oneness,” then Putnam’s proposed “solution” of “internal realism” implies a version of successful maturation which involves separation (from the mother or from Truth) but not complete separation. Such a position clearly echoes the standard Freudian model in which unsatisfiable infantile desire is sublimated in socially useful ways rather than being acted out or repressed. Ford’s adherence to this, in some ways quite traditional, model as an alternative to the developmental failures he associates with the intellectual weaknesses of postmodernism is made explicit in the middle story of the collection “Jealous” which is set in Montana in 1975 and which acts as a foil to the other two pieces. In contrast to “The Womanizer” and “Occidentals”, “Jealous” offers a traditional, perhaps even nostalgic, version of American selfhood in which the inevitable sexual and philosophical uncertainties of adolescence are successfully resolved under the influence of a benign father-figure and via the mechanisms of the classical Oedipal model.

The key to the story lies in its initially mysterious title. Although there are some hints of jealousy in the relationships between Doris and Larry’s father and between Larry’s father and his estranged wife, these are not particularly significant. The story is clearly not about jealousy in any overt or explicit way, and the title only begins to fully make sense when we consider the narrative via a Freudian model in which the relationship between father and son is defined by sexual rivalry over the mother—in which the son is in other words, by definition, jealous. The structure of the story, in which Larry the seventeen-year-old protagonist, leaves his father in Montana and travels in the company of his Aunt Doris to Seattle to visit his mother, allows what is on a conscious level unspeakable to emerge in the dream-like interval between leaving one parent and reaching the other. The events which occur in and around the Oil City bar, where Doris
and Larry are waiting for the Seattle train, function as a fantastic realisation of Larry’s Oedipal urges. Barney, his Aunt’s temporary drinking companion, an ersatz father figure, is gunned down by the police and shortly afterwards Doris (who is very clearly a version of the mother) seeks comfort by having sex with Larry in her Cadillac. Larry in other words achieves (albeit in a displaced form) what according to Freud every male child truly wants—he satisfies the incestuous desires which, unsatisfied and unsatisfiable, elsewhere in the collection fuel the narcissisms of Matthews and Austin.

The kind of freedom that Doris offers to Larry, although it seems exciting and tough-minded at times is, the story finally insists, regressive and immature. This is signalled strongly, if strangely, by Doris’s revelation in the story’s final pages that she is bisexual: “I was involved with another woman for a while. Quite a while in fact. It was very fulfilling […] Does that shock you? I’m sure it does” (143). Although Larry pretends he isn’t shocked by this, he certainly is, and it is this revelation rather than any more orthodox Freudian threat of symbolic castration which has the effect of resolving or ending Larry’s Oedipal phase—of allowing him to achieve a healthy and independent selfhood. In using homophobia as the catalyst for successful individuation, Ford appears to be following Freud’s suggestion that homosexuality represents a form of narcissistic self-regard. (An implication which is also present in “The Womanizer” where Austin, while in Paris, uncomfortably occupies the apartment of a gay acquaintance—“a luxurious metal-and-velvet faggot’s lair with enormous mirrors on the bedroom ceiling” [53]). Such a linkage, between narcissism and homosexual desire, feels outdated in the light of contemporary queer theory and it may well add to our sense of “Jealous” as a relatively conservative story in which nostalgic regionalism and father-son bonding are offered as implicit alternatives to the failures of postmodern culture. Within the context of the collection as a whole, however, it is important to note that this more old-fashioned vision offers little concrete hope or help to characters such as Austin and Matthews whose social and familial backgrounds have clearly not prepared them to understand or resist the temptations of a contemporary postmodern milieu. If “Jealous” succeeds in reminding us that the dilemmas of the American present are not necessary or universal, that they emerge from a particular historical set of circumstances, it does little to explain how they may currently be overcome. For that we must turn again to the endings of the other two stories and in particular to the remarkable penultimate scene of “Occidentals” in which Matthews finally meets his translator Mme de Grenelle.

Part of the purpose of the scene between Matthews and Mme de Grenelle is certainly to mock Matthews, perhaps on some level even to morally punish him for his previous blindness and self-absorption. If through most of the story (focalised as it is through him) we have seen other people—Helen and Penny especially—translated into his way of thinking, this pattern is comically reversed by Mme Grenelle who proposes to transform Matthews’ self-justifying autobiographical novel into a satire with an unreliable protagonist:

“So. It is not quite finished in English. Because you cannot rely on the speaker. The I who was jilted. All the way throughout, one is never certain if he can be taken seriously at all. It is not entirely understandable in that way. Don’t you agree? Perhaps you don’t. But perhaps he has murdered his wife, or this is all a long dream or a fantasy, a ruse—or there is another explanation. It is meant to be mocking.”

“That could be true,” Matthews said. “I think it could.” (253)
Mme de Grenelle’s subversive rereading of *The Predicament* functions also and equally well as an interpretation of “Occidentals” itself—since Matthew’s moral reliability is central to both the imagined novel and the actual story. In that sense, this scene could be seen as itself a postmodern gesture by which Ford emphasises the status of the story as only one text (among other texts) by including within it its own ironic reinterpretation. Mme de Grenelle’s otherness in relation to Matthews is strongly signalled by both her race and her sexual orientation, and at first or even second reading it may seem that her intervention at this late stage shows Ford conceding to the relativizing, postmodernist tendencies which the rest of the story seems to wish to resist. Mme de Grenelle is brutally accurate in some ways but crude and coercive in others, in other words she herself is not entirely reliable, and the temptation may be to conclude from this fact that there is no one right interpretation of what has happened or of who Matthews is, and that Ford is offering us finally, in opposition to Matthews’ narcissistic fantasies, only a more sternly postmodern and pluralistic world made up of incommensurable language games, of separate versions of the truth which cannot ultimately meet.

At this point, however, it is useful to refer again to Hilary Putnam. In *Reason Truth and History* Putnam specifically addresses the issue of translation as part of his consideration of relativist arguments concerning incommensurability. He notes that relativists such as Kuhn and Feyerband emphasise the impossibility of any true or accurate translation across languages or even across different historical versions of the same language:

The incommensurability thesis is the thesis that terms used in another culture, say, the term ‘temperature’ as used by a seventeenth-century scientist, cannot be equated in meaning or reference with any terms or expressions we possess. As Kuhn puts it, scientists with different paradigms inhabit ‘different worlds’. (Putnam, *Reason* 114)

Putnam rejects these arguments as self-refuting by noting that if taken literally they would mean that people from other eras or cultures (or even earlier versions of ourselves) could not be understood or recognised at all. As with other contemporary manifestations of relativism, he sees radical scepticism about translation as being based on the failed fantasy of complete synonymy (which he argues is equally absurd). Rather than the opposed alternative of synonymy or incommensurability, Putnam offers a notion of translation based on “interpretative charity”: “interpretative success does not require that the translatees’ beliefs come out the same as our own, but it does require that they come out intelligible to us” (Putnam, *Reason* 117).

