Learning Curve
With an Introduction by Françoise Palles-Papin

Mary Caponegro

Electronic version
URL: http://transatlantica.revues.org/5304
ISSN: 1765-2766

Electronic reference
Mary Caponegro, « Learning Curve », Transatlantica [Online], 1 | 2011, Online since 04 January 2012, connection on 06 October 2016. URL : http://transatlantica.revues.org/5304

This text was automatically generated on 6 octobre 2016.

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“What’s the matter with Mary Caponegro?”
Françoise Palleau-Papin

Were I to introduce Mary Caponegro formally, in an official biographical notice, it would go something like this: Mary Caponegro is the Richard B. Fisher Family Professor in Literature and Writing at Bard College, where William Gaddis once taught. She is the author of five works of fiction: Tales from the Next Village (Lost Roads, 1985), The Star Cafe (Scribner, 1990), Five Doubts (Marsilio, 1998), The Complexities of Intimacy (Coffee House, 2001), and All Fall Down (Coffee House, 2009). She is the recipient of the General Electric Award, The Rome Prize in Literature, The Bruno Arcudi Award, and the Charles Flint Kellog Award. Her fiction has been anthologized in You've Got to Read This, The Italian American Reader, A Convergence of Birds, Wild Dreams, and Heads and Tales. That being said, I would have yet said nothing of Mary Caponegro’s true matter: her light touch and her grit, her wit and deadpan humor, her capacity to deal with the most realistic concerns in a way that allows us to look at them anew, as if from another planet. And most of all, her sense of the craft of writing. She adapts her style to a great variety of topics, but there is a recognizable touch in her writing, the signature of her craft, even when she assumes the voice of another poet, as in the story “Because I Could Not Stop For Death.” In that piece, the narrator appropriates the voice of Emily Dickinson, risen from the dead to comment on a box the artist Joseph Cornell has made in her honor. An authorial narrator stresses the penmanship of the poet in a reflexive comment on the art of writing: “A woman carefully placing the nib of her pen in an inkwell, transferring it to a white rectangular surface, making marks in a hand slanted far to the right, then taking the same pen and putting a line through some of the marks she has made.” With similar precision, Mary Caponegro is a master at switching rhythm, at diving deep into the flows of a sentence as
into a series of obsessions, then lackadaisically changing pace and tone, to follow the meanderings of a character's mind.

Many of her characters are troubled people. They feel ill at ease in the world, and question the reality of things, which does not mean, however, that they are grim or depressive. On the contrary, their portrayal humorously reverses our expectations and returns to us an image of our own ideals and successes as somehow unfit or strange. Following in the footsteps of William Gaddis (who taught a course at Bard on what he called "the literature of failure" with his customary sense of provocation), she leads us to ponder on what it is, exactly, that we call a successful life. Her narrators have a great deal of distance, and they may be “falsely and childishly naïve, but perversely so,” as Marc Chénetier, her French translator, aptly comments. Her sense of the uncanny finds a poetic and lyrical expression in her dissections of family life in The Complexities of Intimacy. Her writing displays a rare blend of humor and empathy, eroticism and otherworldly spirit, realism and surrealism. Her stories can be like fables, full of the wonder of Eastern antiquity, as in Tales from the Next Village, or oddly immersed in the prosaic life of contemporary misfits, as in All Fall Down. In Five Doubts, she creates a collage by juxtaposing the diary of the artist Cellini with his set of fictive characters, “an Etruscan Catechism” and tombola images as well as various forms of art, in order to explore the workings of the imagination as expressed in art.

She is currently at work on Chinese Chocolate, a novel about growing up as an Italian-American Catholic in suburbia in the sixties, when ethnicity elicited more ambivalence than pride. The novel is much more conventional than Caponegro’s earlier work, though it also employs surrealist gestures within its more mimetic framework, and yet it retains the author’s stylistic complexity. The formation of attitudes about gender and sexuality is the core of the novel’s concerns, but without any of the preconstructions and preconceptions of the kind we are all too familiar with. This is a Bildungsroman that does not gloss over the past or explain the mysteries of experience. Caponegro casts a fresh eye on the sixties, and her alert tone and sharp style are manifest in the following excerpt from her novel.

