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"I just run off sometimes": Runaway Women in Elizabeth Spencer's Short Fiction

Stéphanie Maerten

- 1 "All of those women are moving, traveling, trying to break out of their assigned roles. That does very often happen to women, particularly from large extended families—they get locked into assigned roles, with the family essentially deciding what kind of person they are, what they should do, what they will do for the rest of their lives" (Spencer, "Conversation" with Amy Weldon 49). This is what Elizabeth Spencer explained in a 2002 interview when asked about the process of soul-searching many of her female protagonists go through. These women, or girls, who were meant to live well-ordered lives, reveal themselves to be independent-minded and are torn between the pressure to conform and the need to find themselves so as to come to terms with their identities. As Peggy Whitman Prenshaw notes, "Spencer's fiction since the middle 1950s has turned inward to explore the inner drama of characters, mainly women, who struggle to find a 'workable compromise' between self and the outside world" (25). Indeed, in *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*, a collection published in 1981, which gathers thirty-three of the thirty-seven short stories written between 1944 and 1977, several of Spencer's heroines illustrate the above descriptions. Many of them, whether consciously or unconsciously, yearn to escape their lots.
- 2 According to Elsa Nettels, "Elizabeth Spencer portrays two kinds of women prominent in her later fiction: the passive figure, like Frances Harvey [in "First Dark"], who is freed by the agency of others; and the active figure, like Aline [in "Mr. McMillan"], who of her will frees herself and pursues an independent course" (83). Yet, some women do not seem to fall into either of these categories. Theresa Stubblefield, in "The White Azalea" for instance, only becomes free to escape after the death of her father and could thus be considered a "passive figure," though she voluntarily ignores her family's injunction to come back and buries the letters they sent her. In addition, Spencer's women do not always escape physically—Theresa's intensive reading also constitutes a

form of escape. And, although some characters like Judy Owen in "The Visit" seem to content themselves with their lives and manage to achieve a certain balance, the reader is led to witness their inner struggles and bewildering searches for identity which often take the form of a psychological escape; as Gilles Deleuze puts it, "[t]o flee is not exactly to travel, or even to move . . . flights can happen on the spot, in motionless travel" (37). In all these narratives, regardless of the nature of the escape, Spencer's heroines explore the other side of themselves, blurring the line between fantasy and reality.

- 3 Spencer's use of fantastic and fairy tales elements in some of her stories, has been extensively studied. "Ship Island," with its subtitle "The Story of a Mermaid," patently summons up Andersen's fairy tale *The Little Mermaid*. As Prenshaw points out, "Elizabeth Spencer has created in the compelling image of the half human mermaid a metaphor of the female condition" (21). Prenshaw also compares Gordon Ingram, the protagonist's husband in "Knights and Dragons," to the mythical Minotaur. Elsa Nettels mentions the "allusions to folklore and fairy tales that frame the action and impart symbolic power to the characters" in "First Dark," "Knights and Dragons" and "Ship Island," among others (92). In the same way, Marcel Arbeit alludes to the fairy tale subtext and the imagery that structure "I, Maureen" (320-23). A thorough analysis of several short stories from *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer* reveals many other more or less explicit references to fairy tales, and the underlying presence of fantastic, mythic or gothic elements.
- 4 The dreamlike nature of Spencer's writing reflects the heroines' states of mind and the short story form is particularly suited to the purpose since it is not rooted in a specific place and time—or at least, place and time do not matter as much as the inner life of the protagonists. As Charles E. May explains, "the tradition of the short story as descended from myth, folktale, fable, and romance forms, drives it toward focusing on eternal values rather than temporal ones and sacred/unconscious reality rather than profane/everyday reality" (Introduction xviii). Thus, the short story form is an adequate means for Spencer to plunge the reader into unreliable first-person or third-person narration through the use of free indirect discourse or stream of consciousness, and for her to depict reality as the character perceives it. In doing so, she also sheds light on the creative process and more particularly on women's difficulty to become, as she puts it, "artists of their lives" ("Elizabeth Spencer-b.1921" 338).

"Everything any woman in her right mind could want—that was my life." ("I, Maureen" 341)

- 5 Many of Spencer's female protagonists seem to live a perfect life according to society's standards. In "I, Maureen," Maureen Partham lives in a luxurious house in Baie d'Urfé with her loving and caring husband and their two beautiful children. They have "an apartment on Drummond Street in Montreal, servants, two cars, wonderful friends, a marvelous life" (343). In "Ship Island," Nancy Lewis, who comes from a modest family background, is cherished by her kind and affectionate boyfriend from a well-off family, much to the satisfaction of her parents. Judy Owen in "The Visit" is supportive of her husband whose academic career she admires and encourages—she is ready to follow him and to help him to reach his goal. The list of women who seem to have everything they need to fulfill themselves within the family circle is endless.