Although Matthews has, in an earlier conversation with Helen, explicitly supported a relativistic understanding of translation—“I think it’s inventing [...] I think it’s using one book to invent another one” (164)—the story’s conclusion emphasises that his opinions have changed. The story ends with Matthews deciding to write a long-delayed letter to his parents: “And in his letter he would try as best he could, and with the many complications that would need detailing, to explain to them all that had happened to him here and what new ideas he had for the future” (255). In writing to his parents, Matthews is clearly “centering” himself again, in other words he is placing himself firmly back inside the social and historical contexts from which he has earlier sought to escape. This may seem like a modest and rather conservative gesture, but within the logic of the story and in the context of his recent narcissistic and matricidal fantasies it
is a small but telling vision of a new maturity (or realism to use Putnam’s term) in which the various experiences of loss, separation and difference—all symbolically encapsulated in the original loss of the mother—can be acknowledged and managed through (rather than denied or embodied by) language, and in which also the very ability and willingness to recognise and communicate with others, however uncomfortable or partial that communication may feel, is itself important evidence of a shared set of assumptions and beliefs.

Such moments of hard-won hopefulness are rare enough in Ford’s short fiction, but their rarity testifies more to the difficulties of expressing, even within art, the valuable but unstable combinations of knowledge and uncertainty that internal realism (to use Putnam’s term) implies, than to any lack of faith or belief on Ford’s part in the importance of the realist project. In “Charity”, a story in his next collection A Multitude of Sins, the protagonist, Nancy Marshall, while on vacation in Maine finds herself observed by a busload of Asian tourists whom, she is sure, imagine her to be very different from the person she actually is. “Isn’t it odd,” she says to her husband, “to be seen but to understand you’re being seen wrong” (Multitude 205). This encounter subtly echoes that between Matthews and Mme de Grenelle in the sense that both are moments of cross-cultural encounter in which recognition and misrecognition are combined. For Nancy this experience provides a rare moment of freedom and pleasure in an otherwise unhappy weekend, but the pleasure, I would argue, comes as much from being misunderstood as from being noticed in the first place (and also vice versa). Ford’s point here, as in the Mme de Grenelle scene, is surely that both elements of the experience of communication or translation (the being seen and the not being recognised) are equally crucial since to achieve maturity is to recognise both similarity and difference—i.e. to realise that other people exist, but that it is not possible to completely understand them. If to be fully understood (or centered) is the nightmare from which male American protagonists from Rip Van Winkle onwards have fled, then Ford reminds us in Women with Men and elsewhere that to not be understood or seen at all (to be decentered) is in fact equally unbearable and impossible. If both “Occidentals” and “The Womanizer” only hint at a third “mature” position, it is not, as I have just suggested, because Ford does not recognise that such a position is real and meaningful but rather because such a position is so inherently unstable and fleeting that to name it at all is to risk having it harden into Truth or dissolve into difference. As Nancy notes in “Charity,” after being seen but also not seen by the busload of tourists: “It was a grand feeling […] The great mistake would be to try to seize […] and keep it forever. It was good just to know it was available at all” (Multitude 205).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. In the provocative and hyperbolic Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction Fisher argues that America and its literature is defined by a process of creative destruction in which each generation starts afresh and in which immigration (or “removal”) is thus “a life form not a one-time act” (272). In Philip Roth’s Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity, Posnock places Phillip Roth within a literary and intellectual tradition of transgressive immaturity which is at the same time Emersonian, pragmatic and modernist. He emphasizes,
above all, Roth’s refusal to conform to any predetermined role or expectation, his desire to always remain on the move. Fiedler notes in the introduction to *Love and Death in the American Novel* that ever since Rip Van Winkle “the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat–anywhere to avoid ‘civilisation,’ which is to say the confrontation of a man and a woman which leads to the fall, to sex, marriage, and responsibility” (xx).

2. Fiedler suggests in typically robust fashion that the three main options available to a male American protagonist fleeing the confines of domesticity are impotence, innocent homosexuality and unconsummated incest (329-69). Fisher and Posnock emphasize, in contrast, the importance of pragmatic or aesthetic self-creation but neither set of possibilities, the darkly Freudian or the more hopefully pragmatic, fully capture Matthews’ position.

3. The classic articulations of this position are Roland Barthes 1967 essay “The Death of the Author,” and Jacques Derrida’s 1966 lecture “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” In the latter work Derrida uses “center” as a synecdoche for structure more generally, and identifies a recent “rupture” or “event,” which we may plausibly identify as the beginnings of postmodernism and which he describes as the moment when “language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse” (Derrida 280).

4. Fiedler had little time for Emerson (who is barely mentioned in *Love and Death in the American Novel*) but Emerson is central to both Fisher and Posnock, and the central importance of Emerson to the development of America’s literary and philosophical traditions has been convincingly argued for by a number of recent critics–most notably Richard Poirier and Cornel West.

5. The connections between American pragmatism and continental philosophy are most energetically and thoroughly examined in the work of Richard Rorty.

6. “Standing on the bare ground–my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space–all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant is then a trifle and a disturbance” (Emerson 6).

7. Although in his discussion of “democratic social space” Fisher does not acknowledge any debt to LeFebvre, the connections are clear enough.

8. The notion of the city as a place of irrationality, disorder and postmodern “play” has been articulated most notably by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

9. The same terminology is used by LeFebvre, although with entirely opposite political implications.

10. For a more detailed account of this argument see Hilary Putnam *Reason, Truth and History*, 119-124. See also Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* and, for a discussion of how Putnam’s ideas may relate to literary criticism, Martha Nussbaum.

11. The most clear and striking example of this paradox within the postmodern canon is the hallucinatory anti-Realism of Jean Baudrillard where the hyperreal frequently takes on the qualities of absolute truth. In *Fatal Strategies* for example Baudrillard notes: “Just as the model is more real than the real […] the amazing aspect of fashion is that it is more beautiful than the beautiful. […] It exceeds the aesthetic form in the ecstatic form of unconditional metamorphosis” (Baudrillard 186).