“Learning Curve”
Mary Caponegro

Abbie Hofman’s instructions for gipping Ma Bell are explicit. If the capitalist matriarch owns every phone, then clearly those phoning should share in the dividends. Why not spell out how to beat the system? But who would guess some of Hoffman’s most eager readers were students at St. Rose of Lima? Two girls in plaid skirts fumble with penny and cardboard while a third girl reads out the appropriate passages from Steal this Book, and soon enough the only phone booth in the whole school features an out of order sign. At assembly the following day, the principal asks that whoever disrupted the mechanism make herself known. No one confesses; Darcy won’t let them. It’s just a venial sin anyway, she insists, even if augmented by passively lying: sin of omission tacked onto a sin of commission. In any case the crime is too conspicuous to try again.

This conspicuousness is due in part to the aforementioned fact that the three-story brick building houses exactly one public phone booth. There are standard rotary phones on the desk in the nurse’s office, the principal’s office and one or two other administrative
offices, but these are for school business, parental summons, emergencies; if extracurricular calls were desired, a girl would require a dime. She would have to situate herself here at the bottom of the first floor stairwell near the exit, close the accordion-style glass door, seat herself, insert the dime, then place the tip of her index finger inside a series of seven consecutive holes among the ten located equidistantly on the round plastic dial, listening as the mechanism rotated forward and back, the duration of rotation dependent of course on the relative proximity of the particular letter or number to the terminus of the series, itself marked by a small piece of metal hardware and the sound of a tiny metallic click. No student thinks of these movements as troublesome or excessive, but to be prevented from doing so: that is indeed troublesome—and all the more so for the tiny administrative staff, who must of course open their phones to the girls until the out of order sign is obviated.

Leave it to someone community-minded to imagine what marvelous things a repaired phone can do to atone for its prior misuse by hooligans, among whom the guileless Janice would never suspect were included Victoria Corrigan and Virginia Postodellafuoco. You could count on one hand—well, in fact on two fingers—the number of times this phone has been used for political purposes. The first has obviously already occurred and been sanctioned. The second will sanction itself, in a convoluted fashion, after Janice supplies the catalyst—Janice who is the most conscientious—and decorous—of objectors, Janice whose honor roll status makes clear her objections are sincere and substantial and can’t be dismissed by adults as mere acting out, Janice whose ambitions extend beyond being a good student, good Catholic, good girl. (Too goody goody a girl, if you ask me, says Darcy). But even the other more gullible girls of St. Rose find it hard to project such a grown-up yet wholesome ambition as being a good citizen. Yet Janice has heeded a call as insistent as Joan of Arc’s, and decided that fingers too young to be counted among those held high in a V at Yasgur’s Farm, i.e. fingers not yet permitted to push down a lever to vote, nevertheless need not be entirely idle.

Thus Ginny finds herself once again at the first floor phone booth, feeling even more tentative than when she was performing an illegal act, this time engaged by an actual dime rather than penny and cardboard, in the unlikely circumstance of dialing the local Democratic headquarters, because Janice has offered her own services to the McGovern campaign, and casually suggested that Ginny might, if she cared to, do likewise.

Ginny admires Janice, no matter what Darcy thinks. She admires the noble, extracurricular use to which Janice puts her skills, though of course she resents the example it sets. After all, one can’t loll about in one’s fluffy pink robe, mooning over song lyrics and gorging on twinkies, and still have the focus to cite the exact number of Vietnam war casualties, the number of deaths, the number of troops, number by which troops were recently reduced, available details about what the formerly missing-in-action soldiers endured. Clearly, Janice has not confined her research, or her prayers, to the one man who matched her MIA bracelet.

