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The fragment, the spiral and the network: the progress of interpretation in Louise Erdrich's "American horse"

Isabelle Thibaudeau-Pacouil

- 1 Louise Erdrich's short story, "American Horse", draws upon a familiar topos in the body of her literary creations and in the canon of Native American literature in general, that of the conflict opposing Native American culture to Western authorities. Here, the conflict materializes through the abduction of a child — Buddy — from his Indian mother, Albertine, by the governmental authorities who deem her unable to bring him up. The story may very well appear as a mere version of a now hackneyed theme but for its original way of tackling it. Erdrich's approach relies on the introduction of a variety of perspectives which are going to play a key role in the reader's construction of meaning.
- 2 The whole narrative seems indeed to be articulated around the protagonists' different modes of seeing, a number of which are used by the narrator to structure the readers' own interpretation of the contents of the story. In other words, some of these visions function as images which are going to enable the readers to see/read the short story in a different light, the light of another world view or of a certain type of knowledge.¹ This article will show that it is truly in the reader's interpretation of the story that progress is to be found as what is at stake in his reading is his acquiring a new mode of perceiving reality.
- 3 In "American Horse", the narrator's strategy first aims at confronting the reader with a plurality of perspectives and then at leading him to establish a hierarchy between them all. But why does L. Erdrich want her readers to privilege some characters' perceptions to the detriment of others? The answer can be found in the study of these visions — or of their "mental images" i.e. dreams, memories, fantasies and ideas as Mitchell calls them² — which, right from the incipit, define a reading contract inviting the reader to

replace the story in the spiral of time and read it as an ongoing story, as the visible fragment of an underlying larger narrative. Finally (and this will be my last point) such an interpretative construction on the reader's part is carried one step further with the presence of another essential "epistemological figure"³ — that of the network — which underlies the whole narrative and provides the readers with a new method of reading Louise Erdrich's "American Horse".

- 4 As was mentioned in the introduction, "American Horse" hinges on a conflict opposing two groups of characters: the Western group with Vicki Koob, Officer Brackett and Officer Harmony (who is not white but who all the same works for the white government) and the Native American group with Uncle Lawrence, Albertine and Buddy American Horse. The Western group's actions are driven by a set of values which can easily be outlined through the way they judge Albertine and her environment. That judgement is conveyed through the vision they have of the context in which Buddy lives. Vicki's taking stock of what is to be found in Buddy's homerelies on the careful writing of a list of elements among which she sees no link, no connection (the paratactic mode is here quite evocative).

They could see the house was empty at first glance. It was only one rectangular room with whitewashed walls and a little gas stove in the middle. They had already come through the cooking lean-to with the other stove and washstand and rusty old refrigerator. That refrigerator had nothing in it but some wrinkled potatoes and a package of turkey necks. Vicki Koob noted that in her perfect-bound notebook. The beds along the walls of the big room were covered with quilts that Albertine's mother, Sophie, had made from bits of old wool coats and pants that the Sisters sold in bundles at the mission. There was no one hiding beneath the beds. No one was under the little aluminium dinette table covered with a green oilcloth, or the soft brown wood chairs tucked up to it. One wall of the big room was filled with neatly stacked crates of things — old tools and springs and small half-dismantled appliances. Five or six television sets were stacked against the wall. Their control panels spewed colored wires and at least one was cracked all the way across. Only the topmost set, with coathanger antenna angled sensitively to catch the bounding signals around Little Shell, looked like it could possibly work.