- 6 However, in most cases, these women show a tendency to undervalue themselves. Judy Owen is not as highly educated as her husband Bill—"As Judy had finished only two years of college, Bill often had to put her right about things" (76)—and she does not feel at ease upon meeting the renowned Thompson, Bill's idol in the academic world—"It's only that I know how little I know to talk about, Judy thought. That's why I was so careful. What if they found out about all those books I haven't read? She shook hands with Thompson, but didn't say anything: she only smiled" (78-79). The same feeling of depreciation is obvious in Maureen, who states that she does not deserve to be a Partham—"Dennis Partham's wife, and not even pretty or classy: I never had anything resembling looks or background. I was a bit run-down looking, all my life" (341)—, and it also applies to Nancy Lewis, who does not fit in her boyfriend's social circle.
- 7 Although Nancy constantly looks at herself in mirrors, she fails to gain reassurance: each time, her face seems to reflect her inadequacy to the place she now lives in. For example, it is full of blotches after she has been burned by hot rain. Later, she compares it to "a flower in a room that was too warm" (98). These episodes also symbolically represent Nancy's incapacity to identify with the others who "looked like people in magazines" (98). Such moments are significant when examined through the lens of Jacques Lacan's theory on the mirror stage, which he sees as crucial for the development of individual identity. He poses that the identification with one's reflected image is supposed to give rise to the ego. In Nancy's case, the process is inverted—she refuses to identify with the image reflected either in actual mirrors or in the gaze of others, which functions as a social mirror. This rejection foreshadows the disintegration of her ego and impairs her relationship with others.
- 8 Many of Spencer's heroines share the same feeling that they do not belong to the world they live in; they were assigned a role that does not suit them and feel incapable of maintaining satisfying relationships. Just as Nancy admits she does not like most of the people around her—"It even included, she was sad to say, her mother and father" (90)—, the protagonist in "I, Maureen" is not the caring and loving wife her husband expected—"your love was always defective" (359), he tells her after she has left. As Prenshaw puts it, these characters experience "the difficulty for a woman of reconciling one's human needs with society's requirement of a 'feminine nature' that is either less than or more than human" (15). These "human needs" often express themselves through behaviors that appear to be at odds with what society expects from a woman. The desire to escape is thus accompanied by a form of betrayal which is a necessary element of the "line of flight," to use Deleuze's expression, these women wish to trace—"We betray the fixed power that holds us back" (40). According to Deleuze, "[t]o leave, to escape is to trace a line" (36) and this line represents a rupture with one's familiar setting; "[o]ne only discovers worlds through a long, broken flight" (36). The narratives of these "ruptures," which are common in Anglo-American literature, Deleuze explains, portray characters who "create their line of flight" and at the same time "create through a line of flight" (36). Although Brian Massumi, in his English translation of Deleuze, points out that the word "flight" translates "fuite" and "has no relation to flying" (xvi), this might well be the case when applying Deleuze's theory to women. As Hélène Cixous observes, "[f]lying is woman's gesture—flying in language and making it fly" (887). Sandra M. Gilbert uses the same metaphor in her introduction to *The Newly Born Woman*: "We must fly away to be regenerated . . . To be immune to the hierarchical 'principles' of culture" (xviii). Cixous also ironically

mentions the double meaning of the French word "voler"—"flying" and "stealing": "We've lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers" (887). According to her, "[w]oman must write her self" (875) and to do so, in a world in which language is man's prerogative, she has to "blow up the law" (888) and steal the voice she has been "robbed" of. In the same way, Spencer's heroines, trapped in their domestic lives, and feeling dispossessed from their own sense of self, are willing to "spread their wings" and write their own destiny.

"Then, one summer day, it happened. It could never unhappen." ("I, Maureen" 343)

