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Nation and National Identity in Susan Glaspell's *Inheritors* (1921)

Emeline Jouve

- ¹ In 1917, the United States joined the Allies in their fight against the Central Powers. Despite the remoteness of the conflicts from the Americans' direct experience, World War I was a "key moment in United States history" when, as Ellen J. Gainor observes, "national consciousness came to the fore" (Gainor 1999, 8). The theatre of operations was the Old Continent but the New World was the stage of a mounting national identity crisis:

During the period surrounding World War I... public statements about American identity appeared frequently in print media, expressing widely diverging perspectives on the issue. The debates were motivated by concern about the waves of immigrant arrivals as well as the strain of internal conflict, both of which incorporated local as well as national fears over divided national loyalties. From any number of standpoints writers pondered what America had been, what it could become, and how to achieve these goals. (Gainor 1999, 8)

- ² Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) was part of this generation of writers. Her play *Inheritors*, first performed in 1921 by the *Provincetown Players*, the amateur theatre troupe she founded with her husband George Cram Cook, is one of Glaspell's most original responses to this American identity crisis. The playwright, along with the community of American intellectuals and radicals, was concerned by the isolationist and xenophobic policy of President Wilson whose anti-immigrant and anti-anarchist laws, the Espionage and Sedition Acts, were devised to protect war-time morale by curbing any political dissent. For Ludwig Lewinshon, an influential literary critic of *The Nation*, *Inheritors* was "the first American play in which a strong intellect and a ripe artistic nature grasped and set forth in human terms the central tradition and most burning problem of the national life quite justly and scrupulously, equally without acrimony and compromise" (qtd. in Bigsby 18). With this three-act play, Glaspell revisits her roots by setting the first act in 1879, on a farm owned by a family of early pioneers who settled the American Midwest.¹ She then proceeds to display what has become of the pioneer spirit forty years later, in 1920 when Act II, III and IV take place. With this two-

layered temporal structure, Glaspell explores the construction of an American ethos. In the first Act, which can be seen as a prologue because of the temporal switch, the playwright seems to echo Ernest Renan's definition of the characteristics that underlie the making of a Nation. In his memorable lecture "What is a Nation?" at the Sorbonne in 1882, Renan defined the concept of nation as a "soul, a spiritual principle":

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form (52).

- 3 The French philosopher's definition of "Nation", breaking with the tradition based on shared criteria such as a common language, colour or religion, has been most influential in Europe but also in the United States. Even though no evidence has been found that Glaspell had in mind Renan's lecture when writing *Inheritors*, we may think that such a cultivated woman would certainly have known about the work of a philosopher who became well-known in the U.S.A. after the 1863 release in English of his controversial book *The Life of Jesus*. When reading Act I in the light of Renan's definition of nation, we realize that the "two things" which, for the French writer, constitute the national spirit are treated in the play. This paper will thus consider Glaspell's treatment of the "legacy of memory" before analyzing how she dramatizes the concept of "liv[ing] together." S.E Wilmer recalls that: "theatre can act as a public forum in which the audience scrutinizes and evaluates political rhetoric and assesses the validity of representation of national identity" (2). The reception of the whole play is conditioned by Act I in which the national principles are laid out and on which this study focuses. The analysis of the founding axioms of the building of a nation will lead finally to the examination of the strategies whereby Glaspell invites her audience to reflect upon what it means to be American.

1. The legacy of memory in the making of national identity

- 4 Half way between *mimesis* and *diegesis*, Act I is a *representation* (*mimesis*) of characters *telling* (*diegesis*) what took place in the past. The introductory act, that takes place in 1879, is the enactment of the transmission of the memory of the American pioneer times into the present of the scene. Grandmother Morton stands as the spokesperson of this pioneer past, marked by her arrival in the West in 1820 and the Black Hawk War in 1832. She is the physical embodiment of the past in the present and as such this character represents Memory on stage. In the light of Maurice Halbwachs's typology of memories, we may be more specific and say that Grandmother represents "autobiographical memory" in contrast to "historical memory" (99). When Ernest Renan alludes to memories in "What is a Nation?", he, of course, did not know the French sociologist's theories on collective memory as they were developed in the century that followed that lecture. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how Halbwachs's conjectures can be applied to Renan's assumptions since they both adopt a constructionist approach. These two French thinkers' hypotheses seem to provide a relevant theoretical frame for the analysis of the theme of national identity in Glaspell's *Inheritors*. According to Halbwachs, historical memory or history, which remains exterior to the individual who has not lived through the past events, gives a

