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DÉFENSE ET ILLUSTRATION DU COMMENTAIRE LITTÉRAIRE SUIVIE DE 14 VARIATIONS SUR LA FICTION AMÉRICAINE

« *La malédiction de Christophe Colomb pèse toujours sur nous : chacun doit redécouvrir l'Amérique pour et par lui-même – tout seul !* » (I. HASSAN)

LE COMMENTAIRE DE TEXTE – qu'il soit de littérature ou de civilisation – est une des spécificités du système universitaire français d'enseignement des langues étrangères ; tous les Départements d'Études Anglophones y recourent généreusement sans, d'ailleurs, toujours se soucier de justifier le bien-fondé de cette pratique pédagogique aussi solidement ancrée dans nos traditions que dans nos programmes.

Naguère, R. Barthes dénonçait dans un de ses essais, ce qu'il appelait le « *Mythe du plan en trois parties : thèse, antithèse, synthèse* », qui prévalait ou sévissait – question de point de vue et d'expérience personnelle – dans l'université française ; nul doute qu'il existe, au sein de cette même « *alma mater* », un mythe concurrent, tout aussi prestigieux et sanctionné – sinon auréolé – par l'usage et la tradition : celui du commentaire. Pour en avoir été pendant près de quatre décennies d'enseignement à l'université, un fidèle serviteur, zéléteur ou praticien – encore que, parfois, un peu las et saturé –, nous nous garderons bien d'en faire le procès et lui rendrons, au contraire, un dernier hommage en mettant à la disposition du public étudiant, qui pourra peut-être en tirer profit, le fruit de nos réflexions et de notre pratique.

Nous avons donc rassemblé douze commentaires de textes, tirés du vaste corpus de la littérature américaine à laquelle ils serviront d'introduction car ils permettent de recenser quelques thématiques et problématiques propres à la fiction du Nouveau-Monde, qu'on ne saurait aborder sans un minimum de préparation et de notions préliminaires. Propédeutique d'autant plus indispensable que cette littérature est souvent source de désarroi, lié au bouleversement des repères familiers – c'est l'épreuve du « *bewilderment* »¹ – *topos* classique de la fiction américaine, qui nous transporte dans un univers physique, mais surtout dans une « *psycho-géographie* » – autrement dit un imaginaire – radicalement différent du nôtre. À preuve, l'extraordinaire description par A. Bird dans *Looking Forward* (1899) d'une Amérique « bornée au nord par le Pôle, au sud par l'Antarctique, à l'est par le premier chapitre de la Genèse et à l'ouest par le jour du Jugement dernier », rappel que le Nouveau Monde, dépeint par ses premiers occupants comme une « terre qui ruisselle de lait et de miel », s'enracine dans un espace-temps biblique, ce dont témoigne éloquemment sa littérature, qui n'est souvent que variations sur les Saintes Écritures. C'est dire que « l'enracinement américain [...] s'est fait dans un univers archétypal autant que dans un monde géographique, hors de l'histoire et cependant dans une phase particulière de son devenir » (G. Astre)².

Aborder la fiction américaine implique une orientation vers l'Ouest, mais ce point cardinal n'est plus identique au nôtre, car « le soleil à présent se trouve aux Amériques » (John N. Morris), ce qui revient à dire que la lumière qui éclaire le monde se lèverait désormais à l'ouest. Le pasteur puritain, Cotton Mather, l'affirmait déjà, au début de la colonisation du Continent, pour annoncer l'aube de temps nouveaux et la naissance d'une humanité régénérée et rédimée.

1. « Littéralement : "où le sauvage me désoriente" », P.-Y. Pétilon, *La Grand-route : Espace et écriture en Amérique*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1979.

2. G.-A. Astre, *Situation de l'idéologie aux U.S.A.* Paris, Minard ("Études nord américaines"), 1980.

On sait que pour la civilisation américaine, l'Ouest – avec une capitale scellant sa dignité de pôle d'attraction primordial – est une direction doublement cardinale ; c'est un tropisme fondamental où s'alimente la dynamique de la Conquête et s'affirme l'individualisme du pionnier, ferment de la démocratie américaine. Mais, ultime avatar, l'Ouest est aussi condition spirituelle, scène intérieure où se joue la confrontation non plus à l'Indien, au Sauvage, mais à l'Autre que l'homme porte et abrite en lui-même ; il est donc possible, selon le critique L. Fiedler, de « regarder l'Ouest comme une folie » et, inversement, de « voir dans la folie l'Ouest authentique ». Le même fin connaisseur de l'imaginaire collectif américain note que :

Les femmes et les Indiens sont à l'origine d'une nouvelle définition, propre celle-là à l'Amérique, de ce qu'est pour nous le véritable Ouest, l'Ouest de l'Ouest, pour ainsi dire : c'est le lieu où les Américains de peau blanche et de sexe mâle vont, pour échapper à leur femme, chercher refuge dans les bras d'Indiens du même sexe qu'eux, lieu que d'ailleurs les femmes blanches, dans leur inexorable marche de la côte est à la côte ouest du continent, détruisent au fur et à mesure que les hommes le découvrent¹.

Il est donc clair, à présent, qu'à l'instar de l'immigrant s'embarquant pour le Nouveau Monde, on ne peut aborder le continent des Lettres américaines qu'en se délestant de bon nombre d'attitudes, d'habitudes et de réactions peu adaptées à un nouvel environnement culturel, d'où la nécessité d'une « *nouvelle éducation du regard* » comme le prônait en son temps le Transcendantaliste R. W. Emerson. Deux siècles plus tard, la même recommandation – et métaphore maritime – s'imposent toujours sous la plume des initiateurs à la civilisation américaine :

L'Amérique est ce qui apparaît sous le regard qui s'éveille au terme d'une longue navigation dans les ténèbres : à ce monde neuf on aborde non seulement après avoir traversé l'océan, mais au terme d'une naissance, d'une renaissance, par un baptême².

Cette radicale altérité est encore renforcée par le fait que, même si on peut, à bon droit, soutenir qu'à l'origine la littérature américaine n'est que le prolongement de la littérature européenne, elle n'en a pas moins suivi par la suite une voie originale qui l'a détachée de cette dernière. Aussi la fiction américaine nous est-elle simultanément proche et lointaine : proche, parce qu'en moins de deux siècles, elle a conquis ses titres de noblesse et essaimé aux quatre coins du monde ; lointaine, parce qu'elle garde pour nous autres, Européens, une irréductible part d'altérité. Lire et commenter une œuvre américaine dans sa version originale, c'est faire l'expérience d'une double étrangeté : il y a la confrontation avec un univers mental bien différent du nôtre, puis avec une langue « *criarde, illogique, jubilante née du mariage de l'anglais et d'un déluge de mots d'origine indienne, espagnole, irlandaise et même chinoise..., qui, dans des conditions et des circonstances nouvelles, se sont transformés en Amérique pour former une langue nouvelle.* » (Pétillon). On date de la publication en 1883 des *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* de M. Twain l'émergence d'une véritable tradition vernaculaire, c'est-à-dire un style qui garde toutes les inflexions, tout le pittoresque, toute la saveur de la langue parlée, directe, concrète, en un mot, populaire ; c'est un style libérateur, pétri, façonné par l'Ouest.

Ajoutons, pour boucler ces quelques considérations cardinales, censées servir de viatique, que l'histoire et la critique littéraires, confrontées au prodigieux foisonnement de la fiction américaine, l'ont très tôt corsetée dans des catégories géographiques et distingué, traditionnellement, un genre propre à l'Est (*l'Eastern*), à l'Ouest (*le Western*), au Nord (*le Northern*) et au Sud (*le Southern*), chacun ayant ses thèmes, motifs, style ou tonalité caractéristiques.

C'est donc à opérer un changement de cap et de paramètres – sur le mode imaginaire –, que nous convie la sélection (cf. *infra*) de textes soumis à commentaire, pratique pédagogique qu'il nous reste à justifier ou légitimer.

Le Commentaire I : Exposition (*Adagio*)

Pourquoi commenter un texte littéraire ? Il ne s'agit nullement d'un simple exercice universitaire ou académique ; le commentaire est en fait une *étape prévue, nécessaire, inscrite*, en un mot, dans la vie d'une

1. L. Fiedler, *Le Retour du Peau-Rouge*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1971, 48.

2. P.-Y. Pétillon, *Histoire de la littérature américaine : Notre demi-siècle 1939-1989*, Paris, Fayard, 1992, 692.

œuvre littéraire : M. Blanchot a mis l'accent sur le fait que « *l'expérience littéraire comporte une série de moments dont aucun n'est pensable sans les autres : écriture, composition, publication, lecture, commentaire* ». L'intervention du lecteur et donc du commentateur est nécessaire au surgissement du sens ; elle fait partie de la « *mécanique de la coopération interprétative* ». Un texte représente une chaîne d'artifices expressifs qui doivent être actualisés par le destinataire : « *Un texte est un produit dont le sort interprétatif doit faire partie de son propre mécanisme génératif* » (U. Eco).

Disons, en d'autres termes, toujours tirés de E. Eco : « *qu'un texte postule son destinataire comme condition sine qua non de sa propre capacité communicative concrète mais aussi de sa propre potentialité significative* ».

On passe donc, de la notion de *consommation* à celle de *co-production*. Le commentaire est une variante de la lecture – une lecture discursive, qui s'écrit et s'adresse à autrui –, à la différence de la lecture personnelle, qui n'a pas de destinataire. Lire dans ce cas particulier répond à visée didactique : il s'agit de *montrer, de démontrer et de convaincre autrui*, c'est-à-dire le futur lecteur et de l'œuvre retenue et du commentaire qui s'y applique. Quelle est donc la fonction de cette lecture qui est dirigée vers autrui (“*other-oriented*”) ?

1) Déchiffrer le sens voulu par l'auteur, mais aussi les sens produits par son texte :

« Le texte est une machine paresseuse qui exige du lecteur un travail coopératif acharné pour remplir les espaces de non-dit ou de déjà-dit restés en blanc » (U. Eco)

« Un texte est un mécanisme paresseux (ou économique) qui vit sur la plus-value de sens qui y est introduite par le destinataire. » (U. Eco)

2) Le texte étant aussi « *un tissu de non-dit* », le commentaire recense « *des messages qui sont véhiculés par le texte et qui pourtant ne sont pas dans le texte* » (U. Eco). Attitude qui invalide d'une certaine manière la recherche illusoire des intentions de l'auteur car :

« Il arrive très souvent que son souci d'unité esthétique lui fasse écrire une œuvre dont la structure globale, traduite en langage conceptuel par la critique, constitue une vision différente et même opposée à sa pensée, à ses convictions et aux intentions qu'il l'animaient lorsqu'il a rédigé cette œuvre¹. »

3) Le commentaire est une opération de déconstruction/reconstruction. Le commentaire est nécessairement *perturbateur* : commenter, c'est instaurer par la pratique d'une lecture-écriture productive – c'est-à-dire un travail parallèle à celui de l'écriture –, une *relation critique* avec le texte. Il y a passage du “*lisible*” au “*scriptible*” : le texte n'est pas seulement un déjà écrit, c'est aussi un “*inécrit*” à la réécriture duquel le lecteur participe et contribue par sa lecture. Ce qui se traduit par la mise en évidence de *relations internes non perçues à la première lecture*. Le commentaire part d'un *objet* (le texte) et arrive à un *fonctionnement*. Objectif : montrer que l'*immobilité* de l'objet texte n'est en fait qu'apparence... qu'il est fait de *tensions, poussées, appels*. Voilà qui rappelle la notion faulknérienne – paradoxale et oxymoronique –, de « *dynamic immobility* ». De la *surface plane* du texte linéaire on arrive à un *volume* fait d'échos, de convergences, d'identités, de correspondances, de similitudes, d'oppositions, de reprises et de variations → le commentaire débouche sur la transformation du texte en un *réseau simultané de relations réciproques*...