Not one thing escaped Vicki Koob's trained and cataloguing gaze. She made note of the cupboard that held only commodity flour and coffee. The unsanitary tin oil drum beneath the kitchen window, full of empty surplus pork cans and beer bottles, caught her eye as did Uncle Lawrence's physical and mental deterioration. She quickly described these « benchmarks of alcoholic dependency within the extended family of Woodrow (Buddy) American Horse » as she walked around the room (...). (47, 48)

- 5 Vicki's "trained and cataloguing gaze" does not give a flattering image of the inhabitants of the house since it hints at fragmentation and dissociation through the evocation of physical and mental degradation, utter poverty and neglect. Yet, despite the narrator's choice to present Vicki's and Brackett's perspective in great detail and through internal focalization, the readers do not condone their intentions. On the contrary, through the narrator's use of a number of strategies, they are led to reject their way of looking at things and to wish for Albertine's victory. These strategies lead the readers to grant more credit to Albertine's and Buddy's perspectives and Vincent Jouve's theory in *L'Effet-personnage dans le roman* can be very useful here to understand how this process functions.⁴
- 6 Vicki's mode of seeing and the normative system she and the other officials stand for are rejected because we are programmed to do so by our reading. According to Jouve,

three codes play an important part in the elaboration of a “système de sympathie”: the narrative code, the affective code and the cultural code⁵ and the three of them can be identified in “American Horse”. The fact that in the opening paragraph, the narrator clearly puts the reader on an equal footing with himself favors what Jouve calls “narratorial identification.”⁶ Hence the narrator’s choices are significant since they are going to color our approach to the characters and to the narrative in general. For example, in the first two sections of the story the readers are presented with a touching image of filial and maternal love which will effectively prevent them from granting credit to Vicki’s belief that mother and son should be separated. This narrative strategy is made even more effective through the shifts in focalization orchestrated in these two parts. As Jouve explains: “L’identification primaire au narrateur sert à orienter les identifications secondaires aux personnages.”⁷ Through internal focalization the readers can introject themselves into the characters and experience their fear and their anguish. Such strategies (the list of which is not exhaustive) end up creating a distance or tension between the two groups of characters but also between the narrator, the reader and the Caucasian group. This tension is clearly at play in the ironical look the narrator has of that group which he repeatedly ridicules. Irony, because it relies on the notion of “distance”⁸, brings Lawrence, Albertine, Buddy, the narrator and the reader together. The Caucasians’ system and norms are quickly discarded and so is their fragmented interpretation of the reality of Little Shell.

- 7 The affective code (which consists in making some characters more likeable than others) also helps the reader privilege Albertine’s and Buddy’s perceptions. We learn a lot about them and this produces an “effect of life”⁹, and the more we know about a character, the more we feel concerned about what happens to him.¹⁰ Buddy and Albertine (unlike the others) are granted psychological depth through the presence of four significant themes: love, childhood, dreams and suffering. The first two sections of the story dwell for example on mother’s and son’s reciprocal feelings of love and on their desires. They are both concerned by the oedipal arrest and the reference to that universal crisis cannot but attract the reader who experienced the same desires and dilemmas once in his past. Childhood is also present through memories which provide the readers with the characters’ background or genesis (and as Jouve indicates, once a character is explained he is already forgiven.¹¹). Thanks to dreams, the reader is also able to get an insight into Buddy’s most intimate self since they give us access to the boy’s personal history and thus enable us to feel closer to him. Finally, the theme of suffering plays a key part. Uncle Lawrence, Albertine and Buddy are clearly presented as the victims, the game in what Albertine sees as a manhunt (“they’re outside, they’re gonna hunt” p. 43); the reader cannot but sympathize with this mother who struggles till the end to keep her child, with that old man who does what he can to trick the aggressors and with that little boy who is taken away from the mother he loves.
- 8 Finally, the reader’s tendency to privilege Albertine’s and Buddy’s perspectives also relies on the fact that neither of them comes into conflict with the reader’s own axiology or cultural code. Erdrich does not offer a Manichean picture of the characters in “American Horse”; there is no polarisation between Indians and Caucasians since, as was shown previously, Little Shell is far from being a paradise for a child to grow up in and its inhabitants are not irreproachable. But if the Indian group is not idealized, still their perspective functions as a new benchmark of difference for the reader and enables us to question the rightfulness of the Caucasians’ actions.