schematic and summarized representation of the past whereas autobiographical memory, which comes from the inside as it arises from experience, gives a denser picture of the past represented in its continuity.² From the start of *Inheritors*, Glaspell denounces a schematic and stereotypical vision of the pioneer past. As Paul Ricoeur has demonstrated throughout his works—*Histoire et vérité*; *La Mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* to name only two—the truly objective nature of history is illusory. History “reflects the subjectivity” of an individual, an aspect that the playwright dramatizes when she denounces the white phallogocentric perspective from which national history has been written (Ricoeur 1965, 31). Through the character of Grandmother Morton, a whole chapter of the pioneer past, traditionally centered on the great deeds of white male heroes, is restored. The following exchange between Grandmother Morton and Smith, a young businessman, illustrates her role as the embodiment of living—but forgotten—history:

GRANDMOTHER: Well, it was the same way with the war of 1832.

SMITH: The war of 1832?

GRANDMOTHER: News to you that we had a war with the Indians?

SMITH: That's right—the Blackhawk war. I've heard of it.

GRANDMOTHER: Heard of it!

SMITH: Were your men in that war?

GRANDMOTHER: I was in that war. I threw an Indian in the cellar and stood on the door. I was heavier then. (121-122)

- 5 The young man does not know about the Black Hawk War, he had only “heard” of it. “The war of 1832?”: the marks of ellipsis preceding Smith’s question materialize on the page this void that represents the lack of knowledge, the absence of memory. With his cliché-ridden conception of the past, Smith appears as a representative of the *doxa*. Blinded by his conventional heritage, which equates women to the figure of the Angel in the House, Smith cannot imagine that the old lady fought the war against the Indians, as his question “Were your men in that war?” proves. The ternary repetition of the pronoun “I” in Grandmother’s answer is an attempt to reestablish the truth and her role in history.
- 6 Drama opens the mind to philosophical reflection, inviting the spectators to “distinguish between the good and the bad objectivity of history” “for reflection constantly assures us that the *object* of history is the human *subject* itself.” For Paul Ricoeur, the role of philosophy is to “brin[g] in view... the cleavage between a true and false objectivity... between objectivity and the objectivism which omits man” (Ricoeur 1965, 40). Through her depiction of Grandmother’s pioneer past, Glaspell draws us to focus on this very cleavage, which omits (wo)man. She deconstructs the cultural stereotype of the male hero and departs from the traditional historical representation of the American pioneer. In *Susan Glaspell in Context*, J. Ellen Gainor notes:

The fact that Glaspell has Grandmother Morton describe how she fought the Indians helps establish a motif of female courage and strength ... Historian Glanda Riley has specialized in the study of women’s frontier experiences; she observes that this aspect of American history has been ignored, as if the westward expansion had been an exclusively male phenomenon. (118).
- 7 As Gainor points out, historians have long ignored the part played by women in the westward expansion and this restricted vision has been passed on to generations of Americans who, like Smith, have a distorted view of reality. Misconceptions do not only concern women: Native Americans are also victims of this phenomenon as the rest of the conversation indicates.³ The Black Hawk War was named after the war chief of the

Sac and Fox who left their lands and returned to Illinois, thus generating a conflict with the United States. When talking about the Indians, Smith resorts to prejudices: "I guess you believe the saying that the only good Indian is a dead Indian" (122). The reference to sayings is another evidence of Smith's ignorance concerning the agents that made up the past on which the present is built. In line with Halbwachs's definition of historical memory, Smith has a schematic, oversimplified vision of the war opposing the baddies, the Indians, to the goodies, the white settlers and soldiers. This aspect is confirmed by his belief regarding the American government's compensatory measures to the Indians. Smith's remark follows Grandmother's memories of Black Hawk whom she knew well.

GRANDMOTHER: But poor old Blackhawk—what he didn't know was how many white man there was. After the war—when he was beaten but not conquered in his heart—they took him east—Washington, Philadelphia, New York—and when he saw the white man's cities—it was a different Indian came back. He just let his heart break without turning a hand.

SMITH: But we paid them for their lands. (*she looks at him*) Paid them something.

GRANDMOTHER: Something. For fifteen million acres of this Mississippi Valley land—best on this globe, we paid two thousand two hundred and thirty-four dollars and fifty cents, we promised to deliver annually goods to the value of one thousand dollars. Not a fancy price—even for them days (124).