- 9 Once the inadequacy of Spencer's heroines with the ordinary domesticity of their lives and their desire to run away has been assessed, an unexpected event often triggers their escapes, whether it be the death of an overbearing relative, sudden unsettling occurrences or the intervention of a third party who shows them the way. The death of the oppressive relative as one of the triggers is mentioned by Elsa Nettles: Frances Harvey in "First Dark" is "freed from the prison of her family and its past by the self-willed death of her domineering mother" (82); Theresa Stubblefield in "The White Azalea" escapes Italy the night her father dies and, in *Knights and Dragons*, "the actual death of [Martha Ingram's] husband and Jim Wilbourne's departure from Rome finally free her spirit from its old forms" (85). Another example is mentioned by Betina Entzminger: Maureen Partham's urge to escape seems to have manifested itself when her husband almost died—"she] does not realize her alienation and attempt to break free from this foreign setting until her husband's near death in a boating accident. The arms that reach out to comfort her and hold her back from the lifeless body remind her of the clutch with which she was immobilized in marriage, giving her the cue to flee" (81-82). Maureen's reaction is reminiscent of Louise Mallard's in Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" who cannot help feeling excited about her upcoming freedom when she learns about her husband's death. Louise is eventually killed by the shock and disappointment of his reappearance. As for Maureen, soon after she realizes that her husband is alive, she tries to commit suicide. And just like Louise, her reaction is misinterpreted by the doctor: "Your attempts to take your own life might be thought of as efforts to join your husband, whom you believed to have reached death" (345).
- 10 Another trigger for the heroine's decision to escape is the occurrence of an unsettling event which is perceived by the character as supernatural. The protagonist of "I, Maureen," is blinded by a ray of light refracted by a piece of glass: "It entered my truest self, my consciousness, reverberating with silent brilliance. From that point I date my new beginning" (344). Maureen admits that she sounds "totally mad" (344) when she reports the event to her doctor. In "Ship Island," Nancy Lewis experiences a similar thing—a "burning rain" suddenly falls down, leaving red marks on her skin. Her mother refuses to believe Nancy when she explains what happened and tries to give a rational explanation: "You just got too much sun" (89). These incursions of uncanny elements—in Tzvetan Todorov's sense of the term¹—in the stories correspond to the moment when the heroines lose grip on reality.
- 11 One last trigger for the heroines' journey to the other side of themselves is the encounter with someone who shows them the way to escape. This is true of Maureen whose last psychiatrist not only understands her but provides her with a personal bank

account. As for Nancy Lewis, she momentarily flees with a stranger who gives her the opportunity to run away in his car to New Orleans. This is also the case with Aline, the protagonist of "Mr. McMillan," who left her Mississippi home and only finds relief from her guilt and hope for complete freedom when she discovers the existence of Mr. McMillan, whose life story inspires her and makes the "emotional break with her family" possible (Spencer, "Conversation" with Broadwell and Hoag 57). One may wonder if Spencer's heroines are as independent-minded as they seem and therefore doubt whether they would have managed to run away without an external agency.

"Everyone is a little schizoid" ("I, Maureen" 345)

- 12 In "I, Maureen," Dr. Johnson, a psychiatrist, mentions Maureen's split personality and presents her shift as a deliberate choice: "You choose the other side of the coin, the other side of yourself. You have to have it. If you don't have it, you will die" (345). Yet, Maureen does not seem to have any control over this other self, which she pictures as an object: "The words fell out, without my knowing it. Perhaps the self on the floor had spoken" (348). Betina Entzminger distinguishes between Maureen "the emotionally vulnerable participant" and Maureen the distant observer/ narrator. As she explains, "Maureen the narrator creates a space between herself and the participant Maureen of the past, whom she coolly observes in her memories . . . Actually to experience the emotions would cause a loss of control and force Maureen back into the safety of her husband's protection or into an institution" (80-81). However, the reader may wonder if Maureen the narrator has actually completed her journey to self-discovery and achieved self-realization, as Entzminger suggests. Throughout the story, Maureen feels the need to reassert her identity by regularly adding her name to the first-person pronoun, as in the title which is, in itself, a cry for identity. As Nettels explains, "she learns, as Martha Ingram does, that to free oneself is to suffer a kind of dissolution" (92). The frequently repeated "I (Maureen)" becomes "I (human)" (356), before she finally loses her humanness.
- 13 In "Ship Island," Nancy also experiences such a dehumanization stage. When a stranger asks her for her name in a night club, she involuntarily answers "Nothing" (100). She feels "like a person who wasn't a person—another order of creature passing among or even through them" (105). The use of the word "dissolution" in Nettels's analysis evokes the chemical process by which a substance disappears into a liquid and literally applies to Nancy who repeatedly seeks refuge in the water. She is thus particularly reminiscent of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in which the sea both symbolizes the heroine's quest for freedom as well as a threat.² Such a parallel can be drawn with other heroines in Spencer's fiction but it is especially true of Nancy Lewis whose ability to drift and "sleep" in the water clearly suggests suicidal ideation.