4) Le commentaire étant essentiellement « *l'explication du comment* » : il s'agit de rendre le texte nécessaire. Accent sur sa spécificité :

— la nature linguistique du texte ;

— la question du style : cf. l'affirmation de J.-P. Sartre : “*Le style n'est pas une question de technique mais de vision*” auquel font écho les deux remarques suivantes : « *Metaphor is not a fanciful embroidery of the facts. It is a way of experiencing the facts* » ; « *Style is the way a writer communicates the quality of his mind.* » (S. Foote)

1. L. Goldman, *Marxisme & Sciences Humaines*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970.

Le Commentaire II : Développement (*Andante*)

À la question, « *Qu'est-ce qu'un commentaire de texte ?* » on pouvait répondre, jusqu'à une époque relativement récente, qu'il s'agissait :

« D'un ensemble de remarques organisé qui respecte en général l'unité d'un texte, et qui s'attache méthodiquement à faire valoir par une analyse rigoureuse les intentions d'un écrivain et les moyens d'expression utilisés » (*Le Commentaire composé*, Paris, Hachette Université).

Cette réponse est en partie acceptable, mais on la reformulerait aujourd'hui pour tenir compte de l'évolution de la critique (influence de la Nouvelle Critique) et des études littéraires. Une autre définition possible serait la suivante, inspirée de R. Barthes : « *Commenter, c'est instaurer par la pratique d'une lecture-productive, c'est-à-dire d'un **travail parallèle à celui de l'écriture, une relation critique** avec une œuvre ou un texte.* » Commentons, à notre tour, les principaux termes de cette définition :

1) Relation

L'œuvre a besoin de la critique, « *d'un regard qui la pénètre* » (J. Rousset, XXII)¹ ; le commentaire permet de « *décrire dans un langage qui n'est pas celui de l'œuvre, la vie commune qu'on a connue avec elle, en elle* » (J. Starobinski)². Mais le critique « *est celui qui, tout en consentant à la fascination que le texte lui impose, entend pourtant conserver **droit de regard*** » (*Ibid.* 24). La restriction est capitale : s'il faut effectivement, dans un commentaire, « *épouser les mouvements d'une imagination et les dessins d'une composition* » (Rousset, XIV), il faut aussi savoir, à moment donné, c'est-à-dire dans un deuxième temps, prendre ses distances. C'est ce qu'implique le mot *critique*.

2) Critique

Signifie trois choses :

a) *discerner, séparer* : L'œuvre est une « *complexité ordonnée* » ; il faut donc retrouver l'ordre, distinguer les articulations, les charnières, les points essentiels ;

b) *mettre en crise*, ce qui peut déboucher sur une lecture politique ou idéologique du texte : « *Lire, ce n'est pas faire état **d'informations neutres** vis-à-vis d'un texte. C'est produire la connaissance de celui-ci, en lui faisant avouer théoriquement et politiquement pourquoi et comment il dit ce qu'il dit, pourquoi et comment il tait ce qu'il tait* » (S. Karsz)³, c'est-à-dire révéler le fonctionnement, les contradictions, les présupposés, etc. en un mot, contester l'autorité dont tout écrit se pare.

c) *juger, décider* : jugement esthétique/moral.

3) Lecture-écriture

Le commentaire est travail parallèle à celui de l'écriture ; il est, en quelque sorte, réécriture du texte analysé (cf. Exposition précédente)

4) L'œuvre

L'œuvre est « *l'amalgame d'une forme et d'une expérience dont la genèse et la croissance sont solidaires* » (Rousset IX). Rappelons que pour « *l'art moderne, l'œuvre n'est pas expression mais création : elle donne à voir ce qui n'a pas été vu avant elle, elle forme au lieu de refléter* » (G. Picon in Rousset VII). « *Qu'elle soit récente ou classique, l'œuvre impose l'avènement d'un ordre en rupture avec l'état existant, l'affirmation d'un règne qui obéit à ses lois et à sa logique propres.* » (*Ibid.* II).

C'est, cependant, la notion de *texte* qui a été le plus profondément remaniée par la critique moderne, qui a mis l'accent sur un certain nombre de points essentiels :

1. J. Rousset, *Forme et signification : Essais sur les structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel*, Paris, J. Corti, 1973.

2. J. Starobinski, *L'Œil vivant*, I, Paris, Gallimard, 1961, 26

3. S. Karsz, *Théorie et politique : Louis Althusser*, Paris, Fayard, 1974.

— *sa nature linguistique* : « le langage est l'être même de la littérature, son monde même » (R. Barthes)¹ ; la conséquence est d'importance : le texte ne peut rien imiter, mais seulement raconter : « *Le récit ne représente pas une histoire (réelle ou fictive), il la raconte, c'est-à-dire qu'il la signifie par le moyen du langage... Il n'y a pas de place pour l'imitation dans le récit* » (G. Genette)². La notion de réalisme en littérature n'est plus défendable ; comme l'écrit J. Ricardou³ : « *En la fiction, le réel et le virtuel ont même statut parce qu'ils sont l'un comme l'autre entièrement gérés par les lois de l'écriture qui les instaure* ». Dans cette perspective, l'analyse portera en priorité sur les composantes du langage et sur les niveaux fondamentaux que sont :

- le lexique
- la syntaxe
- la phonologie
- la rhétorique
- la prosodie (puis images, symboles), etc.

Le texte n'est plus perçu comme *le dépositaire d'un sens immuable et intangible* dont une lecture passive et respectueuse permettrait de prendre conscience. De *lisible* (c'est-à-dire, *transparent, univoque, classique*), le texte est devenu *scriptible* (*pluriel, équivoque, faisant appel à la participation du lecteur* : on cherche à établir non seulement ce que l'auteur a voulu dire, mais aussi ce que le lecteur entend). Le texte n'est pas seulement un « *déjà écrit* », c'est aussi un « *inécrit* » à la réécriture duquel le lecteur participe et contribue par sa lecture (G. Genette, *Nouveau Discours*, 108).

— *rupture de l'ordre linéaire* : le texte n'est plus seulement perçu comme une surface, mais aussi comme un volume. « *La lecture*, écrit T. Todorov, *est un parcours dans l'espace du texte ; parcours qui ne se limite pas à l'enchaînement des lettres de gauche à droite et de haut en bas [...], mais qui disjoint le continu et rassemble l'éloigné, qui constitue précisément le texte en espace et non en linéarité* ».

Par lecture complète, il faut entendre celle qui transforme l'œuvre ou le texte en un réseau simultané de relations réciproques (Rousset, XIII), celle que produit « *un lecteur complet, tout en antennes et en regards* » (*Ibid.*, XV). Dans cette perspective, l'objet du commentaire sera de :

« Saisir des significations à travers des formes, dégager des ordonnances et des présentations révélatrices, déceler dans les textures littéraires ces nœuds, ces figures, ces reliefs inédits qui signalent l'opération simultanée d'une expérience vécue et d'une mise en œuvre. Il y a longtemps qu'on s'en doute : ***l'art réside dans cette solidarité d'un univers mental et d'une construction sensible, d'une vision et d'une forme.*** » (Rousset, I. Nous soulignons).

On le voit bien dans ce programme, lire ce n'est pas recevoir un sens qui existerait en soi, c'est au contraire ***engendrer et construire des significations, saisir des structures et des formes*** et, comme le précise J. Rousset :

Il n'y a de forme saisissable que là où se dessine un accord ou un rapport, une ligne de forces, une figure obsédante, une trame de présences ou d'échos, un réseau de convergences : j'appellerai ***structures*** ces constantes formelles, ces liaisons qui trahissent un univers mental et que chaque artiste réinvente selon ses besoins (XII)

Dernier point, également capital : le commentaire s'écrit, est – par définition – un texte et en tant que tel, il doit « *à sa modeste manière, essayer d'être littéraire, ou en tous les cas de ne pas déshonorer la littérature* ». Écrire – non seulement bien écrire – mais aussi entrer dans le jeu du signifiant : « *La critique ne*

1. R. Barthes, *Essais Critiques IV*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1964, 14

2. G. Genette, *Nouveau discours du récit*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1983, 29

3. J. Ricardou, *Problèmes du nouveau roman*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1967, 29

peut pas demeurer dans les limites du savoir vérifiable ; elle doit se faire œuvre à son tour, et courir les risques de l'œuvre » (D. Fernandez)¹.

Le Commentaire III : Reprise (*Allegro*)

Bien-fondé, justification du commentaire : « *Tout texte postule son destinataire comme condition sine qua non de sa propre capacité communicative concrète mais aussi de sa propre potentialité significatrice* » (U. Eco).

Une œuvre littéraire est une « *complexité ordonnée* » (J. Rousset) ; elle se présente donc dans un *certain ordre* – ou sous une certaine forme – qui est celui/celle de l'écriture, de la composition ou de la création littéraire. Le but d'un commentaire, bien compris et bien conduit, n'est pas de se soumettre à cet ordre (de le calquer servilement → paraphrase ou commentaire linéaire), mais de substituer à celui-ci *l'ordre de la lecture, de la réflexion, de l'analyse*, en un mot, **l'ordre de l'interprétation** (= commentaire composé où l'on dégage l'essentiel) d'où la nécessité d'élaguer, de recomposer, de recombinaison les éléments du texte. Le commentaire est de l'ordre de l'exposition, de l'explication, de la démonstration (logique différente de celle de la création/composition). Seul point commun : les deux opérations sont de nature linguistique : « *la critique est une littérature qui a la littérature pour objet.* »

1) Travail :

« *Un texte est un mécanisme économique qui vit sur la plus-value de sens qui y est introduite par le destinataire* » (U. Eco, *Lector in Fabula*) → Commentaire = pratique d'une lecture-productive ou lecture-écriture (une lecture discursive), c'est-à-dire un travail parallèle à celui de l'écriture, visant à instaurer une relation critique avec un œuvre ou un texte. Deuxième conséquence de la notion de travail : la lecture cesse d'être synonyme de passivité réceptive ; elle se fait active, questionne, prend part à l'élaboration du sens, au jeu du Sa. Le commentaire est nécessairement perturbateur (déconstruction/ reconstruction), puisqu'il revient à « *écrire dans un langage qui n'est pas celui de l'œuvre, la vie commune qu'on a connue avec elle, en elle* ».

Cette notion de « Travail » est à mettre en parallèle avec l'émergence d'une conception/définition nouvelle de la notion de Texte, qui n'est plus perçu comme le dépositaire d'un sens immuable et intangible. Le texte est désormais perçu comme un « *nouveau champ méthodologique* », un procès de signification au travail, de **lisible** (transparent, univoque, classique), il est devenu **scriptible** (pluriel, équivoque).

2) Lecture critique :

“Critique” vient de l'Indo-Européen **Krei* = séparer, cribler, choisir. Trois sens fondamentaux du verbe “critiquer” : a) discerner, séparer : L'œuvre est une « *complexité ordonnée* » ; il faut donc retrouver l'ordre, distinguer les articulations, les charnières, les points essentiels, c'est-à-dire selon la belle formule de J. Rousset : « *épouser les mouvements d'une imagination et les dessins d'une composition* » ; b) mettre en crise : révéler fonctionnement, contradictions, présupposés, etc. Contester l'autorité dont tout écrit se pare ; c) juger, décider : jugement esthétique/moral.

3) Spécificité :

La littérature est un langage, la littérature est faite avec du langage, c'est-à-dire un matériau qui est déjà signifiant au moment où la littérature s'en empare. L'œuvre littéraire, fruit d'un travail sur le langage, tire donc de la nature même de ce matériau une grande partie de ses pouvoirs et de son originalité.

Le texte est « *un objet construit* », d'où il ressort qu'un récit, comme tout acte verbal, ne peut qu'informer, c'est-à-dire transmettre des significations. Le récit ne représente pas une histoire (rappelons, cependant, que le langage est doté de propriétés iconiques qui lui permettent parfois de représenter : « *Veni, Vidi, Vici* »), il *la raconte*, c'est-à-dire qu'il *la signifie par le moyen du langage* ; puisque le texte est défini comme œuvre de langage, son analyse portera d'abord sur les composantes du langage, sur les niveaux fondamentaux qui sont : le lexique ; la syntaxe ; la phonologie ; la rhétorique ; la prosodie (puis images, symboles), etc.