- 8 The portrayal of Black Hawk differs from that of the dangerous Indian warriors in the popular imagination voiced by Smith. The mention of the Chief's departure for the East is a reference to the trip that Black Hawk was made to undertake through the big cities as a prisoner of war of the U.S.A., to be displayed to the population. The tour was meant to discourage the Indians from retaliating, by impressing them with the wonders of civilization. The reassessment of the measure taken by the government to compensate for the Indians' loss of their lands is quite daring on the part of the playwright who, under the government legislation, could have been accused of anti-nationalism by exposing the abuses of the past.⁴ Grandmother Morton and later her son, Silas, refer to the Indians but these never appear on stage: they are alive through the words of the white settlers who knew them. The recourse to invisible characters is a hallmark of the playwright's writing.⁵ Noelia Hernando-Real believes that the fact that no Native American characters appear on stage corresponds to "Glaspell's remark that they have been removed from the American landscape" (Noelia Hernando-Real 2006, 191). The Whites conquered the West and erased the Indians from the American scene. By adopting the strategy of the absent character, the playwright literalizes the metaphor.⁶ Through Grandmother Morton's affectionate evocation of the Indian Chief and the references to the injustices Indians endured, Glaspell presents her spectators another version of their national past and also infers that, in spite of their actual removal and erasure from the American landscape, Native Americans as well as women can regain some visibility through oral tradition. Grandmother's version stems from life, real experience, and not from books or official governmental documents written to arouse the loyalty of the country's inhabitants. According to Halbwachs, history begins when tradition ends, when social memory vanishes.⁷ By reviving the past, Glaspell aims to keep social memory alive in order to preserve the ties that cement the community, the Nation. By restoring the primacy of autobiographical memories over history, Glaspell also shows that the past should not be reduced to a series of sterile stereotypes. The complex nature of the past is to be passed on from one generation to the next,

cherished as the gift of knowledge which, contrary to the ignorance that breeds intolerance, favours cohabitation, that is living together as a Nation.

2. Living together and forging national identity

- 9 The introductory “locational *didascalia*” indicates that Act I takes place on the “afternoon of Fourth of July” (Carlson 37; Glaspell 122).⁸ When the son of Grandmother Morton, Silas, appears on stage he is wearing his “army uniform”, as he took part in the parade in commemoration of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. This temporal background symbolizes the celebration of the guiding principles underlying the foundation of the United States of America: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” (395). The respect of these principles is essential if people want to live together as a Nation. To achieve such cohabitation, the cultural differences of each member of the community should be taken into account, as Grandmother infers in her answer to Smith’s question whether she believes in the saying that “a good Indian is a dead Indian”. To the young man’s interrogation, Grandmother answers: “I dunno. We roiled them up considerable. They was mostly friendly when let be. Didn’t want to give up their land—but I’ve noticed something of the same nature in white folk” (122). The comparative structure is worth considering, since it introduces a distinction between nature and culture and infers that the Native Americans and the Whites are similar in nature—a surprising remark at a time when Darwin’s theories were used to justify the inferiority of the Indians, as Glaspell implies at the end of Act I (137). When Smith underlines the ambiguity of Grandmother’s position towards the Native Americans since she fought against the Indians in spite of her affection for them, the old woman explains that they were pulled into the conflict because of cultural ignorance, because the Whites did not know “how to treat” the Indians.

SMITH: But they were such good neighbours—why did you throw dish water at them?

GRANDMOTHER: That was after other white folks had roiled them up—white folks that didn’t know how to treat ‘em. (124)

- 10 Getting to know each other’s culture, working towards a mutual understanding, seems to be the key to the ability to live together. As Grandmother recalls, Black Hawk used to talk with her husband about “how the red man and the white man could live together” (124). The recourse to the modal auxiliary verb “can”, that linguistically refers to an intrinsic ability, proves that sharing the same land is indeed possible (Lapaire 102). As a matter of fact, the Morton family used to cohabit with Black Hawk’s fellow Indians. Silas reminds us that his father and Black Hawk were friends: “My father used to talk about Black Hawk—they was friends” (134). The grammatical colloquialism is symbolically relevant of the ties between the two men who were not of the same colour but felt that they belonged to the same community. For Silas, “‘Twould ‘a’done something for us to have *been* Indians a little more” (134). This remark is striking in the context of production of the play. This son of pioneers wants to pay back his dues to the Indians and enact his dream of living together. To do so, he is eager to “plant a college” on the hill that Black Hawk and his father used to climb together: “That’s what this hill is made for!... End of our trail, we climb a hill and plant a college. Plant a college, so after we’re gone that college says for us, says in people learning has made more: ‘That