12. Freud’s classic essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction” has surprisingly little to say about the specific ways in which narcissistic disorders develop. Melanie Klein and her followers, however, offer a more detailed account. Paula Heiman notes, for example: “in the narcissistic condition the external object is hated and rejected, so that one loves the internal object which is fused with the self and experiences pleasure from it. The external object and its inner representation (gained through introjection) are thus sharply divided. However, the technique of splitting the object
into two derives from and presupposes the fundamental premise that somewhere the two are one” (Klein et al 154).

13. Narcissism is an accusation that has been levelled at Americans before of course—in the work, most notably, of Quentin Anderson and Christopher Lasch. Both Anderson and Lasch see narcissism as an unfortunate side-effect of American individualism—and, in particular, of American culture’s long-standing disdain for fathers (both literal and symbolic). Matthew’s relationship with his actual father (who runs a furniture business in Pittsburgh) remains quite vague in “Occidentals” but the story begins with him being painfully disillusioned by his French editor Francois Blumberg—a man he has previously imagined in distinctly and sentimentally paternal terms: “From their correspondence, Matthews had always pictured Francois Blumberg as an old man, a kindly keeper of an ancient flame, overseer of a rich and storied culture that only a few were permitted to share” (152).

14. This idea of the “bad” mother comes from Melanie Klein’s object relations theory. The splitting of the mother (or more specifically the breast) into “good” and “bad” versions—the former introjected, the latter projected outwards—is typical, according to Klein, of the paranoid-schizoid position of early infancy which should be left behind in the process of healthy development. The failure to pass beyond the paranoid-schizoid position is associated with narcissism as well as a number of other related mental disorders. See Klein’s essay “Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms” in Mitchell 175-200.

15. The aggression towards the “bad mother” is present in the story but is expressed via Josephine’s first husband Bernard who writes an autobiographical novel intended to humiliate her (91).

16. “We have discovered, especially clearly in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance, such as perverts and homosexuals, that in their later choice of love objects they have taken as a model not their mother but their own selves. They are plainly seeking themselves as a love-object, and are exhibiting a type of object-choice which must be termed ‘narcissistic’” (Freud 88).

17. Mme de Grenelle is of “mixed race” (Matthews speculates that she is Berber) and shares her house with another woman.

ABSTRACTS

À un moment important d’ « Occidentals », la dernière nouvelle du recueil Women with Men de Richard Ford, publiée en 1997, le protagoniste Charley Matthews maintient qu’il ne veut plus être « au centre ». Ses désirs le relient à la vieille tradition d’individualisme américaine et en même temps à une forme de postmodernisme européen plus récent. Ne pas être au centre signifie, manifestement, être libéré des contraintes domestiques et sociales, mais alors que le récit progresse, cela signifie aussi être libéré du moi cartésien ou du moi « centré », être, selon le discours postmoderne, « décentré ». Cet article soutient que dans Women with Men Richard Ford est conscient de l’importance croissante de ces tendances postmodernes dans la culture contemporaine américaine et qu’il s’intéresse à tracer leurs origines et à suggérer leurs faiblesses. Sa critique du postmodernisme souligne ses tendances narcissiques et relativistes. Il offre comme alternative une version du réalisme philosophique que l’on pourrait comparer au « réalisme interne » proposé par le philosophe américain Hilary Putnam.
AUTHORS

IAN MCGUIRE

Ian McGuire teaches American Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Manchester. He is one of the codirectors of the University of Manchester’s Centre for New Writing, which he also helped found in 2006. His novel, Incredible Bodies, was published by Bloomsbury in 2006 and he has published scholarly articles on W.D. Howells, Walt Whitman and Herman Melville. He is currently completing a monograph on Richard Ford and contemporary American realism.
Loose Canons: Reader, Authors and Consumption in Helen Simpson’s “The Festival of the Immortals”

Ailsa Cox

1 In her story “The Festival of the Immortals,” Helen Simpson peoples a literary festival with figures from the English literary canon. Charlotte Brontë reads from Villette; Katherine Mansfield and Samuel Coleridge run a joint workshop on keeping a writer’s notebook. The story satirizes the phenomenon of the author event which has now become obligatory for any published writer. In the UK alone there are at least a hundred literary festivals taking place every year, the best known of these being the Hay festival, called “the Woodstock of the mind” by ex-President Bill Clinton. While government spending cuts may reduce some of the smaller festivals, it seems unlikely that this trend will ever be reversed, given the success of such events as a marketing tool. 200,000 tickets were sold at the 2010 Hay festival, an increase of 20% on the previous year, and the festival’s annual report details the large amount of media coverage generated for the publishing industry by the British festival alone; the Hay brand has been exported to sister festivals across Europe, South America, Africa and Asia.

2 Perhaps it was during one of these international festivals that the Irish short story writer and novelist, Anne Enright, wrote a diary piece for the London Review of Books, in which she described “this book-selling business” as an “endless round of taxi-plane-taxi-interview-interview-gig-hotel” (31). Although her article is entitled “A Writer’s Life,” there is no mention of the compositional process or the act of writing. The reader may infer that the defining purpose of the “writer’s life” has been left at home, along with Enright’s neglected family and abandoned housework.

3 The Hay festival is sponsored now by the Daily Telegraph, but previously by the Guardian newspaper, in which Simpson’s story first appeared in December 2006. A symbiosis has arisen between newspapers, publishers, festivals and other means of generating much-needed publicity, such as prizes. For instance, the £30,000 Sunday Times EFG Private Bank Short Story Award is bestowed on the winning author at the Sunday Times Oxford
Literary Festival, the prestige of a high-profile literary event enhancing the newspaper's association with high culture, good taste and other bourgeois values. In *Consuming Fictions*, Richard Todd traces the rise of the Booker Prize, since the 1980s, as an arbiter of British literary culture, and the subsequent proliferation of similar prizes, generating the phenomenon of the literary blockbuster. His analysis of how "contemporary literary canon-formation is subject to powerful, rapidly changing market forces affecting and influencing the consumer" (9) describes the complex interaction of prizes, TV and radio coverage, screen adaptations and bookstore promotions in widening the readership for serious fiction, and—as he sees it—generating a “golden age” for the postmodern novel, exemplified by the success of A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990).