9 The narrator's work clearly consists in presenting a variety of perspectives and in making the readers privilege Albertine's and Buddy's visions to the detriment of the other characters' fragmented outlook. But the reader is also progressively led to understand that the subjects are not as important in the narrative as what they see. He is invited to look at these visions for the message they convey and for the role they play in shaping his construction of meaning. The first step in the progress of our interpretation will depend on our seeing the story not as a mere anecdote, but as a narrative belonging to a larger cycle of stories with no end nor beginning within the textual scope of the short story itself.

10 What is first to be noticed is that Buddy's and Albertine's visions are not limited to a mere re-presentation of real objects. Buddy's dreams have no objects as such in the real world, while Albertine's visions seem to transcend their objects (for example, the butterfly-shaped buckle triggers images which are based on no existing or tangible reality). Whether they are dreams or memories, Albertine's and Buddy's visions open the doors onto the characters' history and enable the reader to go deep into the spiral of time as the incipit to the short story invites the reader to do.

The woman sleeping on the cot in the woodshed was Albertine American Horse. The name was left over from her mother's short marriage. The boy was the son of the man she had loved and let go. Buddy was on the cot too, sitting on the edge because he'd been awake three hours watching out for his mother and besides, she took up the whole cot. Her feet hung over the edge, limp and brown as two trout. Her long arms reached out and slapped at things she saw in her dreams. (42)

11 The incipit is a strategic locus as it provides the readers with guidelines that will help them to interpret the story appropriately. It sets up a reading contract in which Buddy's dreams and visions play an instrumental part. His two types of dreams have the same outcome even if not exactly the same characteristics. His nocturnal nightmare features his being hunted down by policemen who eventually catch him.

Buddy had been knocked awake out of hiding in a washing machine while herds of policemen with dogs searched through a large building with many tiny rooms. When the arm came down, Buddy screamed because it had a blue cuff and sharp silver buttons. (42)

12 His daydreaming is made of two visions which occur separately in time. The first vision appears to be a materialization of his feeling of impending danger in the shape of a dreadful metallic flying monster coming in their direction:

13 There was something coming and he knew it.

It was coming from very far off but he had a picture of it in his mind. It was a large thing made of metal with many barbed hooks, points, and drag chains on it, something like a giant potato peeler that rolled out of the sky, scraping clouds down with it and jabbing or crushing everything that lay in its path on the ground. (42)

14 The second one consists in Albertine's and Buddy's meeting with the monster and in Buddy's abduction by the dreadful "thing":

He closed his eyes and got the feeling that the cot was lifting up beneath him, that it was arching its canvas back and then traveling, traveling very fast and in the wrong direction for when he looked up he saw the three of them were advancing to meet the great metal thing with hooks and barbs and all sorts of sharp equipment to catch their bodies and draw their blood. He heard its insides as it rushed toward them, purring softly like a powerful motor and then they were right in its shadow.

He pulled the reins as hard as he could and the beast reared, lifting him. His mother clapped her hand across his mouth. (43)

- 15 Both dreams offer two different versions of basically the same story. Such visions might have had no effect on the reader and his reading but for their striking coinciding with what actually happens at the level of the diegesis. A subtle shift in focalization makes Buddy's vision perfectly fit into the chronological development of the plot as, at the very moment the monster of his first nightmarish vision catches him, he is suddenly woken up by his mother and told that the villains are indeed there to get them:

He pulled the reins as hard as he could and the beast reared, lifting him. His mother clapped her hand across his mouth.