1. D. Fernandez, *L'Arbre jusqu'aux racines : Psychanalyse et création*, Paris, Grasset, 1972, 99.

La mise en œuvre de divers procédés se traduira par l'émergence d'un **style**. « *Est dit écrivain, non pas celui qui exprime sa pensée, sa passion ou son imagination par des phrases mais celui qui pense des phrases* » (R. Barthes). Qu'est-ce qu'un style ? Une sélection opérée dans un répertoire linguistique, déclenchée mais non déterminée par le sujet de l'œuvre et constitutive de cette œuvre. Lié à la *Vision/Quality of one's mind*. Avoir du style, c'est : « *Parler la langue de tout le monde comme personne.* » (R. Peyrefitte)

"Style involves not only a command of language but also a way of looking at the world : style is not just a way of piecing words together ; it is above all a quality of vision and also the way a man is able to communicate to you, the quality of his mind and not just the way somebody puts in flourishes." (S. Foote)

"Metaphor is not a fanciful embroidery of the facts. It is a way of experiencing the facts."

Conclusion :

Le commentaire part d'un objet, le texte, et arrive à un fonctionnement. Montrer que l'immobilité du texte n'est en fait qu'une apparence, qu'il est fait de tensions, poussées, appels. Il s'agit de rendre le texte **nécessaire** et de déchiffrer non seulement le sens voulu par l'auteur mais aussi les sens produits par son texte. Ce qui est important pour la compréhension du texte, ce sont non seulement les indications qu'il apporte au destinataire mais tout autant les manœuvres auxquelles il le contraint, les cheminements qu'il lui fait suivre. Le discours narratif oriente et programme son interprétation.

Enfin, le commentaire doit également revendiquer son propre statut de texte, c'est-à-dire produit d'une écriture « *qui, à sa modeste manière, essaie d'être littéraire, ou en tout cas de ne pas déshonorer la littérature* ». Écrire, non seulement bien écrire mais entrer dans le jeu du signifiant. « *La critique ne peut pas demeurer dans les limites du savoir vérifiable ; elle doit se faire œuvre à son tour, et courir les risques de l'œuvre* » (D. Fernandez).

14 VARIATIONS SUR LA FICTION AMÉRICAINE

Les textes qui suivent sont plutôt des amorces de commentaires que des commentaires complets composés selon les directives indiquées ci-dessus. Il s'agit en fait de notes préparatoires, plus ou moins développées, servant de lignes directrices à un cours de littérature américaine qui pouvait s'en écarter et aborder des points ne figurant pas dans ces ébauches. Nous avons conservé leur forme originale de notes préparatoires, pas toujours rédigés de A jusqu'à Z car il ne s'agissait pas de textes destinés à être publiés. La sélection inclut les textes suivants :

1. Shelby FOOTE, "*Rain Down Home*"
2. Washington IRVING, "*Rip Van Winkle*"
3. Ralph Waldo EMERSON, "*Nature*" (Extrait)
4. Edgar Allan POE, "*Annabel Lee*"
5. Ernest HEMINGWAY, "*Indian Camp*"
6. Ernest HEMINGWAY, "*Soldier's Home*"
7. Sherwood ANDERSON, "*Hands*"
8. Shelby FOOTE, "*A Marriage Portion*"
9. Erskine CALDWELL, "*Maud Island*"
10. Flannery O'CONNOR, "*A Good Man is Hard to Find*"
11. William HUMPHREY, "*The Last of the Caddoes*"
12. Stephen CRANE, "*The Bride comes to Yellow Sky*"
13. Stephen CRANE, "*The Blue Hotel*"
14. Robert FROST, "*Mending Wall*".

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SHELBY FOOTE
“Rain Down Home”

« J'ai mes brouillards et mon beau temps au dedans de
moi ; le bien, et le mal de mes affaires même, y fait peu. »

(PASCAL)

A textual analysis of the first two pages

This is intended as a first practical application of the various principles laid out in the preceding vindication of “*commentaire de texte*”, and an introduction to methodology → an exercise in how one goes about making sense of a text: it is meant to be an illustration. What elements merit close attention? → repetition, similarity, dissimilarity, contrast, implication.

In the present instance, the very situation of the passage provides partial answers to the two baffling questions – *Where to start from?* and *What to say?* – every commentator asks himself when confronted with the academic exercise known as “*commentaire de texte*”. Note, by the way, that this quest for meaning – how to make sense of a text ? – parallels the protagonist’s own quest (and eventual fall into non-meaning).

Situation of the passage under analysis

It consists of the opening pages of the short story “Rain Down Home” drawn from the novel *Jordan County: A Landscape in Narrative*¹ by Southern novelist and historian, Shelby Foote (1916-2005). It is thus one of the three most important, *i.e.* strategic, places in any work of literature *viz.* the beginning, the middle and the end (this is, by the way, one of the oldest definitions of the novel since in the words of Aristotle, a work of literature is supposed to have a beginning a middle and an end).

So, “beginnings and endings in literary texts are special places posing the writer with special problems” (D. Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*) → let us say, to state the obvious, that the writer has got to solve two problems *i. e.* How to begin? and How to conclude? That’s what I meant when I said that the situation of the passage parallels to some extent the difficulties any commentator comes up against: what to say, how to begin? Now what are the specific difficulties a writer as to overcome when composing the *incipit* – the inaugural pages of a novel?

The author has to carry out a certain narrative program in order to set the work in motion (give the narrative impetus or momentum), for example:

- lay the scene (description of a place and time and atmosphere) and set the tone;
- introduce the characters;
- arouse and hold the reader’s interest *e.g.* by having the reader wonder what the text is about or what is going to happen to the protagonist, by posing an enigma, etc.
- finally provide some clues as to the way he wishes the meaning of the text to be construed. The author always tries to influence/determine the reader’s response. We’ll have to take into account the type of reading which the text imposes on its readers. Note the following observation:

“Beginnings and endings are always fictional, always impossible to isolate and mark without uncovering some other beginning or ending whose claim to authenticity is equally valid” (Peck)

Consequently, the passage under discussion serving an introductory purpose, the main objective of this “commentaire” will be to show how the author meets such basic requirements.

The relationship between title and text

The title “Rain Down Home” provides the reader with three essential clues :

1. New York, Dial Press, 1954, réédité dans *Three Novels*, New York, Dial Press, 1964.

→ the notions of *Rain* (importance of the weather): bear in mind such cognate phrases as *come rain or shine* (sth happens regularly); *as right as rain* (completely well or healthy); *It never rains but it pours* meaning that things go from bad to worse. They may have some relevance;

→ next comes the notion of “fall” (conveyed by the preposition *Down*);

→ and lastly *Home* (place where you were born and live and feel you belong).

But there's more in the title than meets the eye because the meaning of any term is only produced by its difference from other terms, which means that you must take into account the opposites of the terms I've just mentioned :

→ “rain” is opposed to/suggests its opposite “sunshine” (a key element in the narrative as we shall see);

→ “down” implies its opposite “up” (one might say that the text is about “the ups and downs” or tribulations of the protagonist);

→ and “home” stands in opposition with “not-home”, what psychoanalysis calls in German the “*unheimlich*” = the unhomely, uncanny, unsafe, unsettling. Feeling of being out of one's element → will find expression in the opposition “home-coming” vs. internment, consignment to a mental home.

The mere examination of the title points out some profitable avenues of meaning or directions for inquiry... The three main elements in the title are going to be developed, expanded upon in turn...

Structure of the text

What is the key structural feature/pattern of the passage ? Duality.

Importance of duality as a structural device underpinning the text → the text is characterized by oscillation between shine and rain, objectivity and subjectivity, trust and distrust, old age and youth, communication vs. non-communication, closure vs. disclosure 3rd person vs. 1st person narration; description vs. reported speech or thoughts.

This is graphically illustrated by the presence of a second story (narrative B) within the main story (narrative A) : a reference to the anecdote about the black corpse that the friends of the deceased would like to ship from one place to another in order to organize a double burial service: one in Vicksburg and the other in Bristol. So narrative B is embedded in the main story (narrative A) and serves as a miniature of the parent text; a microstructure mirroring the macrostructure (or in other terms, “*mise en abyme*” or miniature replica) and foreshadowing some of the difficulties the protagonist will have to confront the difficulty to complete a full circle *i.e.* to leave home and then return to one's point of departure, which exactly what the text is about.

The same principle is at work at the chronological level since the passage is underlain by a sharp contrast between “then and now” *i.e.* what the town used to be and what it's become : “The town. They changed it. It's all new”. See how the *hermeneutic code* works → “They changed it.” → who's “they”?

The hermeneutic code is one of the fundamental codes a narrator resorts to in order to make for the integration of the various elements of the text [= models of coherence whose function is to hold the narrative together]. We owe this notion to R. Barthes who worked it out from the realization that a *text* – which is etymologically akin to “*tissue, fabric, weft*”, etc. – is woven out of several codes or narrative strands:

1. The proairetic code (“*voix de l'empirie*” → akin to *empiric(ism)* : trial, experiment, experience): code of actions → referring to all that happens/takes place in a text.

2. The semic code (“*voix de la personne*”): its objective is characterization achieved through the distribution of “*semes*” throughout the text. *Semes* = traits, features, attributes whose sum – subsumed under a proper name – composes an image of a particular character. Awareness that a character has no existence outside the text, is the point of convergence of a series of verbal attributes...

3. The hermeneutic code (“*voix de la vérité*”): devices for stimulating interest, curiosity or suspense such as delays and gaps which turn the reading process into a guessing game, an attempt to solve a riddle or a puzzle. The text suggests the existence of an enigma and delays its solution while, at the same time, it keeps promising an answer.

4. The cultural code (“*voix de la science*”): a code of reference, a shared body of knowledge = *Doxa* = opinions, rationalizations, commonplaces, received ideas, for instance: “Modest women blush”, “Boys will be boys”. Refers to concepts, generalizations, principles governing our perception of the world, justifying our

actions, attitudes or judgments. Its function is to naturalize what is on the main cultural : fragments of sth that has always been already read, seen, done, experienced.

5. The symbolic code ("*champ symbolique*"): the code governing the production of symbolic meaning (a symbol is something that refers to or represents something else). But in Barthes' theory the notion has strong psychoanalytic undertones : in Freud's theory symbolism arises as the result of intrapsychic conflict between the repressing tendencies and the repressed...only what is repressed is symbolized. Repression triggers off a series of substitutions resulting from *displacement and condensation*, two key primary processes governing unconscious thinking → according to Barthes, the way in which a text will regulate a series of anti-thetical terms.

Point of view

Same alternation: at first what is presented is limited to the character's external behaviour (words and actions but no thoughts or feelings; a sort of camera-like perspective) = *external focalization* obtains/prevails; the story seems to be told by an eye-witness who never gets involved in what he records (the protagonist is at first described from without) but then point of view shifts to *internal focalization* (= inside the represented events) for a short space: cf. "the young man told himself"; "he intended to leave his bag"; then back to external focalization. Characteristic rhythm.

Note likewise the alternation of description (narration in the third person) and direct speech/discourse (1st person: the character's utterances are represented in the way he formulated them)

The characters

The concept of duality provides an easy transition to the examination of characterization. It is not only at work at the structural level but also at the level of character-drawing since Pauly Green obviously suffers from a form of dissociation or splitting. Cf. the inaugural description of the protagonist who speaks/mutters to himself ("I ought to watch") and is on the look out, on his guard against possible aggression but there are no grounds for alarm at this stage, or at least, as far as the reader knows. → split personality. As we shall see P. Green suffers from "paranoia" which has something to do with duality since it posits the existence of "the Other" as aggressor or tormentor *i.e.* as a threat one must guard against.

Pay attention to the connotations carried by names: Pauly Green = 1st name from the Latin "*Paulus*" suggests "littleness" to the power of 2 since "Paul" means "the little one" in the sense of junior, youngest son + Y (a diminutive suffix); also a biblical name: the second name of the apostle formerly called Saul (*sepulchre, death*, in Hebrew); as for Green → connotes youth & innocence (cf. "greenhorn" = an inexperienced person).

Two other minor characters: the conductor and Mr. Nowell, a lawyer (a character from *Follow Me Down*). The former helps establish the puzzling, disquieting nature of P. Green's attitude: Note the ambiguity of his announcement → "End of the line" → the implied meaning will become obvious at the end of the text. It also contributes to the introduction of another motif = the dialectics seer/seen; gazer/being gazed at ; activity/passivity) → "the conductor stood there watching him", an attitude P. Green is to interpret as a confirmation of his fear. A crazy logic/vicious circle sets in motion inasmuch as P. Green generates that kind of suspicion by his very behaviour. Cf. "What's the matter?" he said. "You think that I'm drunk or something?"