Todd’s book, published in 1996, does not consider public readings, festivals or other live events; Todd’s research was carried out before the growth of the Internet and online book sales, developments which confirm the pace of change within the market forces shaping “canon-formation.” Since 1996, the tactics used to promote novels have been extended to the short story. The *Sunday Times* Award (first awarded in 2010), is one of several major prizes inaugurated in the UK and Ireland since 2000, notably the BBC National Short Story Prize (2006), the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award (2005) and the Edge Hill Prize (2007). Todd’s central thesis, that “novelists […] have worked in an increasingly intensified atmosphere, one in which both the promotion and the reception of serious literary fiction have become steadily more consumer-oriented” (128), includes the proposition that—consciously or unconsciously—fiction-writers are making aesthetic decisions as part of this nexus of production, promotion and consumption.

While it lies outside the scope of this article, a parallel study to Todd’s, considering the formation of a contemporary short story canon in Britain, would certainly include the work of Helen Simpson, who is the only short story writer to have won the *Sunday Times* Young Writer of the Year Award (in 1991, for her first collection, *Four Bare Legs in a Bed*). Since then she has published another four collections, all well received. Her work is frequently anthologized and broadcast on BBC radio. As previously noted, “The Festival of the Immortals” was first published as a commission for the *Guardian*. The story is metafictional, in that it draws attention to its status as an artifact, destined to be performed “live” by its author; and, it may even be regarded as a custom-made advertisement for its own performance.

Simpson’s account of the festival is highly ambivalent. It is revealed as celebrity-driven and voyeuristic, with Fanny Burney giving a talk about her mastectomy and Jane Austen sniping at questions about being fed by a wet nurse: “because of course that was what people were interested in now, that sort of detail, there was no getting away from it” (111). However, these satirical elements are tempered by an affectionate portrait of two elderly festival-goers, Phyllis and Viv, for whom the cult of the author represents an emotional investment in the habit of reading. Phyllis and Viv served in the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) during the Second World War:

“The first time I saw you, we were in the canteen,” said Phyllis. “You were reading *The Waves* and I thought, Ah, a kindred spirit. I was carrying a steamed treacle pudding and I sat down beside you.” (108)

The juxtaposition of Virginia Woolf with steamed pudding sets up a comic incongruity, continued by Viv’s subsequent comment: “I still do dip into *The Waves* every so often
Bakhtin’s concept of “parodic-travestying discourse” (59) may help us to theorize Simpson’s comic subversions. Bakhtin argues that the Greek satyr plays which provided parallel comic renditions of serious dramatic subjects were a necessary corrective to elevated and monologic forms of discourse. Far from negating national myths, parody permitted the intrusion of a reality that is “too contradictory and heteroglot to be fit into a high and straightforward genre” (55). The parodic-travestying discourse of “The Festival of the Immortals” ridicules the mythologized narratives attached to the biographical figure of the author, without entirely negating their value to their reader. It would be all too easy to simply sneer at the shallow mind-sets of the ordinary festival-goer. But a devotion to reading is not necessarily invalidated by its consumerist aspects, or by an emphasis on emotional affect. Viv and Phyllis are not intellectuals or academics. They belong to the generation before Simpson’s own, who did not benefit from widened access to higher education, and have spent most of their lives confined to the home, taking care of the family. For them, reading has been one of the few chances to please themselves:

“[...] You know, thinking about it, the only time I stopped reading altogether was when they were babies. Three under five. I couldn’t do that again.”

“I did keep reading,” said Viv, “but there were quite a few accidents.” (113)

Speaking of an earlier collection, Hey Yeah, Right, Get a Life (in the US, Getting a Life), Michael Greaney has said: “The stories are explorations of that interior, secretive pleasure, of the rare opportunities for hedonistic self-absorption enjoyed by those who are expected to minister ceaselessly, selflessly and wholeheartedly to the needs of others” (40). He makes particular reference to “Wurstigkeit,” which features lunchtime visits to an almost magical boutique which can only be accessed through a secret password; but his discussion extends this notion of interior, sensory pleasure to less tangible forms of consumption. Greaney suggests that Simpson’s “sampling” of high cultural references, drawing not only on the English literary canon, but also opera and myth, “position her stories, and her heroines, at the interface between the sublime and the humdrum, from which vantage point it becomes possible to appreciate that suburbia has its own poetry” (40). Public events such as author events and the recent phenomenon of the reading group or book club enables such private pleasures to be shared in a social space.

Seen from this perspective, the consumption of high culture may be aligned with other sources of “hedonistic self-absorption,” such as shopping for luxury items. Simpson’s work often explores the joys and pitfalls of retail therapy. Her first published story, “The Bed,” begins: “Let me tell you how a piece of furniture changed my life” (Four Bare Legs in a Bed, 45). In this story, the impoverished narrator buys a luxurious bed on impulse, her boyfriend’s furious reaction soon mellowing into grateful acceptance after they make love on the new mattress. Both the boyfriend and the narrator have been seduced, but the long-term effect of sensual pleasure is to make her indolent and self-indulgent, “an odalisque” (51). The note of “ecstatic complacency” at the story’s end
expresses a tension between the heightened, even hallucinatory, sensations induced by consumerist pleasure and resistance to the passivity induced by this state. Paradoxically, the narrator becomes less conscientious at work, declaring “I shall never do more for money than I have to again” (52). This is because the connections between work, wages and consumption have been simplified, by-passing less tangible forms of satisfaction, such as pride in the job. The final passages in “The Bed” use images of the Christ child and the sleeping boyfriend to suggest a connection between the narrator’s dreamy state and, quite possibly, conception and pregnancy, especially if read in the context of Simpson’s subsequent stories about maternity in Hey Yeah Right Get a Life. Reading across Simpson’s oeuvre, comparing her female characters at different stages in their lives, we can trace an ambivalence towards these various forms of consumption which may be related to the parodic travesty of “The Festival of the Immortals.” The mysterious boutique in “Wurstigkeit” offers “an experience of weightlessness” (Hey Yeah Right Get a Life, 144) which is liberating yet implies absence and erasure; “it subtracted your centre of gravity” (144). For Viv and Phyllis, the excitement of the literary festival, and of reading in general, induces the kind of jouissance experienced by the two working mothers in “Wurstigkeit.”