'Okay,' she said. 'Lay low. They're outside and they're gonna hunt'

She touched his shoulder and Buddy leaned over with her to look through a crack in the boards. (43)

- 16 The interlocking of the oneiric sphere with the real sphere contributes to the shaping of the reader's horizon of expectation and to the significance of the principle of connection. First, the officials' arrival appears as the logical continuation of what seems to form one single narrative: the reader is therefore invited to grant as much importance to Buddy's visions as to the real events in the plot because he has had a confirmation of their validity and prophetic value (doesn't the dream come true?). Second, the readers identify the officials with the policemen of the first dream and the flying monster of the second and can anticipate what is to come: they expect the nightmare to come true and Buddy to be abducted. Our reading is thus programmed by such a foreboding and we will look for signs that confirm or infirm it. Finally, Buddy's visions are essential in so far as they establish a link between his experience and stories of a similar kind that occurred in the mythical past. Indeed already in the incipit, the reader who has some knowledge about Indian folklore can see the monster as being the embodiment of one of the most cruel mythical figures, Raven, well known for its abductions of women and children.¹² Therefore the equation between the officials, the policemen and the mythical monster tends to invite the reader to see Buddy's story as an updated version of an ancient tale which, because of its reenactment in the present, seems to have no ending and to keep recurring again and again.

- 17 The reading of the whole story confirms the contents of the horizon of expectation. The mythical reference even becomes striking in the closing section which narrates Buddy's departure from Little Shell with Vicki and Brackett at his sides.

He ate the chocolate, every bit of it, tasting his mother's blood. And when he had the chocolate down inside him and all licked off his hands, he opened his mouth to say thank you to the woman, as his mother had taught him. But instead of a thank you coming out he was astonished to hear a great rattling scream, and then another, rip out of him like pieces of his own body and whirl onto the sharp things all around him. (52)

- 18 His eating Vicki's bar of chocolate reminds us of Raven's enthralling strategies based on his victims' eating excrements. His "great rattling scream" indicates that the enthralling process has succeeded and that Buddy has become one of them, i.e. a little raven or in more modern terms, a little white boy. This time the dream actually fuses with the reality of the diegesis to become the diegesis itself. Such a fusion indicates that Buddy's story is not merely a variation on the theme of the mythical story of Raven but the continuation of that same story. So Buddy's visions in the narrative are aimed at placing his experience in mythical and historical time. His story is history in so far as it belongs to the cycle or spiral of time. The image of the spiral implies that Buddy's story

was written a long time ago and that the short story is actually one version in a cycle which keeps going endlessly. The never-ending process is featured at the end and at the beginning of the story through the pervading reference to traveling (42-3, 51). The fact that the plot has progressed in between these two sections prevents us from seeing the story as a perfect circle but clearly as a spiral form whose end is not yet known because not yet written, whose end remains open as it is not part of the textual space and time of the story.

19 But how is the reader led to understand that Buddy's story goes on? Through Albertine's first vision which is based on the same basic pattern of the spiral. Though a memory, Albertine's first vision is akin to a dream. As Albertine is getting ready to face Harmony, she is suddenly overcome by the memory of an anecdote that took place in her childhood. She remembers her father with "wings of sweat, dark blue, (that) spread across the back of his work shirt" rubbing the wings of a dead butterfly on her shoulders; she remembers him throwing her high into the air and "never landing." (49-50)

20 This first vision corresponds to her mental return into her past and to her meeting with her father embodied in the stone butterfly ("wings of sweat", "dark blue"). This memory annihilates the temporal frontiers existing between past and present making Albertine's father present to her and in her. The interlocking of Albertine's vision with her subsequent actions gives indeed the readers the impression that the dead father is still living in his daughter and communicating with her. Albertine's use of the buckle as a weapon and her subsequent desperate and suicidal jump are like manifestations of the past, of the return of the dead father in the present even more so as she eventually becomes —through her acts — a butterfly:

Albertine straightened, threw her shoulders back. Her father's hand was on her chest and shoulders lightening her wonderfully. Then on wings of her father's hands, on dead butterfly wings, Albertine lifted into the air and flew toward the others. The light powerful feeling swept her up the way she had floated higher, seeing the grass below. It was her father throwing her up into the air and out of danger. (51)