The latter inaugurates the motif of non-recognition, lack of brotherhood: Green has become a stranger, a foreign element the social body is to get rid of, eliminate.

To return to P. Green's attitude → "frowns"; "Dont" → a threat, very touchy, walking with a chip on his shoulder.

P. Green is marginalized, kept outside the community, hence an increased aggressiveness on his part. P. Green will deal with his acquired destructiveness (a soldier is trained to kill) by projecting it onto the world around him until he is "rectified", forced back into line (forced to toe the line, conform).

Images & metaphors

– image of a threatening world: cf. description of the sun → the color of blood (Note second reference: *Goodblood's*); the whistle of the engine is likened to the "scream of a hound" → No suggestion of serenity. This disquieting note is reinforced by a few instances of *pathetic fallacy*

– “pathetic fallacy”: attribution to natural objects of human capacities and feelings ; ascription of human traits to inanimate nature: “cars obedient to the traffic-lights”; “the lidless glare of red and green” → conveys a faint hint of something ominous, Big Brother has taken over, involves the existence of a central brain controlling the town and lives of its inhabitants; “clockwork entrails of the parking meters” → bearing out suggestion of a dehumanized world.

– profanation or transgression (cf. “the red flag of violation”): selling a round trip ticket to corpse *i.e.* is somewhat sacrilegious → an idea involving disturbance of the existing order, hence it is necessary for the clerk to “get a ruling” (a decision made by somebody in authority, a judge). Plays a proleptic rôle: announces the further disturbance brought about by P. Green’s wish to return home.

Cf. also further down, the vulgarity of the beer drinkers and description of the men’s room with the obscene graffiti and pictures: the world stinks.

– the rhetoric of vision / violence / innocence

Atmosphere

Rain: alternating weather conditions parallel the shifting moods of the protagonist; the contrast between rain and sunshine, the alternation of bright and rainy spells reflect P. Green’s mental disorder.

Sunshine → aggressive brightness/light → “Brilliant sunlight struck him across the eyes” → introduces the motif of the “gaze”, vision that is to crop up later in the text with the description of the “blank stone eyeballs of the Confederate soldier” emphasizing that people are blind and deaf to each other’s misfortunes and plight.

Main themes

desire for integration → Green wishes to reintegrate himself into his original community
the difficulty of returning home is closely linked with the impossibility of communication.

a disturbance of balance → a return to balance, the recovery of balance

Style

Note the variety of tone, the alternation of long sentences and short ones and the complete contradiction between the balance of the prose and rhythm and the unbalance of the protagonist. Cf. use of a ternary rhythm = a certain nobility (influence of the Bible) “Rain Down Home” is a story with religious even metaphysical overtones but none the less a tale full of sound and fury. But unlike Macbeth’s remark it signifies something: the world is no longer a place fit for heroes or simply human beings to live in. (“*Life’s but a walking shadow ; a poor player, / that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more : it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing*” (Macbeth, Act V, Sc. 5)

Conclusion

The purpose of the beginning is, metaphorically speaking, to sow seeds/elements that will ripen later; it sets in motion the present machinery of narration.

“A cloud blew past the sun” → the protagonist like the sun is “*under a cloud*” = out of favour, under suspicion or in disgrace.

Basic structure of numerous tales: a hero in quest of human values in a world that is sorely devoid of them. The short story itself marks the start of a quest for the whys and wherefores: why is the South become a waste land? The answer lies in the past, in the founding crimes of America whose consequences still beset and prey upon the present... The sons are still paying for the fathers’s sins.

To sum up

“Rain Down Home” is a tale of homecoming; the story of an ex-serviceman who, after coming back from the war, no longer feels at home in his home town. The situation is summed up by the protagonist himself: “I came back from the war and all, back here where I was born and raised, and people dont even know me on the street”.

The situation depicted in the short-story has numerous counterparts in American literature: E. Hemingway, for instance, wrote a short story, “Soldier’s Home” that has kinship in technique and theme with the text under discussion since it deals too with the difficulties a veteran runs into when the time comes for

rehabilitation *i.e.* return to civilian life, to normalcy. The underlying structure of the text is also archetypal : after leaving his original community to achieve experience, maturity, in a word, to grow into manhood, the hero, now a seasoned veteran, tries to return to his community but finds no access to it ; there is no way back. The text is thus built on a circular pattern (Home / Bristol → War / Outer world → Back to Bristol). The veteran, we are given to understand, will eventually end up in a “mental” home, which is not exactly what he expected at the start. However, it is tempting to say that the protagonist actually did not change or grow up (cf. the character’s name: Pauly Green); it is the town that seems to have done the growing up, not the hero: “The town. They changed it. It’s all new.” – “Yes; it’s growing, the man said” (note the “they” = a clue to the hero’s paranoid delusions).

The story is told by an omniscient narrator, an eye-witness who never gets involved in what he records, but is always reduced to mere spectatorship. The protagonist is always described from without, in a non-committal way, with pseudo-scientific detachment and objectivity. There’s something clinical in the way the narrator observes the break-down of an individual: “The stubble of beard was more obvious now, with a coppery glint in the sunshine. His clothes were even more rumpled. The whites of his eyes were threaded with red and each lid showed the edge of its red lining”.

Note the presence in the story of various characters that parallel the hero’s experience or of objects that serve as some sort of indirect commentary on his situation cf. the fate of the black corpse that can’t get a class round-trip ticket is not unlike P. Green’s predicament inasmuch as he himself can’t get back to his point of departure *i.e.* he is unable to come full circle. In the same way, the Confederate soldier with his blank stone eyeballs and the “empty-eyed” old man who might have been locked up for trying to find out the secret significance of man’s misery and suffering foreshadow, in a way, Pauly’s decision to close his eyes to the others, to negate their humanity and his final blank gaze that turns people and things into targets to take potshot at. Lastly, the weather with its successive spells of rain and sunshine clearly evokes Pauly’s mental turmoil, his ups and downs leading to the final fit of madness.

Three themes stand out in the narrative: the theme of vision, the theme of solitude and that of absurdity. The theme of vision is of paramount importance; cf. the disquieting note that is struck by Pauly’s mumbling to himself “I ought to watch”. Actually, P.’s journey is a quest for recognition ; he seeks confirmation of his own identity or being in the look/gaze of other people. He tries to catch the eye of his fellow-men in the hope of getting a look of recognition; ironically enough he even wants his eggs “looking at him”. The dialectics of seeing/watching (seer/seen) is at work in the story; P. would like people to look at him, to recognize and acknowledge him as a human being, as “one of them”, but they only watch, spy on him, stare at him as if he were a freak; the conductor is “watching him” and so is the waitress (“she watched him across the glass of water,”) who later gives him “a distrustful look”. The town also becomes impersonal, a huge all-embracing threatening eye: “Cars went past or paused [...] some central brain, peremptory; electric and unthinking”. The town has undergone, at least in Pauly’s eyes, a process of dehumanization; all familiar landmarks have vanished and the hero is unable to get his bearings again. However, it is possible to present things in a different light and contend that the world has not changed at all and that P. Green merely projects his own feelings of insecurity onto his environment which consequently becomes weird and threatening. The setting is not just a decor, it becomes a set of signs or indices to be deciphered; it becomes “obscene” both in the contemporary sense of “dirty” and in the original, Latin sense of “ominous”: the parking-meters show the red flag of violation, a signal of impending retribution; the lost letter bears out P.’s suspicion that it is impossible to communicate with people, to make contact with them (“Go where you belong, where you’re not wanted”). As the protagonist himself puts it: “I see things all around me and it tears me up inside...all that suffering”. The quotation brings up the kindred theme of solitude, suffering and absurdity. P.’s quest assumes metaphysical dimensions, turns into an inquiry about/into the meaning of life and its attendant suffering: “What does it mean? Its got to mean something all that suffering” and the old timer’s answer: “They got away from God”. Unfortunately, P.’s question is beyond the ken of the man in the street and he is bound to leave the question unanswered; hence the absurdity of man’s predicament: “I want to live in the world [...] wont”.

As for solitude, it is the lot of the common run of people ; everyone is secluded in their own petty lives and cares nothing about their fellow-men; to P.’s admission, “I was lonesome”, the waitress can only reply: “I’m real busy. What will it be?”. The lack of communication with other people is underlined by the fact that P. talks

to himself and thus cuts off all the moorings that bind him to reality and sanity. P. comes to realize that people don't need love ("It's not love they need,") or at least they have become used to doing without it.

Since people fail to turn their eyes on him in a friendly way P. gets back at people by setting his sights on them; the shooting, the recourse to violence, is just another desperate way of reaching out for the other, of trying to get in touch with him. The ending of the story is ambiguous and paradoxical; everyone agrees that the veteran is "all right, deranged"; the pairing of two antithetic phrases: "to be all right" and "to be deranged" seems to suggest that P. is some sort of border case standing on the borderland where sanity merges into insanity. Perhaps to be sane in such society as the one P. describes is the best evidence of insanity; the question will go unanswered...

WASHINGTON IRVING

“Rip Van Winkle”

Washington IRVING (1783-1859) is a representative of the early romantic period in American literature (1800-1865; he did much to encourage a symbolic and romantic interpretation of the American landscape among the men of letters of his generation.

Irving was a novelist, story-writer, historian and biographer. He became a romantic as a result of contact with German Gothicism and W. Scott. (German Gothicism was a type of fiction characterized by the use of medieval settings – gloomy castles, ghosts, mysterious disappearances, etc. – and the exploitation of mystery, cruelty and horrors.) However, Irving's romanticism was relieved with humour, satire and skepticism.

Though he spent twenty years travelling abroad (1st trip to Europe in 1804 ; stayed two years after visiting France, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, England; 2nd stay in Europe from 1815 to 1832), he devoted his most famous books to the American scene: *A History of New York...by Diedrich Knickerbocker* (1809), a kindly satire of the Dutch settlers who founded New Amsterdam, was the 1st comical novel ever written on American soil. As for *The Sketch Book* (1819-20), consisting of 34 pieces, the great majority of which depict English scenes, it contains the two most famous short-stories of American literature "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow". Thanks to Irving, the New World was now beginning to pass on its myths and legends to the Old. In fact, Irving had borrowed the story from a German tale and transplanted it to an American setting (= an American version of "the Sleeping Beauty").

Now to account for the choice and importance of "Rip Van Winkle", I'll quote the opinion of the famous critic L. Fiedler:

The figure of Rip Van Winkle presides over the birth of the American imagination ; and it is fitting that our first successful homegrown legend should memorialize, however playfully, the flight of the dreamer from the drab duties of home and town toward the good companions and the magic keg of Holland's gin. Ever since, the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat – anywhere to avoid civilization, which is to say, the confrontation of man and woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage and responsibility (*Love and Death in the American Novel*, 26)

Unorthodox approach to the text→for practical, *i.e.* pedagogic, purposes, to show you how one is to proceed to comment upon a literary text, I'll apply a method that is strictly forbidden: I'll follow the unfolding of the narrative and make appropriate observations on the way while the official practice of close reading – as implemented at the university – should result in “*un commentaire composé*”, *i.e.* a structured set of remarks, grouped together in paragraphs and sections and vindicating an overall, an all-round interpretation of the text dealt with as a significant whole.

Note however that this procedure is but the 1st necessary stage of “*commentaire de texte*” enabling the reader/interpreter to list similarities and differences, to notice key-words, to bring to light the polarities underpinning the text, to collect the various symbols and metaphors pervading the text, etc. in order to spot patterns upon which to build up an interpretation.

The 2nd stage consists in putting together all the material gathered in the form a demonstration including three necessary parts:

- an Introduction supplying the reader with indispensable information and announcing the various points deserving consideration;
- the analysis of the passage proper in which the afore-mentioned points are to be developed and expanded upon. It should comprise as many paragraphs as there are points of interest;
- a conclusion.