“The more the merrier, right, Ginny? The more people involved, the more chance for change.” “I guess so. I mean, if you say so. If my folks will let me, that is.” It’s easy enough to perform the formalities of dialing and giving her name and arranging the time, with Janice beaming by her side, but once she’s transacted this bold move, Ginny anticipates her parents’ disapproval. She feels trapped now, remembering that even in Pete Seeger’s rousing anthem, “If” precedes “I had a hammer.” (She can see Sister Catherine John at the blackboard dismantling the clause: present contrafactual conditional with relative
protasis). Even a whiff of Seeger’s “smell of freedom” had been intoxicating enough to convince Ginny she had the right to support her own causes and make her own choices, long before she had her own transport.

Be realistic; cancel it now. Why even bother to ask? It certainly won’t be worth the hassle. But she will feel guilty—she’ll feel like a total schmuck to disappoint Janice. She is being ridiculous; she knows she is, pacing back and forth from the phone booth to her locker, hoping that no one will notice. Just go get it over with. Even when she finally puts in the dime, she has no idea whether she’ll dial her mother to ask permission (which obviously should have been done in advance) or call back the local Democratic headquarters to renege, but when her racing mind tells her that one call is better than two—that if she calls mom, who will surely forbid her to go, then she’ll have to call back the volunteers to renege anyway, she repeats the sequence of numbers that Janice had originally given her.

“Excuse me, my name is Virginia Postodellafuoco—I said, Postodel—yes that’s P as in Peter, o as in Oscar, s… I was scheduled to help out at headquarters after school today, but my… parents won’t let me, I’m sorry, I… I have to cancel.” The voice on the other end is a bit brusque—Ginny hears other phones ringing in the background—but not unsympathetic. “Alright then, we understand. When you’re eighteen, call us back! There’s always the next election!” Their understanding stings even more than disgust would have. And now she will have to confess to Janice as well, but worse still, that confession will reinforce a lie, and Virginia begins to feel overwhelmed and sabotaged by her wish to become involved, to make one lousy civic gesture. Study period is almost over, and soon Ginny will have to gather her things and get on the bus. Irrationally, she feels she’ll be less of a hypocrite if she supports her claim after-the-fact, if she empirically obtains information so as to be able to tell Janice (and to have told the McGovern volunteers) not what she assumes, but what is actually fact.

So she goes back for a third time into the booth, tugging the dial in the sequence of two letters followed by five numbers that constitutes her family’s phone exchange. The act is both tedious and automatic. She is perversely curious, now that the entire venture is utterly hypothetical, with nothing concretely riding on yes or no. Her mother answers after four rings and hearing her daughter’s voice, asks, “Is anything wrong; do you want to be picked up?” Just blurt it out; get it over with. “Mom, Janice told me the Democratic Convention is taking high school volunteers to help out with paperwork for a few hours. Janice’s going with a bunch of other girls. I was just wondering if…”

“Do what you think is right, Ginny,” her mother says crisply, with without any extrapolation. “Let me know where to pick you up later.”

Virginia Postodellafuoco is stunned by this permission, this lack of resistance. This is the second time in recent memory that Mrs P. has not acted predictably: first dismissing a man’s touch as inconsequential, and now offering a gesture of social autonomy. Ginny feels like a dog on the cusp of discovering its leash is imaginary—or perhaps less like the dog than the master—for instance each member of Vicki’s family, absurdly still jumping over the ghost of a gate in their kitchen even after the dog is instead penned outside—thus prevented from drinking from the toilet bowl or practicing other objectionable habits that eventually necessitated being penned in to the kitchen in the first place.

But it would be asinine to renege on reneging, to call back and say, “Guess what, I can come do my share after all!”—yet again spelling the endless name—“I convinced my mom and dad!”—dissembling that she’d been persuasive instead of pusillanimous. She can’t
bring herself to make that third call, just takes the bus home feeling triply stupid. Unable to face Janice, she leaves a note: another layer of cowardice. The walk from the bus stop, usually endless, feels insufficiently long. Would that the fresh air could buffer her from the inevitable.