21 The notions of continuity and connection are also clearly put forth through Erdrich's emphasis on the theme of filiation as the reader's attention is constantly called to the characters' family links especially through the stress put on the name American Horse. For example, Buddy's filiation with his father is denied while his belonging to the American Horse is stressed (hence the title: the story is not that of Buddy alone but that of the whole dynasty and of its history going far back to the dawn of time). This theme thus enhances the spiral or cyclical representation of time in the story. It hints at the numerous patterns of regression to be found in the narrative but also refers to the notion of progression and continuity. In other words, it transcends the present to link it with both past and future time as Albertine's final jump exemplifies since this act is aimed at featuring her meeting with her father ("it was her father throwing her up into the air and out of danger" 51). But her trip does not stop there on the grass on which she is lying. The last image Buddy has of her invites us to see Albertine as traveling towards the center of the earth:

She was stretched flat on the ground, on her stomach, and her arms were curled around her head as if in sleep. One leg was drawn up and it looked for all the world like she was running full tilt into the ground, as though she had been trying to pass into the earth, to bury herself, but at the last moment something had stopped her. (52)

- 22 This final representation is evocative of the involutorial spiral which was mentioned previously. Albertine's trip drives us to the center of the earth which is to be equated to the embryonic stage, to the origins of time. Whether she is dead or not does not really matter. What actually matters is the impression the reader is given that Albertine's spirit is alive forever. Mother and son are going in two opposite directions but which belong to the same spiral. The link between them is thus not severed as a first reading of the story might have implied. Erdrich's use of the figure of the spiral clearly places her story in an aesthetics where closure is absent, where the reader's "sense of an ending"¹³ is meant to be transcended or replaced by his acceptance of an absence of ending.
- 23 The omnipresence of eschatological schemes (especially the cyclical pattern), the temporal links established between Albertine and her father, and the recurring back-and-forth movements in time featured in the story invite the reader to go beyond the textual frame of the narrative, to follow the spiral of time and to anticipate a future meeting between Buddy and his mother. The figure of the spiral thus points out the significance of filiation and of the individual's historical background. The individual is not isolated but belongs to a continuum which determines who he is and what is to become of him. The spiral as a link between the protagonists is to be seen as one manifestation of the larger, all-encompassing "epistemological figure"¹⁴ of the network, which clearly stands as the backbone of Erdrich's aesthetics as well as a guiding principle in the narrative since it also gives it its metatextual dimension.
- 24 The figure of the network is most explicitly present in Albertine's perception of Harmony when she faces him, just before her ultimate, desperate act. Her perception is focused on and leads to a rather unusual portrait of the man, which stresses what cannot actually be seen:
- Albertine saw the pattern of tiny arteries that age, drink, and hard living had blown to the surface of the man's face. She saw the spoked wheels of his iris and the arteries like tangled threads that sewed him up. She saw the living net of springs and tissue that held him together, and trapped him. She saw the random, intimate plan of his person. (50)
- 25 What truly matters in this short description is not so much what it tells us about Harmony as the principles that underlie it¹⁵. The description results from a particular way of seeing, which also stands as a guideline for the interpretation of Erdrich's short story.
- 26 This description first underlines the tension existing between surface and depth, appearances and reality. The tiny arteries that have surfaced on Harmony's face are the visible marks of the more complex inner reality of the man; they are the superficial marks of his history. It also puts forth the notion of entangled unity. Harmony is perceived as a labyrinthine structure (especially through the metaphor of "the living net of springs and tissue") and as a mechanism, with the image of the "spoked wheel". The connected arteries make up a sophisticated network (such words as "pattern", "net" and "plan" echo its semantic field), which in turn gives Harmony his identity, his substance ("sewed him up", "held him together").
- 27 Finally, the representation of Harmony through the metaphor of the network is further developed in the short passage that follows:
- She saw the black veins in the wings of the butterfly, roads burnt into a map, and then she was located somewhere in the net of veins and sinew that was the tragic

complexity of the world so she did not see Officer Brackett and Vicki Koob rushing toward her, but felt them instead like flies caught in the same web, rocking it.