THE TITLE: Don't overlook the title; it is an often neglected element providing a clue to the main theme(s) of a narrative or containing it in a nutshell or foreshadowing different interpretations. Pay also attention to where the title appears/crops up again in the narrative and explore the relationship between the title of

a narrative and its contents. Before dealing with the text proper, let's explore the various connotations of the title, a rewarding procedure which often provides the reader with valuable clues or lines of enquiry:

– **Rip** as a common noun denotes "a dissolute or worthless person" which is quite apposite cf. the passage highlighting Rip's aversion to work;

– it also means "a rent made by ripping; a tear" which may refer to the rent in the fabric of time, the 20 years' time during which the protagonist is asleep while the world about him, society, history, etc. keep following their natural course;

– the term may also foreshadow the protagonist's return to the womb/bosom of Nature through a "cleft" (an obvious sexual connotation).

– **Winkle** can be associated to 1) "wink" in the sense of "close and open one's eyes quickly ; blink" hence the phrase "to sleep forty winks". Note the various occurrences of the verb throughout the text. 2) the German or Dutch "*ein Winkel*" meaning "un angle, coin ou recoin" (a secluded place)

– Lastly: *The Sketch Book* was published simultaneously in New York by Cornelius S. Van Winkle and in London by John Miller and then John Murray.

Paratext

The first part between brackets resorts to a traditional incipit (the introductory words or opening phrase of a text) aiming to pass fiction off as truth since the narrator claims that "*the following tale was found among the papers of the late D. Knickerbocker*"; this is a classic "*topos*" / commonplace in literature: many texts claim to be based on a manuscript found in a bottle or an old chest etc., which makes for a mysterious atmosphere and blurs or obliterates the origin or source of the narrative voice conveying the story.

Note however the paradoxical claim to "*true history*" and "*accuracy*" after the reference to "legendary lore"; actually the text will prove to be a hybrid, a mixture of facts and legends.

Another interesting element – recurring throughout American fiction – landscape reading, *i.e.* the notion that landscape reads like a manuscript, is to be deciphered like a text or sometimes a mysterious hieroglyph: "*Whenever he happened upon a genuine Dutch family, snugly shut up in its low-roofed farmhouse [...] he looked upon it as a little clasped volume of black letter and studied it with the zeal of a book worm.*"

Landscape is seen as some sort of archives, a record of history, not just a setting or locale, but the very stuff of fiction, literary material in itself: it is endowed with an anecdotal quality, it is in G. Bachelard's words « *un lieu conteur* », a story-telling place (this quality is further illustrated by the example, among others, of contemporary novelist, Shelby Foote, gave one of his novels, *Jordan County*, the subtitle, "A Landscape in Narrative").

The text proper

Harps on the same theme of **truth** with the poem quoted.

The first part of the text depicts the setting and stresses the **magical atmosphere** suffusing it; it refers to "*the magical hues and shapes of these mountains*", also depicted as "*fairy mountains*" and "*ghosts, witches and Indians*" are mentioned. This enables the narrator to refer to "*the early times of the province*", first when it was founded by Dutch colonists (*the chivalrous days of Peter Stuyvesant*), and then when it became a province of Great Britain. Note that Rip himself is also described as a teller of "*long stories of ghosts, witches and Indians*"

As far as motifs and significant oppositions are concerned, the former half of the story introduces three of them:

– the **conflict between man and woman**: the narrator holds a brief for "*hen-pecked husbands [...] under discipline of shrews at home [...] rendered pliant and malleable in the fiery furnace of domestic tribulation*". "Rip Van Winkle" illustrates another episode in **the age-old war between the sexes**: male and female are at odds, each embodying different principles as for instance:

– the opposition between **leisure/work ethic**: Rip's "*aversion to all kinds of profitable labour*" runs counter to the well-known Yankee cult of profit. Rip = a lazybones "*taking the world easy*", and embodying

waste as opposed to Dame Van Winkle, a regular "workaholic", a domestic tyrant standing for **industry, thrift, orderliness and duty**.

– the opposition between **home** (domestic life) where Rip is under petticoat government and **anti-homes** ("the outside of the house" *i.e.* the inn, the woods). Rip often takes refuge from his virago of a wife in two places that are poles apart from home *i.e.* the **woods or the village inn**, "a kind of perpetual club of the sages, philosophers, and other idle characters". Note by the way, that the inn, as the haunt or stamping-ground of males, is the forerunner of the **saloon**, one of the features of the Western as a genre.

It is on one of his occasional flights from home that Rip betakes himself to the hills where he comes across a stranger, dressed in the Dutch fashion and carrying a keg of liquor, who leads him through "a deep ravine, or rather cleft between lofty rocks" to a "small amphitheatre [where] new objects of wonder presented themselves" among which, a group of people reminiscent of "figures in an old Flemish painting" are playing at nine-pins. The stranger offers them the keg of liquor of which Rip, "a naturally thirsty soul", partakes and then "falls into a deep sleep". As in fairy-tales, the beverage is a kind of sleep-inducing philter.

This is where the second part begins after a twenty years'ellipsis, a piece of information the reader is given much later in the narrative ("but it is twenty years since he went away from home").

On awaking, Rip finds himself on "a green knoll", a detail occurring twice reminding the reader conversant with classical American literature of Fitzgerald's famous description of the New World at the end of *The Great Gatsby*: "the fresh green breast of...the new world" (a reference to the pristine freshness, the sensitivity to new impressions and the secret, natural harmony between man and the American Continent suggested by F. Scott Fitzgerald when he conjures up the image or memory of):

"the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder".

Two observations are in order:

– The "green knoll" is a reference to primeval, virgin America, an undefiled green continent endowed with Arcadian or bucolic qualities, a sort of Eden→Nature is endowed with feminine attributes and qualities; it also possesses a regenerative power. Nature *i.e.* the mountains and the woods offer one a new chance or opportunity to wipe the slate clean and start all over again (Cf. Emerson's famous essay: "Nature"). Rip's sleep and temporary death is a return to the silent, languid quietness of the womb; on the connection between sleep and death, cf. Shelley's famous verse: "How beautiful is Death, Death and his brother Sleep"

– a **sense of wonder**: a key element in American literature because the American Continent with its vast proportions and numerous natural wonders elicits a sense of the sublime and makes for wonderment.

Next stage: *the awakening*, that is, *Rip's rebirth* (note, however, the paradox: *Rip is (re)born an old man...*) and *the return home*. What is uppermost in Rip's mind – since he isn't aware of the time-gap yet – is the forthcoming confrontation with his termagant wife ("he dreaded to meet his wife"). But when Rip enters "the skirts of the village" (note how apposite is the reference to "skirts" in this particular context), he finds himself completely out of his element.

At this stage, an important motif sets in *viz.* **loss of one's bearings**, disappearance of one's usual landmarks. Rip is confronted with **the disquieting strangeness** of a once-familiar world that is changed into something foreign and unfamiliar ("The very village was altered" : "Strange names"; "he began to doubt whether both he and the world around him were not bewitched"). Introduction of the now commonplace Freudian motif of "Das Unheimliche", "l'inquiétante étrangeté", "the uncanny"¹: the once familiar surroundings have turned into a strange country...:

1. Sur l'*Inquiétante étrangeté* ou *Unheimlich* (en allemand) : *Unheimlich* vient de *Heim* (cf. "home") Ce mot signifie « le foyer », la maison et introduit une notion de familiarité, mais il est aussi employé comme racine du mot *Geheimnis*, qu'on peut traduire par « secret », dans le sens de « ce qui est familier » ou « ce qui doit rester caché ».

- the old village inn is gone and has been replaced by “The Union Hotel”;
- a strange flag with “a singular assemblage of stars and stripes” is fluttering from a pole;
- the ruby face of King George has been “metamorphosed” into General Washington;
- people discuss unheard-of topics (rights of citizens, elections, members of congress, liberty, Bunker Hill, etc. that are double-Dutch to Rip).

The winds of change have blown over/swept the quiet Dutch community of old away: Rip finds himself in a foreign country, hence his sense/feeling of lostness and disorientation.

This motif is usually conveyed through a series of cognate terms American fiction continually rings the changes on: “*Wild, wilderness, bewildered, sense of bewilderment*” (cf. in the present case: “*the bewildered Van Winkle*”; “*in the midst of his bewilderment*”) As Y. Pétilion¹ puts it: « *L’expérience commence avec la disparition des repères familiers que James nomme “desarroi” (bewilderment, où le sauvage me désoriente)* ».

Wilderness = condition spirituelle, le dehors sauvage, le chaos primitif, par opposition à l’ordre qui règne dans l’enceinte de l’enclos (*hortus conclusus*):

« Les gens de la Plantation sont en effet soumis à la double et paradoxale injonction de protéger leur communauté, leur jardin enclos, de toute incursion de la sauvagerie alentour : se tenir dans l’enclos de Dieu, derrière ses remparts, sinon l’on risque de s’ensauvager, et d’être relapse, mais en même temps, non seulement il faut s’aventurer dans les terres sauvages afin de les subjuguier et d’agrandir le jardin de Dieu, mais encore il faut s’exposer à la sauvagerie du désert si l’on veut retrouver l’élan fondateur de la sortie inaugurale. Ainsi, c’est dans deux figures antagonistes du wilderness que la symbolique puritaine investit son imaginaire. » (*La Grand-route*, 24)

As a consequence of all “these sad changes in his home and friends”, and the world, Rip loses his identity and sense of selfhood: “*He doubted his own identity, and whether he was himself or another man*”; “*I’m not myself.–I’m somebody else*”.

Rip’s confusion is compounded by the presence of various “*Doppelgänger*” or doubles/“*counterparts of himself*”: an old man and a baby – his son and grandson, both bearing his name. The only drop of comfort in this succession of bewildering experiences is the news of Dame Van Winkle’s death due to a fit of passion.

Actually, Rip **awakens to a new world**, a strange, disquieting and threatening world bearing a new name: the **USA instead of America**². Meanwhile, the Revolution has taken place (the rubicund portrait of his Majesty George the Third has been replaced by that of George Washington), and both *the former colony and*

Les anglophones le traduisent par « *the uncanny* », terme ayant donné l’idée d’*Uncanny valley* sans rapport avec le concept de Freud.

« “L’inquiétante étrangeté” est la traduction donnée, faute d’équivalent en français, par Marie Bonaparte de l’allemand *unheimlich*, traduit par d’autres comme l’« inquiétante familiarité » (R. Dadoun), « l’étrange familier » (F. Roustang) ou les « démons familiers » (F. Stim). *Heimlich* a plusieurs significations. C’est d’abord ce qui fait partie de la maison (*häuslich*), de la famille. Cela concerne l’intimité, une situation tranquille et satisfaisante. *Heimlich* est aussi synonyme de dissimulation, de secret, de peu sûr ou même de sacré. La pièce *heimlich* de la maison correspond aux WC, un art *heimlich* s’apparente à de la magie. *Un-* est un préfixe antonymique, *Unheimlich* est le contraire de *heimlich*, au sens premier comme au sens second. En effet, il peut correspondre à une situation mettant mal à l’aise, qui suscite une angoisse, voire de l’épouvante ; et à un secret divulgué, qui est sorti de l’ombre alors qu’il devait rester confidentiel. En 1959, Lacan inventa le mot ‘extimité’. Cette expression donnait l’idée de quelque chose intérieur, appartenant au sujet, et en même temps non pas reconnu en tant que tel – rendant le sujet mal à l’aise et appréhensif. » (*Wikipedia*)

1. *La Grand-route : Espace et écriture en Amérique*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1979.

2. Ce texte illustre la contradiction primordiale entre l’Amérique et les États-Unis : Marc Chénétier, dans son dernier ouvrage, *La Perte de l’Amérique : Archéologie d’un amour*, affirme que le rêve d’Amérique s’est mué en Rêve Américain, fatale sécularisation proche de la profanation car, dit-il : « *Nul n’a jamais rêvé des États-Unis. On rêve toujours d’Amérique et ce n’est pas ce rêve que dit le “rêve américain”, trop bouffi d’élection, obsédé de salut, hagard de réussite, perclus des envies de mieux-être, avili en “succès”* » (p. 430). La culture “étasunienne”, c’est bien ce qui reste quand on a pris le parti d’oublier l’Amérique des origines.

old Rip Van Winkle achieve their independence through the defeat or death of their respective oppressors (two female figures: the mother country; British rule/ his wife; "petticoat government"). Rip used to be his Majesty's subject, he's now "a free citizen of the United States"

Ironically enough, the text draws a parallel between throwing off the yoke of matrimony and the yoke of British rule, the tyranny of Dame Van Winkle and Britannia's. However, the end of the text is suffused with a kind of nostalgia for the good old days, RVW becomes "a chronicle of the old times before the war" when America was still a rural country under the influence of some sort of pastoral ideal.