A Plunge into Darkness

- 14 For Spencer's heroines, the journey to self-discovery corresponds to a trip to the dark side, from a secure life to danger, from order to chaos. Asked about the presence of a light side and a dark side in her fiction in an interview, Spencer notes: "[A lot of my characters] like to walk a tightrope over the dangerous in preference to staying with the safe and superficial. It's when the safe world becomes superficial, or materialistic,

that's when they can't stand it. So they plunge off into other directions" ("Elizabeth Spencer-b.1921" 329). Spencer's criticism of the materialistic world in which her heroines stifle is often palpable.³ Yet, it is not so much the superficiality and the ensuing tediousness of their domestic lives that force these women to escape as their irrational attraction to danger, regardless of the consequences. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous compares women to a "dark continent" which men seek to invade and which women have been taught to fear (877). By plunging into the dark, Spencer's heroines follow Cixous's exhortation to overcome their fear: "*The Dark Continent is neither dark nor inexorable.*—It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable" (884-85). In "I, Maureen," the pain the heroine suffers after escaping to the dark side of the city is self-inflicted: "I went through an agony of missing what I could have, all back, and whole as ever, just by picking up the phone . . ." (346). The same observation can be made about Nancy in "Ship Island" who, despite her well-ordered life, is attracted to dark places like the seedy and dangerous city of New Orleans. She escapes to a night club, "New Orleans-style" (100), before recklessly following two strangers and coming back with bruises.

- 15 Danger and pain are necessary in these women's quest for freedom because feeling the pain is a proof that they are alive. As Peggy Prenshaw points out, "[b]etter to live one's painful condition, in harm's way, than to relinquish one's identity" (22). It nonetheless seems that this frightful plunge into darkness and the painful feeling of "having touched bottom"⁴ that ensues are essential steps in the characters' quest; they enable them to "find [their] balance," albeit in "very unlikely ways" ("Elizabeth Spencer-b. 1921" 330). In other short stories, danger and pain are perceptible—though to a lesser extent—and are also part of the heroine's journey to self-discovery. In "Go South in the Winter," the pain Mrs. Landis experiences when she believes, for a brief moment, that her son has died, awakens her and enables her to come back to life: "She was laughing, a woman sometimes foolish, but now restored to the smooth, safe surfaces. She said that she would come that night, to watch the dancing" (319). Another example is the protagonist of "The Girl Who Loved Horses": Unhappily married, Deborah is exposed to danger and is nearly raped by a stranger, a dark version of her husband, to whom she feels ambiguously attracted. When he puts a gun to her breast, "[s]he shuddered at the touch with a chill spring-like start of something like life, which was also something like death" (426). The antithesis highlights the inner conflicts Deborah faces and reinforces the above-mentioned statement that self-endangerment is the heroine's way to feel alive. In the same way, the character constantly tries to recapture these moments of aliveness through reckless high-speed rides, as the following interior monologue shows: "(Why do you ride a horse so fast, Deedee? Why do you like to do that?' *I'm going where the sky breaks open.* 'I just like to.' 'Why do you like to drive so fast?' 'I don't know.')" (427). The shift to the first person and to the present tense, as well as the use of parentheses and italics add dramatic effect by going deeper into Deborah's confused mind and makes the reader wonder about her potentially suicidal behavior.

"You prefer the fantasy to the reality" ("I, Maureen" 347)

- 16 The dreamlike quality of the narratives pertains to the characters' loss of mind and exploration of the other side of themselves. It is conveyed by Spencer's frequent

recourse to fantasy. Fantasy is here used in the broader sense of the term, covering the inclusion of fantastic, gothic or fairy tale elements as well as mythical, magic or supernatural references. Betina Entzminger, while discussing the emotional detachment displayed by two heroines—Maureen and Nancy—states that “in Spencer’s stories, it is not the incidents that are fantastic, only the characters’ reaction to them” (78) and that “Maureen the narrator creates these fantasies and the story itself to place the emotions at a safe remove from reality” (86).