- 28 What this series of associations implies is that the world is to be perceived as a macrocosmic network in which a multitude of smaller—or microcosmic— structures (going from the wing of a butterfly to the human being himself) interlock. But this highly poetic and cryptic passage also functions as a network—a textual one—as it weaves together all the metaphorical associations that have been previously mentioned. It draws on the butterfly imagery and, through it, develops the theme of filiation and connection in general. Besides through the evocation of the « roads », the « map », and «the net of veins and sinew », the passage takes up the image of the network, which is associated, in the final part of the quotation, to that of the web—whose symbolical meaning here is particularly appropriate as it duplicates what comes out of Albertine's perceptions¹⁶. Albertine is not deceived by appearances, she is not taken in by Harmony's sweet talk as she knows that his words are tricky signifiers—they do not have the Signified he claims they have.
- 29 These two passages are clearly meant to function as a *mise en abyme* of the whole short story which is to be perceived as a network of images and intertextual references. But it is also a metatextual piece since it provides the readers with the necessary guidelines to the interpretation both of the story and of Erdrich's aesthetics. This short passage is therefore to be read as a small textual network of signifiers, which have to be deciphered by the reader in order for him to understand its metatextual significance. It invites us to read « American Horse » as Albertine and Harmony read each other's faces: "Each read the face of the other as if deciphering letters carved into softly eroding veins of stone." (50). The reference to the tension between surface and depth is here made explicit through the evocation of carving and of the dichotomy existing between the signifier (the "letters") and the signified (which requires a deciphering process to be clearly identified). The main characteristic of the signifier is that it is partial or fragmented; it does not reflect the total complexity of the reality it refers to and therefore should not be interpreted for what it is but rather for what it conceals (this is precisely why Vicki's mode of perception and interpretation are rejected). Erdrich's numerous intertextual references, which are disseminated throughout the text in its every nook and cranny, are but the tips of huge icebergs whose main bodies lie concealed in the depth of the text and of Native American culture. Visions are not simply visions but the resurgences and materialization of stories of the past; cars are not merely cars but current manifestations of mythical beings. The short story is therefore a subtle and intricate network of references ("veins of stone") which are meant to be interpreted ("deciphered") by the readers. This hermeneutic dimension of reading implies that the readers go beyond the surface of the story and look for signs, which, all linked together, eventually lead to meaning, knowledge and the reader's own construction of the story. The figure of the network is therefore to be seen as the backbone of Erdrich's aesthetics—which mainly relies on continuity, on the absence of fragmentation—and of her conception of Indian literature. It is thus to be seen both as a vector of knowledge since it compels the reader to work out the meaning of the text and as the object of knowledge, as Erdrich invites her reader to see reality (time and space) not in a fragmented way but as a web in which everything is linked.
- 30 Perceptions are clearly meant to structure and govern Louise Erdrich's short story. Vicki's and Brackett's conception of Uncle Lawrence and of his house are characterized by fragmentation, dissociation and meaninglessness and therefore to be dismissed as

not reliable in the construction of meaning. They cannot understand Buddy's world and culture because they cannot see that, beneath the shell of Little Shell, a coherent world lies.

- 31 In the end, the short story can be compared to a complex form of stereograph. With a stereograph, the reader is presented with a pattern which *a priori* does not represent anything but the pattern itself. Only after his gaze has got used to the pattern and transcended it can he see a three-dimensional image take shape through the net of signs he first had access to. The process in Louise Erdrich's story is more or less the same except that the reader is first given an image (or a story) which he is not to see for itself but as a network which, in turn, contains several smaller networks. These smaller networks are all related to each other and their combination eventually leads the reader to build a three-dimensional picture which does not have the fragmented and linear appearance of the original one. Hence, through the stress she puts on connections, Erdrich manages to transform her story into an ongoing narrative. Even though the diegesis is textually limited and ends at the final full stop, she invites her reader to transform that full stop into a comma and to move on with the story. She thus turns the reader into the narrator's creative counterpart as once the diegesis is put an end to, the creative work of interpretation proceeds in weaving the threads of the narrative together. This is the real progress of interpretation.