In his book The Singularity of Literature, the critic Derek Attridge examines the complex relationship between the literary text, its readers and its authors. He uses the term “idioculture” to refer to:

[...] the way an individual’s grasp on the world is mediated by a changing array of interlocking, overlapping, and often contradictory cultural systems absorbed in the course of his or her previous experience, a complex matrix of habits, cognitive models, representations, beliefs, expectations, prejudices, and preferences that operate intellectually, emotionally, and physically to produce a sense of at least relative continuity, coherence, and significance out of the manifold events of human living. (21)

Attridge’s list is exhaustive because he is at pains to emphasize heterogeneity, change and fluidity. He theorizes the interplay of the physical, emotional and cognitive within the individual psyche, uniquely constituted at a specific point in the space-time continuum, and the subjective engagement with the production and reading of literary texts. According to Attridge, the value of literature lies in its engagement with ‘otherness’, and each reading of a literary work is more than a single, definitive act. It constitutes an ongoing event or performance. Thus, there is no right or correct way to read. He says that:

We may want to exclude as illegitimate the author’s intentions, or facts of his or her biography, or our own beliefs as readers, or the quality of the paper on which the text is printed, but the reality is that any of these factors, and dozens more, may enter into a reading that does justice to the alterity and singularity of the work. (81)

One of these factors is an imaginary relationship with the biographical author, examined more closely by Andrew Bennett, in his study, The Author. Bennett makes the obvious distinction between Thomas Hardy, the historical individual whose name is on the cover of Tess of the D’Urbervilles; and the notional figure of the author constructed by the text itself:

It is for this reason, perhaps, that if you do get in your car and drive to Dorchester in order to visit the museum there, with its prize exhibit, Hardy’s study, or if you drive out to Higher Bockhampton nearby, to view the carefully preserved house in which Hardy was born, or even if you look around Max Gate, the house in which he
lived for the last forty years of his life and in which he died, there will be something hollow in the experience. (120)

Yet the breathless syntax of Bennett’s lengthy sentence, tipping over into bathos at its disappointing conclusion, implies that Bennett himself cannot entirely disavow this futile pilgrimage. Through a discussion of authors who name or depict themselves within the text, he decides that: “the strange, the uncanny appearance of the author’s name in a work might help to account for the difficulty we have in accounting for authors of literary texts more generally, as well as for our fascination with those figures” (123). For Bennett, the figure of the author is a contested and indecipherable entity, shifting inside and outside the text. Attridge’s concept of an “idioculture” provides a framework for understanding a sense of communion with the imagined figure of the author as an entirely legitimate aspect of reading their texts.

However, the relationship between the female reader and the literary canon remains fundamentally one-sided. Elderly middle class women make up a considerable proportion of the fiction-reading public, and yet, Simpson suggests, their lives are barely represented by the literary canon:

“It’s not in the books we’ve read, is it, how things have been for us,” said Viv. “There’s only Mrs. Ramsay [...] and she’s hardly typical.” (113)

Simpson’s own fiction addresses the marginalizing of domestic, and especially maternal, experience, something she has spoken about in interview, especially a 2007 interview with the American writer Amanda Eyre Ward. The enthusiastic critical reception for her work in the UK has sometimes been tempered by a uniquely British anxiety around writing which is perceived as domestic, “the mumsy doing the mumsy stuff.” Writers who address the deficiency identified in Viv’s remarks—“there’s only Mrs Ramsay [...] and she’s hardly typical”—jeopardize their literary status. Simpson’s intertextual allusions to high cultural values, as noted by Michael Greaney, expose her characters’ partial exclusion from that culture. But they also affirm the author’s cultural credentials, compensating, perhaps unconsciously, for the low values accruing to her subject matter.

This intertextual dialogue also expresses her characters’ yearning for transcendence, a drive which is fuelled by responses to texts and their authors. This may be best illustrated by comparing “The Festival of the Immortals” with another story from Hey Yeah Right Get a Life. In “Lentils and Lilies” (known as “Golden Apples” in the US), a teenage girl, Jade Beaumont, is studying the English Romantic poets for an exam. Reading Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth is to some extent a means to an end, her eventual escape from the schoolroom and a suburban lifestyle; but the poems also stand for emotional liberation—for spontaneity, passion and a heightening of the senses. Jade is at that stage in her life when everything seems possible, and she makes herself the heroine of every text she encounters:

She was the focus of every film she saw, every novel she read. She was about to start careering round like a lustrous loose cannon. (2)

(Or even perhaps a “loose canon”?) In his essay “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” Bakhtin argues that we all “author” ourselves—that the subject is constructed in dialogue with a putative other. Following Attridge, it would seem that one important way in which that “otherness” is accessed is through the engagement with literature, and the “performance” of reading. Like so many of Simpson’s stories, “Lentils and Lilies” is punctuated by small epiphanies and vivid sense impressions:
She was transported by the light and the trees, and just as her child self had once played the miniature warrior heroine down green alleys, so she saw her self now floating in this soft sunshine, moving like a panther into the long jewelled narrative which was her future. (4)

While this passage does not seem to refer to a specific literary text, this imaginative self-transformation, eliding the boundaries between the interior self and external world, the human subject and the animal kingdom, is redolent of the romantic poets that Jade has been reading.

Jay McInerney has commented on the positioning of “Lentils and Lilies” as a preface to the collection in which it appears. His New York Times review of Getting a Life argues that the evocation of Atalanta, the virgin huntress who, in Greek mythology, was tricked into marriage, “suggests that her fate may eventually resemble those of the older women in the following stories.” In citing “Lentils and Lilies,” I am proposing further connections, not just between the teenager Jade and the disillusioned mothers in Hey Yeah Right Get a Life, but between those characters and Phyllis and Viv, whose commitment to reading endures throughout their lives. Phyllis has three children, just like the recurring character, Dorrie, in Hey Yeah Right Get a Life.

Writers are also readers, and indeed, for many, the fiction-making impulse is a natural consequence of intensive reading. Simpson studied English literature at Oxford—an experience she speaks of with great enthusiasm—and has spoken and written about a range of writers whose work is important to her, including Katherine Mansfield, Alice Munro, Colette, Angela Carter and Virginia Woolf, the writer who first brought Phyllis and Viv together. Simpson chose Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own for a newspaper series, “Book of a Lifetime.” Remembering first reading the book at fifteen, Simpson writes: “Things read early on can become part of your fibre and sinew.” Her choice of metaphor is revealing, suggesting that reading matter can be incorporated into the vital fabric of the self. While Woolf is presented as a parodic figure in “The Festival of the Immortals,” she is nonetheless central to Simpson’s interrogation of female authorship.