Note that characteristically enough Rip takes up his winter quarters in the village inn, the stamping-ground of "men without women" (title of a collection of short stories by E. Hemingway) where the communion of males can take place (cf. role of the saloon in Westerns).

Now Yankee mobility, energy and enterprise have invaded the little Dutch bucolic enclave; everybody frets and fidgets. The "snugly shut" community which was, so to speak, outside time and space, an island of – relative – peace and quiet surrounded by an ocean of activity, has been overtaken by **History and Progress**, the hustle and bustle of modern life: it will be washed away by what will become "**mainstream America**".

By way of conclusion

This short-story, highlighting mistrust of women and revolutions, is based on the conflict between two characters of European folklore¹: a termagant (noisy, quarrelsome) wife and a lazy husband but under Irving's pen this European tale assumes a distinctively American flavour and foreshadows certain motifs and themes recurrent in American fiction.

"Rip Van Winkle" is thus a literary melting-pot (or "melting-plot") since the short story combines/weaves together elements derived from European folklore (and even ancient Greek mythology)² and typically American characteristics:

1. « En intégrant quelques-uns des motifs les plus suggestifs du fonds légendaire européen (le sommeil surnaturel, la Furieuse Armée, le Hollandais Volant, le Cauchemar), ces fictions associent originalement la thématique du fantastique à la mythologie politique américaine : la guerre de l'Indépendance, la naissance mythique du nouvel État et la croissance extraordinaire d'une nation. [...] Ces revenants sont effrayés par les États-Unis, qu'ils tiennent pour une machination diabolique. Le Rêve Américain commence par un cauchemar. »

« Le fantastique, genre de l'irreprésentable et de l'indicible, ouvre la littérature américaine en faisant de la naissance des États-Unis une tache aveugle de la représentation. » (Pétillon)

2. Figure en filigrane le précédent antique de « Mélanion, le chasseur qui s'en fut très loin dans la montagne pour fuir les femmes et le mariage » (Cf. M. Détiéne, *L'Invention de la mythologie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1981, 169).

Mélanion est un héros arcadien, célèbre chasseur. Son histoire est racontée par Xénophon dans son traité sur la chasse, le *Cynégétique*, en 1, 2 et 7; et aussi par Pausanias, le guide Michelin de l'époque, dans sa *Périégèse* chère à nos voyages, en 5, 19, 2. Mélanion est surtout connu pour avoir épousé Atalante, cette vierge chasserresse qui avait dit qu'elle n'épouserait que l'homme capable de la vaincre à la course. Nul n'y parvenait. Mélanion, malin, eut l'idée de laisser échapper une à une les pommes d'or du jardin des Hespérides, qui lui avaient été données par Aphrodite, au moment où Atalante allait le dépasser. Atalante (curieuse ? attirée par leur beauté ? par leur prix ? par leur dimension mystique ? on simplement, amoureuse de Mélanion, et trop heureuse de perdre la course en même temps que sa virginité) ralentit pour les ramasser, et Mélanion gagna. Ils se marièrent donc. Les choses se gâtèrent un peu par la suite, semble-t-il, puisqu'on ne sait si l'enfant d'Atalante, Parthenopaeos, a pour père Mélanion ou Méléagre, autre chasseur célèbre, amoureux lui aussi d'Atalante. Mélanion et Atalante eurent une fin assez tragique (il me semble qu'Ovide en parle dans ses *Métamorphoses*): au cours d'une chasse, ils firent l'amour dans un sanctuaire de Zeus, ce qui leur valut d'être tous deux métamorphosés en lions.

L'image du chasseur solitaire évoquée dans le texte [Rip Van Winkle] est commune à tous les chasseurs, à commencer par Actéon et Adonis. Elle signifie symboliquement que le chasseur doit être chaste : confronté aux grandes forces de la sauvagerie, il ne doit pas déchaîner en plus celles de la sexualité deuxième grand réservoir des puissances de la nature non dominée. Et quand il le fait, ça tourne mal (comme Mélanion dans la deuxième partie de sa vie, mal commencée par une victoire acquise par la ruse, et non par son mérite; comme aussi Actéon, Adonis, et Méléagre)

Cf. également les citations suivantes :

« L'origine mêlée – germanique et amérindienne – d'un récit aux sources de la littérature des États-Unis, devient le sujet même de la fiction [...] métissage littéraire [...] fiction placée à la croisée du territoire indien, du village de colons hollandais et du terroir germanique : croisement des coins de terre (*plot*), des intrigues (*plot*) : un *melting plot* » (*Trois récits fantastiques américains*, éd. B. Terramorsi, traduit de l'américain par A. Geoffroy, Paris, J. Corti, 1996).

But note that the language in which the narrative is written remains unquestionably English; the conquest of a genuinely American idiom¹ will be the next step and objective in the slow emergence of an indige-

« Avec la légende de Rip Van Winkle, on a l'exemple presque unique d'un écrivain entreprenant en toute connaissance de cause d'adapter à la réalité locale un mythe hérité du Vieux Monde, [et de créer] la première nouvelle américaine » (L. Fiedler). À côté du "Mythe de l'amour dans les grands bois", du "Mythe de la femme blanche au tomahawk", du "Mythe des gais compagnons dans les terres vierges et sauvages", RVW constituerait, selon L. Fiedler, le quatrième mythe fondamental des États-Unis : "Le Mythe du mâle en fugue".

Selon P.-Y. Pétilion, ce récit fantastique est à l'origine (avec "La légende du Val Dormant" et "Peter Rugg, le disparu") d'une mystique américaine de l'espace : « Perte des repères familiers du moi, étrangeté du monde métamorphosé en pays inconnu, ainsi s'esquisse un thème qui va hanter les fictions d'Amérique pendant deux siècles. Version américaine des pérégrinations d'Ulysse : le *nostos* impossible. Retournant à son Ithaque, il ne la retrouve plus : le point d'orgue a entre-temps été effacé de la carte » (*La Grand-route*, 71)

« La légende *Sleepy Hollow* et celle de *RPW* [...] sont ainsi comme deux faces d'un même mythe opposant le sommeil (l'enracinement au creux des terres) à l'histoire considérée comme métamorphose, comme migration et tourbillon qui effacent les anciennes marques (*landmarks*) » (P.-Y. Pétilion, *La Grand-Route*, 74)

« Il est remarquable que la littérature américaine s'ouvre sur des fictions qui éclipsent l'Histoire – la naissance des États-Unis –, derrière l'impossible description du rêve, de la tempête ou de l'apparition ; des fictions qui touchent au fantastique en tentant de représenter une voie de passage historique. » (124)

1. "The language in which we speak and write [*id est* British English] is the vernacular tongue of a nation [*i.e.* UK] which thinks it corrupted on every other lip but its own [...] of a nation whose natural, political, religious, and literary relations and peculiarities are totally unlike our own. [...] The whole external character of our country is totally unlike that of England. Our descriptions, of course, which must, if we ever have a poetry, be made in the language of another country, can never be distinctive. They can never possess the peculiar claims which those of native individuality teem with [...] How tame will his language sound who would describe Niagara in language fitted for the falls at London Bridge, or attempt the majesty of the Mississippi in that which was made for the Thames? It is not meant to be even hinted that the English language is incapable of all that language can do; but that peculiarities of country, especially the great distinctive characteristic ones, and manners likewise, can be perfectly rendered only by the language which they themselves have given rise to. I mean a peculiar language. [...] The language of the Indian is no less peculiar than his manners [...] It was made to express his emotions during his observation of nature [...] Hence it is as bold as his own unshckled conceptions, and as rapid as his own step. It is now as rich as the soil on which he was nurtured, and ornamented with every blossom that blows in his path. It is now elevated and soaring, for his image is the eagle, and now precipitous and hoarse as the cataract among whose mists he is descanting". (Walter Channing, "On American Language and Literature, in Kay S. House, *Myth and Reality in American Literature*, Greenwich, Fawcett Publications, 1966, 155).

"What suits Great Britain, with her insular position and consequent need to concentrate and intensify her life, her limited monarchy, and spirit of trade, does not suit a mixed race, continually enriched with new blood from other stocks [...] we must develop a genius, wide and full as our rivers, flowery, luxuriant and impassioned as our vast prairies, rooted in strength as the rocks on which the Puritan father landed". (M. Fuller, "American Literature", *Ibid.*, 155)

Sans retracer dans le détail les diverses étapes de cette quête et conquête d'une vision, d'une thématique et d'une langue proprement américaines, rappelons que les écrivains du Nouveau Monde ont dû relever un triple défi :

– Contribuer à l'*éclosion d'un génie national* à la mesure du « grand spectacle » qu'offraient un immense territoire et la « terrible vastitude » d'une Nature incarnant le sauvage, le grandiose et le terrible. L'objectif étant de promouvoir une langue répondant aux sollicitations d'un environnement nouveau (« *the pressure of the raw material itself [...] the need to domesticate a continent* » (House, 313), présentant des aspects inattendus et des particularités inconnues excédant les possibilités d'expression du langage de la vieille Europe.

nous literature bearing the stamp of the Continent and reverberating with the echoes of the spirit of place and the speech of Yankeedom.

Further clues to a textual analysis of “Rip Van Winkle”

Fabliau avec deux personnages typiques du folklore américain : le mari fainéant et la femme harpie

Tout le monde se démène et s'agite: la mobilité Yankee a envahi l'enclos hollandais

À l'espace ouvert et neuf du Continent (*Wild-deor-ness* : le pays où habitent les bêtes sauvages) où se déploie le peuple conquérant en marche s'oppose cet enclos aux strates anciennes → les contes foisonnent dans les endroits protégés vs *shifting world*/monde mouvant.

Rip serait une version transatlantique de *La Belle au Bois dormant/The Sleeping Beauty*

Rip un rêve inspiré par la misogynie + la vanité des révolutions

Rip s'éveille au monde étrange qui s'appelle les USA

Fabliau avec deux personnages typiques du folklore américain : le mari fainéant et la femme harpie

Tout le monde se démène et s'agite: la mobilité Yankee a envahi l'enclos hollandais

Comme *Sleepy Hollow* : trou perdu enlisé dans la léthargie, monde assoupi et rêveur qui semble sous un charme, celui d'un magicien allemand (l'Europe du XVI^e siècle)

À l'espace ouvert et neuf du Continent où se déploie le peuple conquérant en marche s'oppose cet enclos aux strates anciennes → les contes foisonnent dans les endroits protégés vs. *shifting world*/monde mouvant.

– Développer une *thématique* typiquement américaine (parmi les précurseurs, J. F. Cooper dont on a dit que l'œuvre était « *an exercise in national definition* ») et surtout créer *un lexique et une langue se démarquant de l'anglais britannique*. Répondra à cette dernière attente la lente émergence d'une langue littéraire américaine *sui generis* à laquelle chaque écrivain contribuera peu ou prou en explorant non seulement les diverses possibilités offertes par l'environnement géographique, l'histoire, le milieu social, le mythe, le rêve, l'utopie, la réalité, le fantastique, le quotidien et le banal mais aussi par tous les domaines de l'expérience individuelle ou collective : saga nationale (J. F. Cooper), exploration des profondeurs de l'âme humaine ou de l'inconscient (N. Hawthorne, E. Poe), traversée des espaces extérieurs (W. Whitman) ou océaniques (H. Melville), confrontation entre le Nouveau Monde et la vieille Europe, (H. James), etc. Toute langue littéraire nationale doit – pour se forger mais aussi pour tester et accroître ses pouvoirs d'expression – affronter un large éventail d'expériences diverses qui, entre passé, présent et avenir, rêve, mythe et réalité, cime, gouffre et abîme constituent le territoire du romancier, vaste province dont les confins extrêmes seraient *l'infra-humain* ou *l'inhumain* d'une part, *le surhumain* de l'autre, et au milieu, le *middle ground* de tout ce qui relève de l'humaine condition (« *Homo [ou plutôt Scriptor] sum nihil homini a me alienum puto* » serait depuis Térence la devise de tout écrivain digne de ce nom). Et ce territoire, l'écrivain, pionnier des lettres, doit avec pour seules armes l'observation, l'expérience et l'imagination (les trois vertus cardinales du romancier) l'arpenter, le cadastrer et le conquérir, en un mot, le faire passer sous la juridiction de la fiction, du romanesque et du littéraire : telle est naturellement la vocation de l'écrivain américain et la mission du *novel* qui recoupe celle que William Gilmore Simms attribuait au *romance* – « *It does not confine itself to what is known or what is probable. It grasps at the possible* » (House, *Myth and Reality in American Literature*, 25). Le roman ira même au-delà et étendra son fief à l'impossible, c'est-à-dire l'horreur de la guerre, cette « sauvagerie qui passe l'imagination et la sollicite sans trêve » (J. Kaempfer, *Poétique du récit de guerre*). Ainsi, par la nature de son sujet singulier (dans ce cas particulier : la guerre de Sécession), qui déborde les possibilités d'expression du langage ordinaire, l'écrivain cherchant à étendre le champ du dicible sera conduit à opérer « une décomposition ou une destruction de la langue maternelle, mais aussi l'invention d'une nouvelle langue dans la langue, par création de syntaxe » (G. Deleuze). Sur la question de la langue américaine cf. “Le véritable héros du *Red Badge of Courage*”, P. Carmignani, Hal-archives ouverte, code cel-01759162.