is why we took this land.” (Glaspell 137). Barbara Ozieblo observes that the hill can be read as an “echo of the Puritan City on a Hill” (Ozieblo 1990, 69). Like John Winthrop’s “City Upon a Hill”, this college on a hill should be a model for the people, a place free from persecutions. The cultivation metaphor is extended throughout the play as the study of the semantic fields present in the text demonstrates. Silas explains that his college is “a college in the cornfields – where the Indians maize once grew”. He adds that it is “for the boys of the cornfields – and the girls”; in other words he wishes to democratize education (137-138). In his refusal to sell the hill and his desire to give it away to his people, Silas reminds us of the position that Black Hawk defends in his autobiography:

My reason teaches me that land cannot be sold. The Great Spirit gave it to his children to live upon and cultivate as far as necessary for their subsistence, and so long as they occupy and cultivate it they have the right to the soil, but if they voluntarily leave it, then any other people have a right to settle on it. Nothing can be sold but such things as can be carried away (66).

- 11 By ceding his land to the community, Silas keeps the Indian spirit alive. The cultivation of the corn played a great part in Native American culture and rituals (Black Hawk 53-56). The term “culture” etymologically comes from *colere* meaning “tend, guard, cultivate, till” (“On Line Etymology Dictionary”). Glaspell uses the isotopy of cultivation to symbolize culture, that is the way people live, not only their customs but also the knowledge of these differences, that “wake things in minds”, as Silas explains (137). For this character, knowing is the key to understanding the world. Along with Black Hawk, Fejevary, Silas’ Hungarian neighbour, has helped grandmother Morton’s son to have a different vision of life.

SILAS: I have a mind, (to FEJEVARY, *humorously*) Haven’t I? You ought to know. Seeing as you gave it to me.

FEJEVARY: Ah, no – I didn’t give to you.

SILAS: Well, you made me know ‘twas there. You said things that woke things in me and I thought about them as I ploughed. And that made me know there had to be a college there—wake things in minds—so ploughing’s more than ploughing. (137)

- 12 Fejevary fled Hungary after fighting for the independence of his country in 1848. Fejevary’s foreign origins confirm Renan’s theory that the sense of belonging to a Nation does not depend on ethnicity but mainly on the will to live together which, as Glaspell portrays, notably stems from the desire to share knowledge. Learning is a chain process, a chain of cooperation. Education disseminates knowledge, like the wind that blows away the corn and enriches the land of one’s neighbours. Despite his own lack of academic culture, Silas’s desire to build bridges between the past and the future through education make him an archetype of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s American Scholar, a man who “take[s] up into himself all the ability of the time, all the contributions of the past, all the hopes of the future” (Emerson, 70).⁹ Madeline, Silas’s granddaughter, is the ultimate inheritor of the values that the erection of the college symbolized. Of the generation represented in the following Acts, which take place in 1920, Madeline is the only one who understands the importance of cooperation. She is ready to sacrifice herself and go to prison for the well-being of the community, for the sake of the Nation. At the end of the play, the cultivation metaphor is resumed:

MADELINE: ... But father has been telling me about the corn. It gives itself away all the time—the best corn a gift to other corn. What you are—that doesn’t stay with you. Then—(not with assurance, but feeling her way) be the most you can be, so life will

be more because you were. (*freed by the truth she has found*) Oh—do that!... love... could save the world if only you'd—throw it to the winds (211).

- 13 The young woman revives her lost heritage in a country that is now paralyzed by its fears of the Other. Under the Espionage and Sedition Acts, Madeline faces prosecution for having taken part in the protest of the Hindu students and is to stand trial to answer for what is considered as a crime against the United States. Madeline's country seems to have forgotten about its guiding precepts: the Nation is thus in danger. Madeline's sacrifice is in keeping with the "spiritual principle" of Nation formulated by Renan:

A large aggregate of men, healthy in mind and warm at heart, creates the kind of moral conscience which we call a nation. So long as this moral consciousness gives proof of its strength by the sacrifices which demand the abdication of the individual to the advantage of the community, it is legitimate and has the right to exist (53-54).