- 17 Among the Gothic elements used by Spencer in her stories is the labyrinth several heroines have to walk and which leads to their encounters with dark creatures—the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur comes to mind. When Nancy escapes, “she went down a corridor and around a corner and down a short flight of steps. She ran down a long basement hallway where the service quarters were, past linen closets and cases of soft drinks, and, turning another corner and trying a door above a stairway, she came out, as she thought she would, in a night-club place called the Fishnet” (100). The alliterative use of words beginning with a /c/ accelerates the rhythm of the passage and establishes a threatening atmosphere. The labyrinth here functions as a threshold allowing Nancy to enter a different, darker world. This idea is reinforced by the name of the place she reaches, “the Fishnet,” ironically described as “a good place to hide” (100), which foreshadows her unfortunate encounter with Bub. Nancy is guided even further in the labyrinth by Bub and meets the Minotaur-like Dennis, who is described as “an erect, strong, square-cut man, not very tall” with “cold eyes” (103). The comparison can be pushed further for just like Theseus, Nancy appears to be offered as a sacrifice from Bub to the fearsome Dennis who inquires when he first sees her: “‘What you got there?’” (103).
- 18 The reference to the Greek myth is also perceptible in “The Visit,” in which Judy’s trip to reach Thompson’s villa is a dangerous one, where one “might lose the way entirely” (76). The villa itself is described as a labyrinth in which “she was left to lose her way alone” (83). She meets the owner of the place, the great Thompson, described as “grizzly and vigorous, with heavy brown hands” (78). Peggy Prenshaw also compares Gordon Ingram, Martha’s husband in “Knights and Dragons,” to the Minotaur. According to Martha’s friend George, Gordon is “a ‘huge figure’ with ‘gross hands,’ a ‘shaggy head, and big awkwardly tilted feet’” and Martha is “‘sequestered’ in an apartment that is reached by ‘devious stairways, corridors’” (23). In these examples, physical disorientation echoes the heroines’ mental disorientation and the presence of a fearsome creature symbolizes their darkest fear, the danger they have to face like a rite of passage in order to gain freedom.
- 19 Other Gothic elements add to the atmosphere of mystery that surrounds the protagonists: decaying settings such as the ruins of an old castle in the background in “The Visit” (77), and supernatural beings such as the ghosts seen by Frances Harvey and Tom Beavers in “First Dark.” One example is the strange creature Maureen imagines she has become in the eyes of her family after having reached the other side. She is described as “[a] woman, invisible, floating softly through a June day” (348), “a demon in the sacred place” (349). During one of her “visits”—which she calls her “forays into enemy land” (349), Maureen pictures herself as a monster: “I ran past one of them, one of the Partham women . . . She must have screamed also, I saw her mouth make the picture of a scream . . . and then there I was back again, crazy and fleeing with a bruised forehead all purple and gold” (347). The lack of control over the creature

she has become is reminiscent of Frankenstein's lack of control over the being he has created. Although Maureen is accountable for her loss of self and dehumanization, the parallel with Shelley's monster enables the reader to understand the heroine's feeling of helplessness. Such Gothic atmosphere is also perceptible in the hospital scene, in which Maureen relentlessly braves the elements to visit her sick son, ignored by the people around her. The narrative undergoes a progressive shift from a dreamlike, fantasy world—evocative of *Alice in Wonderland*⁵—to a nightmarish one with deeper implication, which could be qualified as Kafkaesque.⁶ Patrick Bridgewater, drawing a parallel between Kafka and Lewis Carroll, explains:

One of the most basic features in Kafka's work is the way in which, as in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, reason is replaced by the seemingly irrational. I say 'seemingly' because Lewis Carroll constructed his looking-glass world in a scientific way, on strictly rational, reverse-logic lines. Kafka's world by contrast, has its own dream-logic which immediately shows the world of simple logic and single meanings to have been left behind. (98)

- 20 Likewise, Maureen's escape, into dream world and fantasy at first, seems to gradually lose its logic. From the moment her narrative becomes tinged with darker, Kafkaesque undertones, the reader understands that she has lost control and that the process is irreversible. The loss of control is reinforced by the use of the present tense—Maureen's narrative shifts to the present tense each time she slips into deeper confusion. Although this tense gives a feeling of vividness to the narrative, it brings a sense of timelessness to the events by disconnecting them from the timeframe of the story. The reader is thus thrown into the subjective thoughts and confused mind of the character. By transcending time and space, these episodes allow the heroines to seek refuge, at least temporarily, in an imaginary world, in order to alleviate their plight.

"I am a princess in a silver tower" ("I, Maureen" 361)

- 21 Spencer's stories share the same eerie atmosphere, mainly imputable to the fairy tale subtext. While the magical atmosphere fairy tales convey enables the heroine to escape from her painful condition into a fantasy world, it also appeals to her darkest fears, fundamental flaws and unavowed desires. Although "Ship Island" is subtitled "The Story of a Mermaid," the protagonist does not resemble the treacherous mythic creature that lures men to their death. According to Hilton Anderson, she is closer to Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid, as she deliberately leaves her boyfriend for fear he might drown: "He's coming down deeper and deeper, but one thing is certain—if he gets down as far as I am, he'll drown" (109). Yet, Spencer's use of the traditional tale rather breaks away from the message conveyed by Andersen—Nancy does not "save" her boyfriend when she leaves him; on the contrary, she is not willing to sacrifice her freedom and does not take his feelings into account.
- 22 The fairy tale subtext is also perceptible in "The Visit," which includes a prince, a princess and an old castle. *The Beauty and the Beast* comes to mind when Judy encounters Thompson, as in these passages:

Thompson placed a hand like a bear's paw beneath her chin; his coarse thumb, raking down her cheek from temple to chin, all but left, she felt, a long scar. "Beauty," he remarked. His hand fell away and whatever she was expecting did not occur. . . . she longed to comfort him, but before she could think of how to, he tilted

her head to an angle that pleased him, kissed her brow, and shambled off, though in truth he seemed to trail a length of broken chain. (83)

- 23 Although Judy is nicknamed "Beauty," just like the heroine of the original story, her relationship with Thompson, "the beast," is different. The pity she feels is a means of justifying her physical attraction and the verb "comfort" thus contains sexual overtones. Judy remains passive and lets Thompson literally manipulate her—"he tilted her head to an angle that pleased him." The relationship is fantasized, as shown by the verbs "felt," "was expecting," "longed" and "think," whereas Thompson is associated with actions. "The Visit" can thus be read as the story of Judy's temporary escape into the magic world of fairy tales. She is quickly brought back to reality by her husband's mundane and guilt-inducing remarks: "He has a taste for pretty girls. You overdid it, dressing so well" (84). The story ends with the image of a huge boulder "float[ing] out into a white gorge with the leisure of a dream" (83), as if it was taking away Judy's fantasy forever with it.
- 24 In "I, Maureen," the protagonist ironically presents herself as a princess locked in a castle: "I am a princess in a silver tower . . . Golden birds sing to me. I drift around in a long silk gown" (361), making a parallel with traditional fairy tales such as *Rapunzel*. Yet, the irony rather comes from the fact that Maureen is depicted as a woman whose fate is to remain locked in towers men repeatedly build for her. When she meets Michel, she declares: "From the day I'd seen him a private tower had begun to rise about me; its walls were high and strong. . . . within myself, a princess came to life and she leaned from high-set windows sills" (354). Most classical fairy tales are structured around the traditional idea of the woman as a helpless being waiting for her prince to save her and offer her the comfort and security of married life, but Spencer's use of the fairy tale subtext subverts the traditional message. As Donald Haase explains, such subtext is essentially meant to answer "the structures and images of female disempowerment" (19) and has aroused feminist scholars' interest. He mentions the examples of Sandra Gilbert and Sarah Gubar who, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, analyzed "how writers such as Emily Brontë and Charlotte Brontë used fairy-tales allusions, structures and characters in their novels to repudiate the fairy tale's repressive fantasies and to foreground feminist themes" (20). However, while Spencer's heroines escape the passive role assigned to women as daughters, wives or mothers of dominant males and seek independence and freedom, their journeys to the other side of themselves are paradoxically filled with fantasies in which they ironically fall into the same traps.⁷ Thus, their actions cannot be interpreted as a complete rejection of a male-dominated society. Their emancipatory desires appear to be more ambiguous—not only do they escape on their own initiative, but they deliberately choose to fall into the traps men have set for them; their newly obtained freedom originates in the possibility to choose the traps they fall into.

"Artists of their lives" ("Elizabeth Spencer-b.1921" 338)

- 25 Asked about the reason why many of her characters appear to be "loners," Spencer explains: "loner' characters are good to have in a work of fiction . . . they can comment, are apt to be ironic, compassionate, witty, perceptive" ("Elizabeth Spencer" 133). Whether the story is told by a first- or third-person narrator, the reader is given

access to the heroine's internal thoughts and is led to follow her sometimes illogical or even absurd reasoning. S/He is carried along in her fantasy world without any narratorial authority to confirm or invalidate the veracity of the sequences of events or to comment on the legitimacy of her decisions. S/He thus becomes the helpless witness to her predicament.