“I thought you were staying after school,” her mother says, clearly surprised. How could she possibly begin to explain?

“I decided against it.” Mrs. Postodellafuoco peers into her daughter’s face for a clue to this reversal but finds no information, while Virginia in spite of herself hopes her mother’s bemusement will transmute to approval for this craven act in duty’s disguise.

Like a dog. Like a master. Or a carnivore trained against nature not to salivate in the presence of meat should the calendar read Friday or Ash Wednesday or any of the remaining thirty-nine days of Lent—and thus unable to adjust once the taboo is lifted, she stands there unhinged—paralyzed by this voluptuous, treacherous thing called free will. After so many years of lip service, it has mutated from a two-word phrase inside a pale blue Baltimore Catechism to a tangible, sensual entity that unfortunately tastes nothing like chocolate; unless chocolate were mixed with castor oil instead of milk, or a chocolate so dark it had acquired the density of lead, or as if Hershey’s inverted the Cracker Jacks gimmick—offering every unsuspecting tongue a stigmata-worthy nail in place of a delightful, diminutive toy. How had the ethics of calling Headquarters back, let alone actually going, become so impossibly awkward? She can’t stomach the feeling it gives her even now. And her mother is no help, says nothing: no “all for the best” or “isn’t that strange?” or “I’ll never figure you out, Virginia.” Just that gaze. That perplexed gaze.

She will punish her mother for giving permission, for being so inconsistent, for putting her in such a discombobulating position, though these very permissions are what she has always craved. It is no sin to distract herself from her own shame, is it? Especially if the distraction is a kind of... political gesture: confronting her parents’ prejudice, so as to convert it in one fell swoop—on behalf of the Democratic campaign. She will start with her mother, during preparation for dinner.

“What if I married a black man? What then?”

“What are you talking about, Ginny? Where did this come from?”

“If I met someone and fell in love—who was black.”

“That would hurt your father very much, for one thing.”

Dad, whose TV screen screens him from the tone and detail of the conversation, overhears only the bones of her question—assumes it’s a game, and as usual he’s more than willing to play along. “Better a Jew so you bring us some money!”

Mom carries on at reduced volume. “You’ll marry a nice boy from an Italian family if you know what’s good for you.”

“I’m not sure dad is so keen on that idea; he didn’t seem as excited as Nonna when she brought it up in Calabria years ago.”

“You know what I mean: an Italian-American boy from a good family here in the States.”

The unspoken coda of “not too Italian though” is mentally audible to Ginny, as she listlessly peels the potatoes and carrots her mother has assigned her.

“That man who walked by and touched you, Virginia... he wasn’t black, was he?” Ginny ignores her.
“Virginia, I asked you a question.”

“What man...? Oh, you mean the other day, at the phone booth?”

“What other man would I be talking about?”

Ginny bends to retrieve the slivers of vegetable skin that had fallen to the floor while she’d stood peeling over the mouth of the Rubbermaid garbage can. “No. I think he was just very tan.” Her mother is obviously unconvinced and annoyed, but thankfully does not pursue the matter further.

These were confession’s easiest sins to dispense with: I lied to mother three times, I was mean to my sister twice, I was fresh to Sister in class—for the more you piled on these predictable venial sins, the more likely you were to fill your confessional plate, as it were, and thus be spared telling the man in the robe through the screen all the things you were really concerned about, and therefore least likely to enunciate, and would probably never renounce: I touched myself, Father—I lost track of how many times—every night, as I pictured the dangerous bald man, the sensuous black man, the really cute boy at the dance who unfortunately never asked to dance with me. And once, Father, just once, I even thought of my sister’s boyfriend.

Not even to your Uncle Renzo would you confide these incredibly private transgressions, although among all the priests in the diocese he was the most sympatico—and though you strongly suspected that Vicki and Janie and Maggie and Darcy in their own respective cocoons of desire, were probably picturing Renzo as she did the bald man, the black man, the boy at the dance.

NOTES


INDEX

Subjects: Reconnaissances