In “The Festival of the Immortals,” Phyllis has joined a creative writing class, but has made little headway with authoring her memoirs. This is partly because she is uncertain how to represent herself on the page: “just as you didn’t talk about yourself in the same way you talked about others, so you couldn’t write about yourself from the outside either” (113). As an experienced reader, Phyllis shows insight into the role of displacement in the fiction-making process; but, as an inexperienced writer, she has not yet found a strategy for detaching the living self from the autobiographical subject. As Margaret Atwood says, “all writers are double […] one half does the living, the other the writing” (37).

Phyllis’s lack of progress also, significantly, stems from her reluctance to record memories which seem fragmented and inconsequential. This apparent shortage of worthwhile material recalls a quotation from A Room of One’s Own cited in Simpson’s tribute:

In one passage she [Woolf] gestures towards a landscape of untouched subject matter when she imagines questioning an old woman about her life—but “she would look vague and say that she could remember nothing. For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups are washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it at all. All has vanished. No biography or
Yet Phyllis does have stories to tell—the story about seeing Viv with the steamed pudding; the narratives she exchanges with her old friend as they catch up on their lives since the war; and the anecdotes about all the authors she has encountered at the Festival—including Virginia herself.

For many readers and writers—and not only Simpson—the figure of Woolf embodies the female author. In Toby Litt’s comic novel, *Finding Myself* (2003), the chick lit author Victoria About self-consciously models herself on Virginia Woolf, as she sets about her magnum opus, *From the Lighthouse*. “Right this moment Virginia is very important to me” (210) she says, temporarily exchanging her laptop for a writing pad and fountain pen, which seem “more fitting to the spirit of Virginia” (209). Helen Wussow, in an article on “Virginia Woolf and the Problematic Nature of the Photographic Image,” refers to the contradictory versions of Woolf perpetuated by her biographers, often with the help of specific photographs—for instance the well-known 1902 studio portrait, which presents her as wistful, enigmatic, other-worldly. In “The Festival of the Immortals”, Simpson subverts this received image of the literary saint with a Virginia capable of keeping “the whole marquee in stitches—spellbound—rocking with laughter” (109). In debunking the highbrow “spirit of Virginia,” Simpson is demystifying the figure of the author and authorship itself. In her closing lines, she literally cuts the author down to size, as Viv spots Charlotte Brontë: “See, I was right! She is short” (115).

Readers and writers are ordinary people. An exchange between Viv the reader and Phyllis, the would-be writer, suggests that the only difference between these two positions lies in attitudes towards posterity:

“I’m more than what’s happened to me or where I’ve been,” said Viv. “I know that and I don’t care what other people think. I can’t be read like a book. And I’m not dead yet, so I can’t be summed up or sum myself up. Things might change.”

“Goodness,” said Phyllis, amazed. (114)

Viv’s suggestion that the living subject “can’t be summed up” echoes the difficulties Phyllis has had writing her memoir. In order to produce a conventional text, it is necessary to somehow suspend the flow of lived experience. Woolf’s own solution, and that of other modernist authors, was to develop a new aesthetic, which addressed the insufficiency of language; and this modernist aesthetic has influenced Simpson’s characteristic use of sense impressions and lush natural imagery to evoke shifting states of consciousness. This is the style of “The Bed,” “Lentils and Lilies” and “Wurstigkeit,” and of many of the stories in *In-flight Entertainment*.

“The Festival of the Immortals” uses a more restrained style, with less descriptive detail. This stylistic simplicity can be seen as a logical strategy, in a story that is predicated on a flight of fancy, and flouts the laws of time and space. The relatively plain and detached style anchors the fantastic elements within everyday reality. It also draws attention to the mundane aspects of literary production. Simpson seems to suggest that, despite their celebrity, the authors appearing at the festival do not belong to another order of beings. They are not so different to their readers. They are as ordinary, and as everyday, as the steamed treacle pudding in the ATS canteen.

The many ambiguities in “The Festival of the Immortals” are not resolved by its conclusion. The demands made on writers to actively promote their own work through
public activities which are at variance with the essentially solitary nature of literary composition remain problematic. But Simpson does also use the story to celebrate the inter-relationship between reading and writing, including its emotional, libidinal dimensions. She has also produced a story which clearly demonstrates the impact of the marketplace on literary production, authorship and the text itself.

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

2. See http://www.literaryfestivals.co.uk/.

ABSTRACTS

La nouvelle « The Festival of the Immortals » de Helen Simpson propose une représentation satirique du phénomène anglais actuel de l'événement littéraire. Cette nouvelle met en scène un festival littéraire où des auteurs canoniques reviennent de l'au-delà pour parler de leurs écrits. L'ironie de Simpson se trouve néanmoins atténuée par le portrait touchant de deux femmes âgées qui sont des adeptes de ce genre d'événement culturel. En effet, ces femmes adhèrent au culte de l'auteur et expriment une affection particulière pour l'acte de lecture. Cet article met la théorie de Bakhtine au service d'une étude de l'ambivalence que démontre Simpson envers les formes publiques de consommation littéraire, un thème récurrent dans l'œuvre de Simpson.

Dans cette nouvelle et ailleurs, Simpson aborde la question de la marginalisation de l'expérience féminine et la difficulté des femmes à faire entendre leur voix. Le concept d'« idioculture » emprunté à Derek Attridge permettra de comprendre comment le lien étroit entre lecture et écriture permet d'aborder l'altérité, et justifiera la légitimité d'une lecture des textes à travers le prisme d'un auteur imaginé par le lecteur.

AUTHORS

AILSA COX

Ailsa Cox is Reader in English and Writing at Edge Hill University, UK. Her books include *Alice Munro* (Northcote House), *Writing Short Stories* (Routledge) and *The Real Louise and Other Stories* (Headland Press). She has also published essays and chapters on short story writers including Alice Munro, Nancy Lee and Elizabeth Bowen. She is the editor of the peer-reviewed journal *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice* (Intellect Press).
Note
Parody in “Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan” by Shalom Auslander

Morgane Jourdren

1 “Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan” is part of a collection of short stories entitled Beware of God, published in 2006 by contemporary American author Shalom Auslander. It is the story of poor and foolish Stanley Fisher scraping for a living and unwittingly unleashing a whole coalition of forces against him the world over after finding most embarrassing “Holy Scriptures” on a soul-searching trip to the Negev Desert. He has, in fact, come across the apparently genuine original version of the Old Testament. A paragraph that seems to have been dropped from the later editions simply reads: “The following is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental” (96). The message conveyed by this genuine document is subversive enough to alarm political, business and religious leaders of all persuasions and prompt them to react. Stanley’s findings are indeed too much of a potential threat to the established order and the dogmas on which it has always rested to leave matters unattended. Stanley’s Old Testament is soon unanimously declared a fake, and the embarrassing witness the poor wretch has come to be is eliminated, while his name, his birth certificate and all the information about him is forever deleted from official records.