- 26 On several occasions, Spencer has pointed out that she tends to consider her female characters as human beings, with lives of their own: "The way I feel about characters in books is that they are all living somewhere outside the book. They're doing a lot of things all the time that I'm not putting in the book" ("Characters" 29). She even pushes the point further by identifying with Marilee, the protagonist of three of her short stories: "She almost becomes like the writer of the story, doesn't she? She's observing as though she were writing" ("Interview" 606). What these heroines are writing is their own stories and their own selves; and they do so despite the male characters' attempts to crush their ego and their creativity, in a way reminiscent of Cixous's injunction: "Woman must write about her self: must write about women and bring women to writing" (875).
- 27 In "Ship Island," Nancy Lewis displays a certain talent for making up stories. When she meets Bub, who purportedly experienced the pain from the "burning rain" himself, the reader is unable to determine whether the anecdote is true, or if Nancy actually imagined this character to prove her point. And indeed, Bub and his friend might well be the products of Nancy's imagination—they appear unexpectedly, with a Cadillac and money to spend, ready to fulfill all of her desires, as if they were made-up characters from a story: "They did everything she said. She could make them do anything" (105). Nancy herself comes from the writer's imagination and the use of a third-person narrator reinforces her status as a fictional character. Spencer thus draws the reader's attention to the fallacious nature of storytelling. When Nancy comes back from her trip, covered in bruises, the reader is left to fill in the blanks.
- 28 Instead of the independent-minded woman in search of freedom who creates her own destiny, Nancy appears to have lost control over the events at the end of the story. Her thoughts are expressed in a chaotic way and seem to flow as if they were drifting. The water metaphor extends throughout the narrative and culminates in the last paragraph: "Her voice faded in a deepening glimmer where the human breath is snatched clean away and there are only bubbles, iridescent and pure. When she dove again, they rose in a curving track behind her" (110). The first, long sentence ends with two postpositive adjectives separated by a comma and thus detached from the rest of the sentence, echoing the bubbles they qualify, as they travel to the surface. The last sentence, much shorter, brings the story to an end with Nancy's symbolic final plunge into the dark side, leaving the reader, as Entzminger puts it, "to be drenched in the misery of lost love, isolation, and denial" (80). Yet, the sudden emerging of the bubbles, emphasized by the juxtaposition of the two antithetic verbs "dove" and "rose," gives the reader the assurance of Nancy's ability to breathe and thus to survive.
- 29 By choosing a first-person narrator in "I, Maureen," Spencer provides the reader with an even more intimate relationship with the protagonist. At the beginning of the story, Maureen directly addresses the reader: "We had a house on the river and it was beautiful, . . . and you can describe it for yourself, if you so desire. There can be rugs of any texture" (341-42). The use of the second person, reinforced by that of dynamic modality with the auxiliary "can," clearly show the narrator's will to assign the reader

a role in the story. The text is also replete with interrogative sentences, parentheses or italics, as if to further involve the reader in the writing process. S/He is thus made aware of the subjectivity of the narrative and of the fictionality of the events. As the story unfolds, the narrative becomes more confused and chaotic; free indirect discourse turns into stream of consciousness, reflecting Maureen's loss of touch with reality.

- 30 To depict the fantasy world in which she takes refuge and to render the dream-like quality of the events, the narrator makes numerous references to other works of fiction. The references to *Alice in Wonderland* in the hospital scene have already been mentioned. Another representative example is the episode in which Maureen receives a visit from two members of her husband's family—Vinnie Partham and her husband Charles:

On she goes, with Charles dozing in his chair after the manner of British detectives in the movies, who look dumb but are actually intelligent and wide awake, solving the perfect crime . . . The phrases have started looping out of her mouth like a backward spaghetti-eating process. Luminous cords reach up and twine with others, grow into patterns of thought. The patterns are dollar signs. I see them forming. (352)

- 31 The narrative here is pervaded by ludicrous images that seem to come directly from the narrator's confused mind; Maureen describes the scene as she perceives it, by referring to detective stories or cartoonlike images. The artificiality of the discourse, previously achieved in the first part of the story by addressing the reader in a straightforward manner is now produced through the use of intertextual references in order to create an absurd, fictional world which again underlines the constructed nature of the story. The reader is made aware of Maureen's unreliability as a narrator and needs to interpret the literary codes and fill in the gaps in order to reconstruct the "reality" of the events. This illustrates Charles May's idea that "[f]ictional self-consciousness in the short story does not allow the reader to maintain the comfortable cover-up assumption that what is depicted is real; instead the reader is made uncomfortably aware that the only reality is the process of depiction itself—the fiction-making process, the language act" ("Chekhov" 215-16). Thus, although the escapes narrated in Spencer's stories are escapes from reality, the writing of these escapes, on the contrary, is a plunge into reality. The "lines of flights" these women trace, as Deleuze would say, are directly related to the lines of flights Spencer herself traces, since "[t]o write is to trace lines of flight which are not imaginary, and which one is indeed forced to follow, because in reality writing involves us there, draws us in there" (43).
- 32 Deleuze here discusses literature, but his theory can also apply to other art forms. The original expression "lignes de fuite" is also used in French to describe an essential element in paintings and photographs, meant to bring depth and add perspective. It recalls the picture, "half photo, half drawing" (361) that Maureen and her friend Michel create at the end of the story. In this picture, "with its background drawing of a woman in evening dress turned from a doorway" (362), the "lignes de fuite" seem to be missing, which may symbolically represent Maureen's lack of perspective for the future. Maureen's escape is "pointless" because her lines of flight have no point of arrival. In the same way, the narrative of her escape does not reach any outcome.
- 33 Consequently, the making of the "cheap piece of art" ("Elizabeth Spencer-b.1921" 338) in "I, Maureen" works as a metaphor for the creation of fiction. In order to craft this picture, Maureen has to lay herself bare, revealing hidden parts of herself in the same