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NOTES

1. We draw here on our reading of the introductory chapter to Liliane Louvel's recent book: *L'œil du texte*. In this chapter, entitled « L'image », the author explores such concepts as « image », « figure » and « représentation » which have their relation to knowledge in common. The chapter opens on an important postulate to be found in the words of Michel Baridon: « L'image mentale est une activité symbolique qui joue un rôle dans la cognition au même titre que le langage ». Later on, he adds that both images and language construct the structures of our relationships to the world. Such a postulate will have to be kept in mind throughout our study.
2. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology, Image, Text, Ideology*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1986, 10.
3. Cf. Michel Pierssens, *Savoirs à l'œuvre — essais d'épistémocritique*, Presses Universitaires de Lille, Lille, 1990. We will use the definition Pierssens gives in his « introduction » of the concept of « figures épistémiques ». This definition is taken up in the third chapter of this analysis.
4. Cf. Vincent Jouve, *L'effet-personnage dans le roman*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1992. Our study mainly draws upon the chapter entitled « le personnage comme personne » pp. 108-149.
5. Cf. V. Jouve, *op. cit.*
6. Cf. Jouve, *op. cit.* p. 148. Jouve draws on what Barthes wrote earlier on in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*: « je suis celui qui a la même place que moi ».
7. Cf. Jouve, *op. cit.* p. 128.
8. See the definition Philippe Hamon gives of the concept of irony as being based on « distance » and « tension » in Philippe Hamon, « L'ironie », in *Le Grand Atlas des Littératures*, Encyclopaedia Universalis éditeur, 1990, p. 57.
9. This expression was coined by Vincent Jouve, *op. cit.* p. 108.
10. Cf. Jouve, *op. cit.*, p. 132.
11. Cf. Jouve, *op. cit.*, p. 138-9: « L'évocation d'un être dans la durée a une valeur explicative qui permet de mieux le 'comprendre' ... Un acte compris est déjà à moitié pardonné. »
12. Details concerning Raven's cruelty and cannibalism can be found in Victor Barnow, *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths and Tales and their Relation to Chippewa Life*, U. of Wisconsin P., Madison, 1977, in Ruth Landes, *The Ojibwa Religion and the Midewiwin*, U. of Wisconsin P., Madison, 1985 and in Coleman, Bernard, Frogner and Eich, *Ojibwa Myths and Legends*, Ross and Haines, Minneapolis, 1962.
13. I borrow this phrase from the title of Frank Kermode's essay: *The Sense of an Ending—Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, London: OUP, 1966.
14. This concept is borrowed from Michel Pierssens, *op. cit.* In his « Introduction », Pierssens questions himself about the various types of knowledge that underlie a literary work. The main question he undertakes to answer is: what does the text know? The part played by what he calls « epistemological figures » is instrumental to investigate into the knowledge of the text since these figures are the manifestation or the vectors of knowledge in fiction or discourse.
15. Somehow, the process used here is closely akin to the ideas developed by Kant and the philosophical movement of « Transcendental Idealism » according to which knowledge does not revolve around the objects themselves but around the representation we make out of them.
16. The symbol of the spider in Native American folklore is a highly positive one. *The Encyclopédie des Symboles*, in its section devoted to the Spider reads: « La structure de sa toile renvoie aux différents modes de manifestation de l'Être, sans compter que cette toile est filée comme l'aurait fait aux débuts un divin artisan : elle renvoie de ce fait à l'idée de la maya, c'est-à-dire à ce jeu des formes auxquelles nous nous laissons prendre dans notre existence quotidienne, formes réelles au plan des phénomènes, mais en fin de compte illusoires au regard de l'Absolu. » (42).

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