R. W. EMERSON

An extract from "Nature"

"To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other ; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, — he is my creature, and maugre¹ all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me. Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to grimmest midnight. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. Almost I fear to think how glad I am. In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall² me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me ; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental. To be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets of villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right."

A fundamental text not only in Emerson's philosophy and the history of the philosophical movement *i.e.* Transcendentalism his name is inseparable from, but above all in the emergence and development of an American "imaginary". "Nature", one of the most seminal texts in American literature, had a deep and far-reaching influence not only on Emerson's contemporaries, but also on following generations of writers and thinkers.

The text, published in 1836, reads like a manifesto and one of its main characteristics is that it obviously serves a double purpose: hence its didactic bias (the author expounds his ideas and philosophy: his aim is to prove his point and to convince people cf. use of logic: NOT...BUT, etc) and its lyricism (in the second part, Emerson gives his text a personal dimension through the evocation of his own experience cf. the emergence of "I" in "I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration", etc.). Note as well the movement of the text from

1. In spite of.

2. Happen, occur.

the general ("Our age", "We" etc.) to the particular/personal ("I"/"Me") and its culmination in depersonalization ("NOT-ME"; "Eye" etc.).

The same duality is to be found in the structure of the text which is underlaid with a whole series of fundamental oppositions such as: not see/see; superficial/deep; manhood and man/child and spirit of infancy ; eye/eye and heart; outward/inward, etc., which remind one that for Emerson, "*the world was a series of balanced antagonisms*" and that his personal tragedy was, in his own words, that while "*I was a believer in Unity, a seer of Unity, I yet beheld two*". One of the functions of Emerson's plea for Nature is thus to solve and "transcend" (i.e. "go beyond") such contradictions, and to achieve this he addresses himself to the most radical opposition i.e. the opposition from which all the others stem: Man vs. Nature.

A) Emerson's notion of Nature

Nature is not something to be exploited and tamed but a source of "a wild delight". A new concept of Nature:

- therapeutic effect: Nature = "*a cordial*" curing Man's malaise and evil;
- "*a comic and mourning piece*" attuned to Man's shifting moods;
- a source of Youth; a place of rebirth; rejuvenation of mankind;
- the setting of a religious experience.

In that first part, there is evidence of an obvious Romanticism : importance of naivety, wonder, innocence, childhood (cf. Wordsworth: "*The child is father of the man*"). Note that after dealing with Nature in general, the text concentrates on a particular "locus": the woods.

B) Emerson, "*Der Waldgänger*"¹

The woods, an archetypal place for the American psyche (pristine innocence, "wilderness"), a place where Man gets in touch with a mythical past (Pastoral ideal, etc.) and with his most genuine and essential nature. The opposite of corrupt, alienating Society (cf. Huckleberry Finn and Thoreau), a place of refuge.

The Woods = youth, childhood regained/recaptured, but more important still, the woods = a sort of leafy cathedral where Man experiences a religious, mystical experience and feels in the presence of God. In these "*plantations of God*", Man returns to reason and faith (note the reconciliation of two reputedly antagonistic principles).

Moreover, in the woods, Man undergoes a drastic, radical change: "*all egotism vanishes*" i.e. the I/Ego/Me becomes something different "*a transparent Eye/I-ball*", he vanishes into the "*not-me*" i.e. universe, God, Universal Being = "*I am part or particle of God*". The individual is no longer separated from, but at one with "*the All*" = brotherhood, unity, etc.

An important aspect: this religious experience is also an "*aesthetic experience*": Man becomes the beholder and "*lover of uncontained and immortal beauty*".

Consequence of all this: awareness of an "*occult relation between man and the vegetable*" etc. = COMMUNION.

This experience is a sort of baptism, a process of rejuvenation. **Man is made over again in Nature** = a new being, a second Adam and the scales fall from Man's eyes: he develops a new vision to embrace/take in a new continent.

1. « J'ai traduit par "Rebelle", faute d'un équivalent français tout à fait exact, le mot allemand de *Waldgänger*, emprunté lui-même à une coutume de l'ancienne Islande. Le proscrit norvégien, dans le haut Moyen Age scandinave, avait "recours aux forêts" : il s'y réfugiait et y vivait librement, mais pouvait être abattu par quiconque le rencontrait. Il serait aussi facile que vain de citer les "Rebelles" qui, à diverses époques, ont élu la solitude, la misère et le danger, plutôt que de reconnaître une autorité qu'ils tenaient pour illégitime, Robin Hood et ses compagnons, le Grand Ferré, les Camisards, et bien entendu les Résistants de la dernière guerre. Le Partisan est le *Waldgänger* oriental, comme le Maquisard est le Rebelle du Midi. Tous ces termes eussent fixé l'esprit du lecteur sur une réalité historique, alors que le *Waldgänger* de Jünger est une "figure", au sens que notre auteur donne à ce mot : intemporel, de sorte qu'il peut et doit être actualisé à tout moment de l'histoire. » (H. Plard, traducteur du *Traité du rebelle ou le recours aux forêts* de E. Jünger, Paris, Bourgois, 1995).

C) Conclusion

A remarkable and almost archetypal expression of American Idealism and Optimism: each human being has divine attributes.

In Nature, and in his own nature to begin with, is Man's way to self-fulfillment and salvation. All guiding principles are to be found in man himself, in his impulses and instincts, in his inner self or Adamic self *i.e.* in his nature stripped of its social trappings. A possible criticism however: excessive valuation of innocence, naivety, wonder and childhood accounting for the streak of anti-intellectualism running through American culture and literature, but whatever qualifications one may make, this text remains the moving and thought-provoking manifesto of "*a multiple personality trying to be single*" and to fuse passion and intellect, heart and reason in his doctrine of "*the one and the many*".

Last and not least, it is a perfect example of that "*general education of the eye*" that Emerson advocated, and it teaches one to see things in a different light and from a different angle of vision: the text is in itself an "*eye-opener*".

E. A. POE

“ANNABEL LEE”

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), a controversial author either overrated as a genius notably by the French from Baudelaire to Valéry (hence the nickname “*Edgarpo*” in imitation of the French mispronunciation) or dismissed as a second-rate author (“*the jingle man*” according to Emerson; cf. also Lowell’s verdict: “*Poe is three-fifths genius and two-fifths sheer fudge*” [nonsense or foolishness]) stands outside the main current of American literature.

He was born in the North (in Boston on January 19, 1809) to a couple of actors who died at a very early age but was bred in the South after being fostered by a wealthy merchant, John Allan – hence Poe’s middle name. He attended the University of Va but his addiction to alcohol and gambling led him to fall out with his foster-father. He then entered West Point in 1830, but was soon dismissed. He secretly married his 13-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm in 1835 and embarked upon journalism and a literary career (which was spent in 4 centers: Baltimore, Richmond, Philadelphia and New York.) He gained a national reputation as a reviewer.

In 1839 he published *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. He wrote a handful of poems, among which *The raven* (1845) brought him international fame, but his life was more and more unstable and erratic what with ill-health and drinking. He died on October 7, 1849 in Baltimore.

Poe was “*a socially displaced person*” whose work seems totally unrelated to the American environment: he stood apart from literary nationalism and represented a gloomier side of romanticism. He distinguished himself in three fields:

— criticism: he was one of the first critics to judge a work of art by *a coherent set of aesthetic and technical standards*. His chief tenet was that both poems and tales should be short enough to be read “*in one sitting*”; otherwise the unity of effect would be dissipated. In Poe’s view, good writers calculate their effects precisely. As a reviewer, he was a harsh critic of second-rate American writing, but he dabbled in many popular sensationalistic forms;

— poetry: characterized by his insistence upon the craft of poetry (he pleaded for “*the poem written solely for the poem’s sake*”); his emphasis on **Beauty**, not Truth as the end of art, and his Newtonian conception of the oneness of the Universe (*Eureka, a Prose Poem*, 1848). His poetry is very often complex and composed in obedience to rigorous technical standards hence a certain mechanical quality resulting from Poe’s tendency to carry the rhyming art to excess. He used commonplace romantic themes but gave them a philosophical and mystical application.

— the short story: his output may be divided into three categories:

Tales of terror making much use of abnormal psychology (“*The Fall of the House of Usher*”); Poe perfected the tale of gothic horror;

Tales of beauty in color and rhythm;

Tales of “*ratiocination*”, based on logic and deduction (“*The Gold Bug*”, “*The Purloined Letter*”, “*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*”, etc. having all the special Poe flavour); he may be said to have invented the detective story.

Poe’s most famous collections of short stories are: *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840) and *Tales* (1845) translated into French by Charles Baudelaire.

However controversial, Poe was one of the great pioneers/forerunners of modern literature. One may feel he is more interesting to read *about* than to read; one may not like his work but one cannot ignore it; many domestic or foreign artists either of the past or present expressed their indebtedness to him

Published on October 9th 1849, two days after the death of E. Poe, “*Annabel Lee*” is a perfect illustration of the main principle of his poetics, viz. that ***the only explicit aim of poetry is the rhythmical creation of beauty***.

As a “*musical epiphany, the ultimate aim of Poe’s poetry is*” according to the French critic, Cl. Richard, “*to make the reader overhear the echo of something else, a pregnant silence, an unperceived harmony...the promise of light*”.

As the analysis of "Annabel Lee" will show, a literary work is not only a pattern of meaning but also a **pattern of sounds**. Poetry endeavours to make a special appeal to the ear and to fuse together meaning and sound according to Pope's oft-quoted tenet: "*The sound must seem an echo to the sense.*"

The opening line of the 1st stanza ("*It was many and many a year ago*") reminds one of the standard inaugural phrase of a fairy-tale: "*Once upon a time...*". It not only opens up a world of fable and legend but also ushers the reader into the realm of fiction.

After the reference to *Time* comes the reference to *Place*: "*a kingdom by the sea*" and then like a goddess emerging from the deep, there appears the maiden whose name Lee with its liquid consonant /l/ and long vowel /ee/ connotes both Southernhood and fluidity, and echoes the /i:/ of the seminal series "sea", "we", "me". Note, incidentally, that water (here « *l'eau-delà* ») played a fundamental rôle in Poe's elemental imagination.

The 3rd line achieves a striking effect through the direct address of the narrator to the narratee: "*whom you may know*" which involves him in the poet's nostalgia.

The last line introduces both the theme of Love and discloses the identity of Annabel Lee's lover *i.e.* "me", the narrator.

Thus the 1st stanza sets the poem going: it introduces all the typical ingredients of a sentimental, romantic dirge/ballad and sets the tone.

But it also highlights the essential principles of composition of the poem: as witness the use of echoes, mirror effects, and rhymes (ABABCB), the poem will rest on a twofold effect of monotony:

- the monotony of semantic repetition;
- and the monotony of prosodic repetition (cadence, rhymes) to convey an impression of inescapable sameness.

The 2nd stanza with its internal rhymes (*child/child*) and accumulation effect ("love" x 3) introduces the theme of *first everlasting love* but also intimates that "*that love that was more than love*" lies beyond human apprehension, and being a more than human love aroused – hence its tragic fate – the envy of angels and seraphim.