3. The public forum and the rhetoric of national identity

- 14 Since, in S.E. Wilmer's words, theatre is a "public forum", it "can serve as a microcosm of the national community, passing judgment on images of itself" (2). Susan Glaspell conceived writing as political activism.¹⁰ In *Inheritors*, the playwright explores the idea of Nation and invites her audience to ponder over what it means to be American. In order to favour her spectators or readers' reflection, Glaspell employs different strategies devised to optimize the reception of her play. The audience enters the world of fiction through Act I which predisposes them to adopt an active critical approach. Because of the time shift, Act I can be seen as an introduction to the play. The audience of the *Provincetown Players* were aware of this change of temporal frame from 1879 to 1920 in Act II: on entering the playhouse on MacDougal Street, they were given a bill with all the details of the production including the list of characters, the time and place of the action of the different acts.¹¹ Knowing beforehand that there would be a time shift, the spectators were thus disposed to watch Act I for its significance in relation to what follows. They watched the following acts through the prism of the first. This leap in time can be seen as metatheatrical: from the start, the audience is aware that they are attending a play, that "realistic drama," as Noelia Hernando-Real asserts, "is a deliberate artifice" (Hernando-Real 2007, 67). This metatheatrical device introduces distance and encourages the members of the audience to reflect upon what is taking place on stage. The character of Grandmother Morton plays a major part in this reflective process. At the opening of the play, the old lady is already on stage and is the only character who remains present throughout the whole act.¹² Her omnipresence is the evidence of the importance of this protagonist and thus an incentive to pay specific attention to her point of view, which the audience is led to consider if not to adopt. What characterizes Grandmother Morton is her ambivalence. Despite some exceptions, pioneers usually hated the Indians who prevented them from settling down in the West. Grandmother's defense of the Native Americans makes of her an unconventional character. In spite of her affection for the Indians, Grandmother fought against them and criticizes her son for wanting to give back the hill to Black Hawk and his people. Her equivocal attitudes and remarks can be easily justified on the grounds of realism. Since Glaspell is exploring the theme of American identity, her portrayal of the

Americans that appear on stage has to remain realistic, otherwise she would depict a wonderworld that bears no resemblance to the real United States and consequently deprives the play of its political relevance. Because of her ideological contradictions, Grandmother is what Hans Robert Jauss named “the imperfect hero”. In Jauss’s theory, the modality of identification that corresponds to the imperfect hero is “sympathetic identification”:

By sympathetic identification, we refer to the aesthetic affect of projecting oneself into the alien self, a process which eliminates the admiring distance and can inspire feelings in the spectator or reader that will lead him to solidarization with the [hero] ... The new form of an imperfect, more “daily” hero in whom the spectator or reader can recognize as being of the same “stuff and substance” as himself can be set against the hero who has moved out of reach or generated to a frozen cliché (Jauss 172).

- 15 This “solidarization” with the hero prompts critical reflection on the part of the spectator/reader who tries to understand the position of the protagonist and is then led to eventually draw moral conclusions and thus, paradoxically, shift from complete identification with the imperfect hero to a mixed attitude involving both emotional identification and moral, political or intellectual distance from him. Jauss explains that “the spectator is to identify with an imperfect hero of average quality through which process he will come to understand human situations and be roused to make moral decisions” (157). By trying to understand Grandmother’s point of view, the audience understands, in counterpoint, Silas’s vision of America. In her exchange with his son, who sets out his reasons for giving up his land, Grandmother seems to have switched roles with Smith as she now becomes the spokesperson for the American *doxa*:

SILAS: Our honesty with the Indians was little to brag on.

GRANDMOTHER: You fret more about the Indians than anybody else does.

SILAS: To look out at that hill sometimes makes me ashamed.

GRANDMOTHER: Land sakes, you didn’t do it. It was the government. And what a government does is nothing for a person to be ashamed of.

SILAS: I don’t know about that. Why is *he* here? Why is Felix Fejevary not rich and grand in Hungary today? ‘Cause he was ashamed of what his government was.