way writers expose their deepest selves: "He makes the light strong; the veins of my hands stand out in great detail; the bones are almost X-ray visible" (362). Not only is the process painful (Maureen burns her hands), but the picture's relative success may remain temporary—"copies of it will eventually stick up out of garbage cans, or will be left in vacated apartments" (362).

- 34 "To liberate the New Woman from the Old," Cixous explains (878), women need to refuse to comply with men's expectations: "we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lacking" (878). In Spencer's stories, women do not seem to have reached complete freedom and some boundaries remain. Parts of their stories are not revealed and readers have to fill in the blanks. Their emotions, as Entzminger puts it, are repressed: "Emotion is one thing that is expected of women, and it can often imprison them in a sense of vulnerability and dependence. For this reason, the rebellion against the control of others sometimes means a rebellion against emotion for Spencer's female characters" (74). Their attempts to run away, both literally and figuratively, becomes a means of making their voices heard. Paradoxically, the blanks they leave are even more eloquent than the stories they tell and their repressed emotions appear to be more deeply felt by the reader. Through these techniques, Spencer gives her readers a greater role in the interpretative process and above all, allows them to picture her heroines as having a life "outside the book," thus entitling them to the freedom they yearn for.

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NOTES

1. "[In the uncanny], events are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in one way or another, incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected, and which thereby provoke in the character and in the reader a reaction similar to that which works of the fantastic have made familiar" (46).
2. Marcel Arbeit draws a parallel between Edna Pontellier and the protagonist of "I, Maureen" for they both reject the demands of their perfect married life and build a new identity. He points out a difference between Edna's progressive awakening process and Maureen's sudden revealing moment of blindness (320).
3. Spencer declares later in the same interview: "I began to hate this kind of thing [materialism] in American life. I suppose without really wanting to, I turned into a social critic" ("Elizabeth Spencer-b.1921" 330).
4. Spencer uses these expressions while discussing Julia, the protagonist of her novel *The Snare* ("Elizabeth Spencer-b.1921" 330).
5. The references to *Alice in Wonderland* are obvious, from the "deepening tunnel" leading to the hospital, the people inside described as "infinitely small," or the nurse as "a white rabbit" (356-57).
6. "Having a nightmarishly, complex, bizarre or illogical quality" (Merriam-Webster.com). In Spencer's story, this idea is reinforced by the description of Maureen as an insect, as previously mentioned.
7. Spencer does not consider herself a radical feminist: "I don't think I'm a feminist in the sense of being very doctrinaire about it. Absolute equality is impossible because men and women are very different" ("Elizabeth Spencer-b.1921" 341).

ABSTRACTS

Elizabeth Spencer publie en 1981 *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*, dont les personnages principaux sont en grande partie des femmes confrontées à la réalité d'une condition féminine bien éloignée de leur personnalité. Certaines d'entre elles peinent à répondre aux exigences familiales traditionnelles ; elles suffoquent en tentant de remplir le rôle que la société leur impose. Spencer donne à ses lecteurs accès aux pensées intérieures de ces protagonistes en quête d'identité et de liberté. Elle révèle leur désir de fuir et d'explorer cet aspect bien dissimulé et souvent obscur de leur personnalité. Qu'il s'agisse de s'échapper temporairement dans un monde imaginaire ou de

quitter définitivement un cadre familial délétère, la fuite ici revêt différentes formes et la quête ne se solde pas toujours par la liberté tant désirée. Cet article s'attache à en déterminer l'élément déclencheur et à analyser la façon dont Spencer brouille la frontière entre rêve et réalité grâce à de fréquentes incursions dans le monde du merveilleux, du gothique ou du fantastique. L'écriture reflète la subjectivité narrative – le récit de la fuite est alors perçu comme le produit de l'imagination de l'héroïne. Celle-ci devient une artiste capable de créer sa propre représentation de la réalité et de susciter, par conséquent, une réflexion sur le processus de création artistique.

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