2 Reading “Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan,” one is struck by the similarity of tone and mood between this short story and other writings by Shalom Auslander. It is highly parodic, in every sense of the word.

I. The trials and tribulations of a new-fangled schlemiel

Stanley Fisher—down on his luck, out of a job and with a baby on his way—t ook the last of his dwindling savings, kissed his wife Sharon goodbye [...] and journeyed to Israel for a soul-searching expedition through the Negev Desert.
He sought meaning.
He sought guidance.
He sought purpose. (91)

The first words of the opening sentence immediately provide the audience with a somewhat familiar horizon of expectations, as they clearly mimic the style of old tales and stories, of old Yiddish tales in particular, in which the unlucky protagonist undertakes a journey away from kith and kin, from which he is supposed to return a rich man. The character of Stanley himself, though depicted in an ironical way at the end of the sentence as a new-fangled Abraham who sounds very much into schmaltzy psychology and “soul-searching,” and leaves his wife to roam the desert in search of some kind of truth, in fact, bears a family resemblance to the old stock-character of the schlemiel, that born loser in Yiddish literature, who, however down on his luck he might be, keeps on foolishly hoping for a brighter future. Fisher is truly made of the same stuff as the kind of archetypal fools that Irving Howe describes as having “a positive gift for getting into trouble, for doing things the wrong way, for saying the inept word at the inappropriate moment—and always with the best of intentions” (23). He is very much like all those characters one comes across reading Sholem Aleichem. In fact, as he harbors wild dreams of turning into an instant multimillionaire after the discovery of the tablets, Stanley particularly reminds one of a typically foolish and naïve character under the name of Menakhem-Mendl in The Letters of Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl and Motll, the Cantor’s Son, as the latter writes to his “wise, esteemed, and virtuous” (3) but down-to earth and skeptical wife that he will come back to her a wealthy man:

“I’m dealing in Londons and not doing badly! You can clear 25 or 50 rubles at a go, and sometimes with a bit of luck, 100. On Londons you can make your fortune in a day. There was a fellow not long ago, a synagogue sexton, mind you, who walked away with 30,000 faster than you can say your bedtime prayers and now he cocks his snoot at the world.” (3, 4)

But Menakhem-Mendl’s dreams will never come true and neither will Stanley’s. For, as onomastics suggests, Stanley Fisher is predestined to fish, to fish for trouble indeed. That he discovers thirteen tablets (an unlucky number according to popular belief and literary convention) in the desert is indeed no coincidence. It is, in fact, a sign of his being dogged by misfortune, when in his foolishness he believes that thanks to his “invaluable” discovery he is bound to see the end of his woes. Thus begins the long, long story of the many trials and tribulations of that little man with a particular knack for treading on dangerous ground.

The narrative is then made to go on and on, slowly unwinding and mimicking the conventions and the meandering, convoluted rhetoric of old tales and Biblical stories. Hence, among other devices, one cannot miss the constant use of a ternary rhythm—“They looked ancient. They looked important. They looked holy” (93), the repetition of the same formula over and over throughout the text—“In those days” (92, 97, 105) or “It was a dark and depressing place” (92, 97, 105), and the ternary pattern on which the whole narrative is based. The three encounters made by Stanley—the two experts and the Pope—are reminiscent of the three trials the protagonist has to go through before his quest or his initiation journey is completed.

But here, in a sudden departure from the set patterns of the genre, the tempo accelerates, and the reader is made to visualize a wild mock-thriller in which an
unlikely coalition of corporate, political and religious lobbies join forces to eliminate Stanley, together with his far too subversive discovery:

Two men in black suits and sunglasses appeared at his side. One man grabbed the suitcases containing the tablets, while the other led Stanley down the hallway into a small, secluded office. The door was closed, the lock was turned, and that was the end of Stanley Fisher and his troublesome non-fakes. (102)

What one might have thought to be the end of the story, however, is not. The narrator keeps us in suspense eventually to come up with a protracted surprise ending which sounds again more like a tale-like one than like a typical ending in a thriller. The narrative at this stage thus takes on a surreal quality, echoing with a mysterious voice on the phone, coming from nowhere, and claiming to be Stanley Fisher wanting to speak to his wife Sharon. But Sharon, who has hit the headlines as the new heroine of an “Immaculate Conception” story in Long Island, and the rest of the world are already doing without him.

II. An extravaganza

Thus, as has been shown, old tales and stories serve as a main canvas for what might be appropriately described as an extravaganza. Giving free rein to his imagination, the author turns an old tale form into a wild mock-story in which the character of a poor, insecure fellow under the name of Stanley Fisher has suddenly become the Enemy Number One of an unlikely coalition made up, among others, of the Ayatollah Khamenei, of the Pope and the Bush government. The adventures of the main protagonist, who is desperately looking for the highest bidder to sell his merchandise to him and “make a pile” in the best tradition of folk-tales, is now giving way to a parody of a thriller showing the Pope grabbing “his Papal Staff” (97) (possibly an irreverent sexual innuendo) and “poking Stanley painfully in his stomach,” (97) while “the Ayatollah Khameni sat down at his tangerine iMac, printed out one copy of “Fatwa.doc,” and hastily filled it in” (99).

What is characteristic of the writer’s style here is his particular talent for sketching a series of vignettes. His is a very visual art, which gives a trenchant impression of the characters and the scenes he depicts and makes them look like characters or scenes straight out of cartoons. One also gets the same impression as the narrator tells us the episode in which Stanley finds himself in contact with all kinds of e-bayers leaving messages on the Web: from the Jesus freak, writing “Fuck you, asshole” to the stereotypical religious fundamentalist fulminating against “the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah,” as well as the BTW (short for “by the way”), the one-track minded bidder asking: “how much do you want for your wife’s panties? ” (98).