GRANDMOTHER: Well, that was a foreign government. (134)

- 16 In her early conversation with Smith, Grandmother was the one who “fret[ted]” about the Native Americans and she now accuses Silas of doing it. The ironical reversal sheds light on the weakness of her remark. She then advances the nationalistic argument that “what a government does is nothing a person to be ashamed of” as a technique to evade any responsibility. Yet, the government represents its people: what the government does is in keeping with the people’s desires otherwise it should be overthrown as the *Declaration of Independence* states. Thus, the old lady’s answer to justify the inappropriateness of the Silas’s example is all the more faulty in the light of the founding principles of the United States. Her clumsy attempt to counteract Silas’s view maybe explained by the protective instinct that drives her to want to keep the land for her children. The display of this mothering impulse which, in patriarchal society, was expected of any women worthy of the name renders this character even more likeable and the spectators are inclined to adopt a sympathetic attitude towards her. Nevertheless, this sympathetic identification does not blind the audience to the imperfections of the protagonist and thus easily decipher the flaws in her argumentation consisting in a series of hypocritical clichés. Such stereotypical points of view are characteristic of the opinions of the *doxa* and contribute to social *status quo*.

At the very end of the act, Grandmother Morton is able to understand Silas's point and is ready to sacrifice for the sake of the community the land for which she has worked so hard:

SILAS:... Why I can't forget the Indians. We killed their joy before we killed them. We made them less (*to FEJEVARY, and as if sure he is now making it clear*). I got to give it back—their hill. I give it back to joy—a better joy—joy o'aspiration.

FEJEVARY: (*moved but unconvinced*) But my friend, there are men who have no aspiration. That's why, to me, this is as the light shining from too far.

GRANDMOTHER: (*old things waked in her*) Light shining from far. We used to do that. We never pulled the curtain. I used to want to—you like to be to yourself when night conies *[sic]*—but we always left a lighted window for the traveller who'd lost his way. [...]

SILAS: (*with gentleness, and profoundly*) That's it. Look again? Maybe your eyes are stronger now. Don't you see it? I see that college rising as from the soil itself, as if it was what comes at the last that thinking breathes from the earth. I see it—but I want to know it's real before I stop knowing it. Then maybe I can lie under the same sod with the red boys and not be ashamed. We're not old! Let's fight! Wake in other men what you woke in me! (145-146)

- 17 The kinesics is here the key that enables the readers/spectators to make sense of the end of the Act. The stage directions "*old things waked in her*" indicate that the actress embodying Grandmother should act the lines that follow as if she had experienced an epiphany: she now sees what Silas sees. It is through the literalization of the symbol of the light that Grandmother manages to understand Silas. Once again, she falls back on her memory. The phrase "used to" marks a contrast between two states of mind, between her initial desire to keep the house to herself and her resolution to open it to the lost traveler: "I used to want to—you like to be to yourself when night conies—but we always left a lighted window for the traveler who'd lost his way." This move to solidarity in the past is similar to what she experiences in the present; we are led to believe that Grandmother now agrees to sacrifice her land for the well-being of the community just as Madeline, her rightful inheritor, does at the end of the play. This symbolical light that enables Grandmother to "see", that is to say to understand Silas's views, is the light which illuminates the spectator, which conditions their interpretation of the subsequent acts. The injunction "Let's fight! Wake in other men what you woke in me!" can be interpreted as an appeal addressed to the audience to act in the present and struggle against injustices in the name of the Nation. The spectator's attention is clearly drawn to the fact that Silas has managed to convince Grandmother that his own present course of action was a valid re-enactment of her own past cooperative behaviour, that his contemporary interpretation of the ethical and political principles of her times was a valid interpretation. Grandmother's new vision appears as an epiphany, a moment of near-religious experience, but above all a hermeneutic experience which the members of the audience are invited to share.

4. Conclusion

- 18 "With its sweeping vision of American history and its pointed examination of the foundational principles of democracy", J. Ellen Gainor writes, "*Inheritors* stands as a testament to Glaspell's and the *Provincetown Players*' belief in the power of the stage to express and influence political conviction" (Gainor 2001, 115). Writing such a play was an act of clear political involvement on the part of the playwright who was risking

prosecution. In his review of the play in *Vogues*, Kenneth Macgowan indicates that “the United States Marshal of New York and an assistant had come to the play to see if the stories of its ‘un-Americanism’ were true enough to justify its suppression or amendment” (qdt. in Gainor 2001, 113). Strangely but luckily enough, the Marshal left the playhouse after the first Act. With her subtle staging of the American past, Glaspell managed to bypass censorship despite the daring nature of Act I challenging official history. Theatre is the art that can give flesh to the past. As a collective experience, theatre seems to be one of the most adequate forms of art to rekindle collective memory since it makes the past alive in the present of the audience who are invited to transcend the world of fiction and consider to what extent the issues raised on stage can be related to their social reality. Yet, if Susan Glaspell reminds us of the importance of reviving the past, she nonetheless hints at the dangers of such an enterprise. In *Inheritors*, which opens on the Fourth of July, Glaspell voices Silas’ dream of “a war celebration where they never mentioned war”; to him, that would “be a way to celebrate victory” (Glaspell 135). This reflection echoes Tzvetan Todorov’s remark at the end of his book *Les abus de La mémoire* when he warns his readers against the danger of getting stuck in the past by stubbornly commemorating it instead of considering how the horrors of the past may be avoided in the present.¹³ Like the philosopher, the playwright calls upon her readers and spectators to draw lessons from the past and act in accordance in the present in the name of justice. The desire to live together should be driven by this sense of justice, a necessary condition to ensure the happiness of all the members of the community. Glaspell seems to argue, as Second Wave feminists later did, that the “private is political”; justice is an everyday life commitment, any daily injustices should be fought against in order to preserve those “unalienable Rights” of “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness,” that constitute the mainstay of the United States of America. What Glaspell demonstrates in *Inheritors* is that a Nation is indeed, as Ernest Renan declared in his lecture, “a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future” (53).

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NOTES

1. In its original form, *Inheritors* was written in three acts (Act I, Act II Scene 1, Act II Scene 2, Act III) but, in the British edition, the play was divided into four acts.
2. "Il y aurait donc lieu de distinguer en effet deux mémoires, qu'on appellerait, si l'on veut, l'une intérieure ou interne, l'autre extérieure, ou bien l'une mémoire personnelle, l'autre mémoire sociale. Nous dirions plus exactement encore (d'un point de vue que nous venons d'indiquer) : mémoire autobiographique et mémoire historique. La première s'aiderait de la seconde, puisque après tout l'histoire de notre vie fait partie de l'histoire en général. Mais la seconde serait, naturellement, plus étendue que la première. D'autre part, elle ne nous représenterait le passé que sous une forme résumée et schématique, tandis que la mémoire de notre vie nous en présenterait un tableau bien plus continu et plus dense" (99)/"We may usefully distinguish two types of memory, that we may call inner or inward memory and outward memory, or again a personal memory and a social memory. To be even more accurate (from the point of view demonstrated above): an autobiographical memory and a historical memory. The first type relies on the second, since, after all, our personal history is part of history in general. Yet, the second is naturally more extensive than the first. Moreover it gives us a summarized and schematic representation of the past, while the memory of our own life provides us with a much more continuous and dense vision of it". The English translation of *La mémoire collective* was published in 1980 by Harper & Row Colophon Books under the title *The Collective Memory*. The book is, however, out of print and available copies are rare. For these reasons, the translations of the passage from *La mémoire collective* are mine. After the sociologist, who later demonstrates in his book the contradiction of the phrase "historical memory", the term "history" will be used in the analysis that follows.
3. Both the terms "Indians" and "Native Americans" will be used in the present essay. "Indians" will be chosen when referring to the traditional biased conceptions of the original inhabitants of the New World. We may wonder whether the many allusions to the fear of the Indians may be interpreted as an oblique reference on the part of the playwright to another type of Red Scare, that launched by the government against left-wing groups in 1917.
4. On his way back to the East, Black Hawk surveys the landscape around him and ponders over the injustices his people have suffered from: "On our way down, I surveyed the country that cost us so much trouble, anxiety and blood, and that now caused me to be a prisoner of war. I reflected upon the ingratitude of the whites when I saw their fine houses, rich harvests and everything desirable around them; and recollected that all this land had been ours, for which I and my people had never received a dollar, and that the whites were not satisfied until they took our village and our graveyards from us and removed us across the Mississippi" (108). As this paper

notably tries to demonstrate, many elements in the play convey the impression that Glaspell read Blackhawk's autobiography first published in 1833 under the title *Life of Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak*. However, it is interesting to note that Glaspell's account of the American government's compensatory measures differs from that of Blackhawk himself. We may wonder whether Glaspell's revision may be a way of countering censorship.

5. Susan Glaspell's first play, *Trifles* (1916), revolves around Mrs. Wright who never appears on stage. Glaspell then resumes this potent dramatic strategy in several of her plays such as *Woman's Honor* (1918), *Bernice* (1919) or her 1931 Pulitzer winning play *Alison's House*.