Parody in the form of amused and possibly sometimes satirical authorial or narratorial comments also stands out as a distinctive feature of “Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan.” Throughout the story, the narrator thus constantly pokes fun at the world of cliché-ridden stories, empty slogans and ludicrous formulas with which we, readers and writers alike, are bombarded day and night. Cheap popular media, which is all too prone to publish eye-catching stories, is a main target for the narrator’s irony as well as commercials which are associated here with corny images and schmaltzy rhetoric: “But the baby cooed happily from inside the Graco Lite-Rider Stroller/ Cat Seat Combo” (105).
The narrator even casts an amused glance at himself, hinting at the cheap side to his trade, borrowing from others snatches of dialogues and scenes and trying to foist his story on us like a barker in a fair. While he is telling us the story of Stanley, he is splitting into two characters, that of the storyteller and that of the ironic and somewhat satanic commentator, prompting us to take what we hear with a grain of salt and laying bare before us the very literary devices used in the process. The narrative thus takes on a definitely metafictional and self-reflexive dimension, commenting upon the stereotypical and cliché-ridden representations, the hackneyed stories and the tricks of the trade it is based on.

Parody here serves to underline all that is trite, artificial, pompous, even corny about the stories we are told or we tell each other. One cannot miss, for example, the irony of the deliberately ponderous repetitions and alliterations used to depict the typically remote and secret place of Stanley's discovery: “Deep inside a dark cave on the dark side of a dark and desolate mountain range” (91); nor can one miss the irony when Sharon is provided with a stereotypical “Filipino nanny named Carmalita” (104).

III. A philosophical tale in Voltaire’s sense of the word

Under the guise of a joyful and free-style exercise in parody and impersonation, however, “Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan” conveys a more bitter-sweet image of the world and of mankind than may seem at first sight. Stanley Fisher is, in fact, a new-fangled eiron whose task it is to explore the world around him, in the way Voltaire’s Candide was meant to explore the world.

It is here today’s world that is depicted throughout the story through a number of images associated with America and other places in the world; a world which appears in fact as a new Babylon, in which acronyms of all kinds vie with each other in a restless agitation and an endless battle for supremacy. Ironically enough, far from making the story sound more realistic, though they stand for real organizations in the U.S., the mere enumeration of these acronyms somewhat heightens the reader’s impression that the world is going insane and that Man is becoming more and more inarticulate. All these acronyms sound nonsensical and make up a new Babel of tongues, each trying to cover the other, each claiming that “whatever they believed was unbelievably right, and what everybody believed was unbelievably wrong” (92). A strange impression of both a static and restless world emerges from the reading of Shalom Auslander’s short story.

Merchants of the Temple seem to rule this world, together with bigots, fanatics, warmongers of all kinds, every one of them distorting facts into the kind of fiction that best serves their interests or going so far as to endorse stories that best suit them, be they, like the essentially Roman Catholic dogma of The Immaculate Conception, compatible or not with their own faiths. Hence Stanley’s voice is lost in the distance, while life is going on and everything is back to the kind of normalcy which sees men and women turned into good little soldiers and compulsive consumers. Sharon—the new unlikely heroine of an “Immaculate Conception Story” in Long Island—is being pampered by the Establishment and provided with all the creature comforts she and her baby are supposed to need, in exchange for her being part of a worldwide conspiracy against the Truth. A cross between Biblical Delilah and the archetypal character of the femme fatale in film noir, Sharon who had hitherto contented herself
with repeating “Mmm hmm” (93, 94, 96, 101) is now fully siding with the powerful, an unlikely icon of “purity” and a slave to a sordid consumer society.

In a very Voltairian way, the tale we are being told indicts Man’s intolerance and bigotry, while religion is being shown at the end of the day as having not much to do with God, here an apparently absentee Landlord, but with men and vested interests, as is suggested by the recurrent image of “ecstatic” (103) leaders bent on selling their books or furthering their own causes at all costs.

O’Reilly thanked them all, and reminded his viewers that the one book they could buy that definitely wasn’t a fake was his book, which was currently number one on the New York Times bestseller list. It made, he noted, a wonderful gift. (102-103)

At the end of the story, Stanley tries to reach Sharon. His voice heard in the distance on the phone may well be that of the writer in contemporary society trying in vain to make himself heard in a cacophonous world which is shown to be torn between conflicting views, warring tribes and a tight-knit coalition of vested interests.

The world as implicitly depicted by the narrator is a world in which articulacy and the art of conversation seem to have given way to strange noises, rumblings, shouts and rantings, in which the kind of reasoning process in which Man is engaged sounds more like a parody of Talmudic discussions that would have gone out of hand … far-fetched, endless, warped and boring, as the narrator suggests:

Abraham Foxman called an emergency meeting of the ADL, who called an emergency meeting of JDL. They didn’t really care what the BOOK of Stan claimed about the divinity of the Old Testament, much as they didn’t really care what Jesus or Mohammed claimed about it. However, if The Book of Stan were true, then the Old Testament was not true, and if the Old Testament was not true, the whole idea of Jews as a chosen tribe was not true. Brass tacks: If there were no real tribe, then there were no real Jews, there could be no real anti-Semitism, and if there was no anti-Semitism, then Abe and his staff were shit out of a job... (99-100)

Conclusion

“Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan” definitely belongs to absurdist literature. The world itself, as implicitly depicted through the story, thus seems to have been forsaken by God while Mankind has been left alone to tear itself apart. Images of war, of death, of death in life abound in the story, but never does the audience feel oppressed listening to the storyteller. Quite the contrary in fact.

There emerges from the story as told by the narrator a sense of festive kinship between him and us, as we share for a moment the pleasures of subversive wit, humor and self-derision. “Startling Revelations from the Lost Book of Stan” typically appeals to the mind “that is rather accustomed to shuttling between the transcendent and the worldly and defining its relationship to reality in terms of the ironies generated by such travel” (Shechner 146).

Parody and self-parody are here more than a literary mode, they are a way of retrieving a sense of being for a moment, away from an oppressive and dull society. They are part of a literary game between chums not taking themselves too much in earnest, which might be the first step towards moments of innocence. Perhaps another version of the “Immaculate Conception.”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


AUTHORS

MORGANE JOURDREN

Morgane Jourdren is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Angers. She holds a Ph.D in American studies and wrote a Doctoral Dissertation on Charlie Chaplin. She has published a book entitled *Charlie Chaplin: An American Dream, a Dream of America* and several articles on cinema, literature and civilization on the internet site : La Clé des Langues. Her research focuses on the American dream and its representation in cinema and literature as well as on the question of identity.