6. The dialectics between the American territory and the dramatic stage as well as between the public and private scenes is another major motif in Glaspell's work. The playwright, who sets the substantial majority of her plays in houses, dramatizes the interactions between the microcosm of the home and the macrocosm of the nation and thus transcends spatial boundaries. The theme of memory explored in *Inheritors* proves that temporal boundaries are also transcended. In the light of Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, we may conclude that Glaspell's houses become indeed "one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind" (6).

7. "L'histoire ne commence qu'au point où finit la tradition, au moment où s'éteint la mémoire sociale" (129). "History starts where tradition ends, when social memory vanishes" (my translation).

8. I am borrowing here the term "locational disdascalia" or "location stage directions" from Marvin Carlson's typology introduced in his essay "The Status of Stage Directions."

9. The thematic references in the play to nature, self-reliance and civil disobedience, to name only those three, and the quotation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem, "Blight", in Act III would justify an analysis of *Inheritors* in the light of transcendentalism, which would provide us with valuable new insights into the study of American identity in the play.

10. In an interview given in 1921 to journalist Alice Rohe, Glaspell declares: "Of course I am interested in all progressive movements, whether feminist, social or economic ... but I can take no very active part other than through my writing... When one has limited strength one must use it for the thing one feels most important" (Gainor 2001, 8).

11. Confer playbill reprinted in Edna Kenton's book on *The Provincetown Players* (figure 29, 138).

12. Silas and Fejevary enter the stage on page 126 and Smith leaves on page 130 just before Felix's entrance on page 135.

13. To illustrate the importance of drawing lessons from the past and of acting in the present, Todorov concludes *Les Abus de la Mémoire* with a remark by Alain Finkielkraut on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the roundup of Jews in the Paris Vélodrome d'Hiver during World War II: "Alain Finkielkraut remarquait récemment que la meilleure façon de commémorer le cinquantième anniversaire de la rafle du Vel d'Hiv serait, plutôt que de calmer sa tardive solidarité avec les victimes d'antan, de combattre les crimes commis par la Serbie à l'égard de ses voisins. Ceux qui, à titre ou à un autre, connaissent l'horreur du passé ont le devoir d'élever leur voix contre une horreur autre, mais bien présente, se déroulant à quelques dizaines de mètres de chez eux. Loin de rester prisonniers du passé, nous l'aurons mis au service du présent, comme la

mémoire –et l’oubli –doivent se mettre au service de la justice” (Todorov, 60). “Alain Finkielkraut has recently observed that the best way to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the roundup of Jews in the Vélodrome d’Hivers would be, rather than to assuage a belated feeling of solidarity with the victims of yesterday, to fight against those crimes committed today by Serbia against her neighbours. It is the duty of those who, in whatever capacity, have some experience of a past horror to raise their voices against an another kind of horror, different but very much present, that is happening virtually on their footstep Far from remaining prisoners of the past, we would use it to serve the present, the same way that memory –and oblivion–should serve justice” (author’s translation).

ABSTRACTS

Based on Ernest Renan’s 1882 lecture “What is a Nation?”, this paper explores the themes of nation and national identity in Susan Glaspell’s play *Inheritors*, first produced in 1921 in New York City. The notion of “collective memory”, contrasting with that of “History”, will be discussed as well as the concept of community. This study, which focuses on the first act of *Inheritors*, also considers how this preliminary act conditioned the audience’s reception of the whole play and prompted the spectators’ reflection on the issue of American identity.

S’appuyant sur “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation ?”, exposé d’Ernest Renan de 1882 à la Sorbonne, cet article s’intéresse aux thèmes de nation et d’identité nationale dans la pièce *Inheritors* de Susan Glaspell, jouée pour la première fois en 1921 à New York City. La notion de “mémoire collective”, sera convoquée pour être distinguée de celle d’Histoire. Ces deux notions seront alors analysées dans leur rapport avec le concept de communauté. Notre étude du premier acte d’*Inheritors* cherchera également à démontrer comment cet acte liminaire conditionne la réception de l’ensemble de l’œuvre par des spectateurs qui sont amenés à s’interroger sur la question d’identité américaine.

INDEX

Mots-clés: mémoire collective, communauté, Glaspell, histoire, Indiens, nation, théories de la réception, théâtre, femmes

Keywords: collective memory, community, history, Indians, nation, reception theory, theatre, women, Black Hawk

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