This stanza is a reminder that according to Poe, love was the truest and purest of all poetical themes and that it was in itself far superior to passion "*whose tendency is to degrade rather than elevate the soul*".

The next stanza expands upon the latent threat implied above: the angels avenge themselves upon the two lovers, and the flame of love is blown out by an evil wind from Heaven (note the reference to another element: "air") that brings Death. For this stanza to assume its full meaning it is necessary for the reader to bear in mind what Poe stated on the subject of Death:

"Of all melancholy topics, what is the most melancholic?" he once asked himself.

"Death--was the obvious reply"

"And when is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?"

"When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then of a beautiful woman, is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world"

The next stanza achieves a mirror-effect by echoing the 2nd and 3rd : note the shift from "*you*" to "*all men*" and the assonance (repetition of vowel sounds within a line: *chilling/killing*). [Consonance is the repetition of a sequence of consonants, but with a change in the intervening stressed vowel: *live-love, leaning-alone; pitter-patter*]

As to the fifth stanza, it emphasizes the same effect by summing up the preceding ones and harping on the indestructible nature of the bond between the two lovers. Their love is all the more incorruptible as it will remain pure and unfulfilled. Lovers become one through death: nothing can dissever the narrator's soul from Annabel Lee's (note the alliterations: *demons, down, under* [Alliteration = the repetition of speech sounds, namely consonants in a sequence of nearby words]; and the internal rhymes: *ever dissever/soul, soul*).

The last part of the poem where the device of internal rhymes is carried to an extreme, is placed under the sign of the moon, a feminine power symbolizing the rhythm of cyclic time: the birth, death and resurrection of the moon symbolize immortality and eternity.

Here, it brings the poet dreams of the beautiful Annabel Lee; as the “*eye of night*”, the moon also reminds him of the eyes of his beloved. The references to light and vision are to be linked with the description in Poe's poetry of woman « “*as luminescence*” (*especially in death where the materiality of woman is rarefied and spiritualized*) ». As Cl. Richard put it: “*woman expires: as breath, she inspires a poetry of immaterial exchange*”.

But the final lines of the poem are most remarkable for the reconciliation of opposites they bring about: the poet communes with the dead maiden who eventually becomes his life and bride but only so through death.

To conclude this short exploration of a poem where the themes of Beauty, Love, Death and Water are closely interwoven, one might say that it is a haunting illustration of Poe's notions on poetics and love. He felt an obvious attraction for a certain type of women, young, ethereal, and doomed to die young as witness the two following lines: “*I could not love except where Death // Was mingling his with Beauty's Breath*” (« *Je n'ai pu aimer que là où la mort // Mêlait son souffle à celui de la beauté.*»

The poem strives “*towards the expression of 'mousiké'[music] i.e. both a rhythmical presence and a rhythmical dissolution of reality; it is a process of spiritualisation through music*”.

As to water, it is in the words of G. Bachelard « *l'élément mélancolisant par excellence* » (*L'Eau et les rêves*), the most appropriate for a meditation on death:

« Eau silencieuse, eau sombre, eau dormante, eau insondable, autant de leçons matérielles pour une méditation de la mort. Mais ce n'est pas la leçon d'une mort héraclitéenne (“C'est mort pour les âmes que de devenir eau”, Héraclite) d'une mort comme un courant. C'est la leçon d'une mort immobile, d'une mort en profondeur, d'une mort qui demeure avec nous, près de nous, en nous. »

Two final observations: the first by L. Howard, who states in his essay, *Literature and the American Tradition* that:

“[Poe] was a **coldly emotional engineer** whose approach to poetry is rational rather than emotional, empirical rather than intuitive – a kind of Benjamin Franklin among poets who could pass himself off as a Byron whenever he put his mind to it.” (105)

The second refers to C. Richard's interpretation of the poem:

« Cette ballade est l'aboutissement de la doctrine poétique de Poe : un poème « en soi » dont la signification ne se perçoit pas par l'esprit. Ce poème n'existe qu'en tant que représentation musicale de l'Harmonie. Au-delà de la symbolique verbale, il exprime par son rythme et sa structure l'harmonisation parfaite du monde que le poète entend illustrer, imparfaitement, dans l'image poétique. Répétitions, allitérations et rimes, quelquefois jugées trop mécaniques, tendent à suggérer l'absolue interdépendance des choses dans un univers qui converge mystérieusement vers l'unité. L'image sonore de l'harmonie transmet l'ultime message de Poe : il trouve la sérénité poétique dans l'acceptation de la mort de la femme, voulue par Dieu dans son « intrigue » cosmique. Annabel Lee, être féminin par excellence, représente ainsi cette essence poétique du monde, le poème suprême de Dieu, toujours inaccessible au poète terrestre. Quand celui-ci reconnaît enfin son imperfection, il parvient à accéder, par l'imagination ou le rêve, au savoir théologique » (C. Richard, *Edgar Allan Poe*, Paris, R. Laffont, “Bouquins”, 1989, 1577).

Various important distinctions in Poe's poetry that may stand one in good stead when it comes to discussing literary texts:

Poetry : « sens limité d'“écriture en vers” » vs. *Poesy* : « l'œuvre d'imagination susceptible de faire naître le sentiment poétique » (C. Richard, Bouquins, 967)

La *fancy fest* « associative et agrégative » = « errement, vagabondage de l'esprit » (1451) ; « la *fancy* entraîne dans des méandres cauchemardesques... » vs. *imagination* (cf. 1309) « synonyme pour Poe d'inspiration et d'intuition fulgurante » = « **seule voie conduisant à la vérité poétique, intuition suprême** » (1475)

« La révélation de l'harmonie du monde est le seul but légitime de la connaissance, et partant, de la *poesis*. La beauté est toujours définie par Poe en termes musicaux et la cohérence suprême du cosmos, qui est vérité, est harmonique par essence. » (977) .

Poésie de la parole = *Création rythmique de la beauté* 1023

« Poe, fort de sa théorie de la ruée *actuelle* des atomes vers l'Unicité, concevra la poésie comme un acte de nostalgie et fondera sa théorie de l'effet sur la nécessité de suggérer par l'acte poétique cette harmonie cosmique qui est la seule vérité poétique (acte primordial du Dieu-poète), que seule l'Unité esthétique saura nous permettre d'apercevoir brièvement. » (Richard, 1491)

« Le principe de la poésie est, strictement et simplement, l'aspiration humaine vers une beauté supérieure, et la manifestation de ce principe est dans un enthousiasme, une excitation de l'âme, – enthousiasme tout à fait indépendant de la passion qui est l'ivresse du cœur, et de la vérité qui est la pâture de la raison » (C. Baudelaire, *Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe*)

E. HEMINGWAY

“Indian Camp”

Lake shore→island: The island is a key place in American literature; famous examples are legion but the most authentic type of island in American fiction is not the ocean island but **the river island** in the midst of the Mississippi which represents, even more than the Ocean, the natural and mythical divide between the East and the West, the Old World and the New. The classic example is “Jackson's Island”, where Huckleberry Finn and Jim, the runaway slave take refuge. It provides the setting for one of the most fundamental myths of American literature: withdrawal from society and civilization, the attempted return to an Edenic space where the white boy and the childlike black man can realize, however briefly, the twofold ideal of pastoral life and human brotherhood.

There exists a strange affinity between the American landscape and the pastoral ideal, and the green island is the most propitious place to fantasize about a bucolic ideal life. **The island symbolizes America as conceived of by the European imagination; moreover, in the very chronicle of the discovery and settlement of the New World, the island comes first, not the continent.** The genesis of America started from the island, whether it be San Salvador where C. Columbus set foot on October 12th, or Roanoke Island, the first outpost of progress. Even literature testifies to the same anteriority; in *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway conjures up the image of:

“the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailorsteyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the best and greatest of all human dreams ; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the best time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder” (187-88).

It is also from Long Island, the “fish-shaped” island with the forgotten ancient Indian name of *Pau-manok*, that W. Whitman, the “first white aboriginal”, sets out on his journey to “make a song for these States”, and lastly, it is from Jackson's Island that there rises the first authentically American voice (Huck Finn's).

The island represents *the antithesis to society*; as such, it is quite the opposite of home, the world of toil and daily routine, of restraint and normality. The island is not only outside quotidian space, it is also outside present time. The island, especially when it is virgin territory, symbolizes a prelapsarian world, the golden age of humanity. By returning to the island, one embarks upon a journey back in time that should ideally lead one to original purity and primal innocence. As a place of renewal where one can wipe the slate clean, the island bridges the gap between a prosaic *hic et nunc* and a mythical *illud tempus*. Finally, the island symbolizes a fundamental opposition between two universes, the antithesis between “this world and that world”, i.e. the profane and the sacred.

In Hemingway's short story, the island is peopled by Indians = another culture, the Indian as embodiment of “Otherness” vs. the Wasps

To reach the island it is necessary to row across the lake = such a crossing assumes the function of a **regular rite of passage**; the river is indeed a borderline and the island often lies at the heart of a triple opposition of a spatial, temporal, and spiritual nature.

A passage to a very special place where sth unusual (at least for an adolescent) is going to take place i.e. a delivery by Caesarean section (birth) followed by a gruesome suicide (death): note balance between life and death

This very short, terse piece from Hemingway's *Nick Adams Stories* is laden with ethical problems. What justification is there for forcing a child to become part of a brutal sequence of medical events?

The medical treatment of the laboring woman is unquestionably life-saving, but the cruel insensitivity of the two white men contributes to the unnecessary death of the infant's father.

Note the undercurrents of racism, and sexism in the text: theme of masculinity in these stories. Hemingway turns a typically female experience in a female space into a male-dominated situation. Although this story is about a childbirth, it focuses on the experience of the doctor rather than the woman.

In this masculine atmosphere, the suicide of the Indian father, then, seems to be an example of a man acting in a feminine manner. According to Nick's father, he probably killed himself because he could not stand it. Nick's father seems to want to teach the adolescent a kind of *stoicism*; he does not give Nick long answers to his questions, and he treats this incident with silence himself. This strong, silent masculinity reappears throughout the stories.

Similarities between Hemingway's life and works

It is no secret that writers commonly pull from their personal thoughts and experiences to produce a work of literature. Ernest Hemingway's "Indian Camp" is a case in point. The short story was originally published in the collection of *In Our Time* in 1925. A brief synopsis reveals that the main character, an adolescent by the name of Nick Adams (the name is an obvious reference to the American Adam a new type of man having recaptured pristine innocence *i.e. homo americanus* part and parcel of God's Chosen people...), travels with his father across a lake to an Indian village. While at the village, Nick observes his father, who is a doctor, deliver a baby to an Indian by Caesarian section. As the story progresses, Nick's father discovers that the newborn's father has committed suicide while his wife gives birth. Soon afterwards, Nick and his father engage in a short conversation concerning death, which brings about the end of the story. At face value, the story is merely five pages long and covers a time frame of only one night. But, with some investigation, the reader can depict parts of the story, which are influenced by Hemingway's life.

A prime example of how Hemingway brought out his past in "Indian Camp" is the description of Nick and his father and their relationship. Hemingway grew up in Oak Park, a middle class neighborhood, under the watchful eye of his parents, Ed and Grace Hemingway. Ed Hemingway was a doctor who "*occasionally took his son along on professional visits across Walloon Lake to the Ojibway Indians*" during summer vacations. These medical trips taken by Ernest and Ed would provide the background information needed to introduce Nick and his father while on their medical trip in "Indian Camp." These trips were not the center point of affection between Ed and Ernest, but were part of the whole. The two always shared a close father-son bond that Hemingway often portrayed in his works.

Nick's close attachment to his father parallels Hemingway's relationship with Ed. The growing boy finds in the father, in both fiction and life, not only a teacher-guide but a fixed refuge against the terrors of the emotional and spiritual unknown as they are encountered. In his father Ernest had someone to lean on. In "Indian Camp," Nick lays back into his father's arms for a sense of security and, thus, reinforces their close father-son relationship. When Nick encounters the terror of death, in the form of suicide, his father is right there to comfort him. From this the reader can see how Nick has his father to, physically and mentally, "lean" on much like Ernest did.

Hemingway's love for his own father is not always so positive though, and he often sought for an outlet through his literature. When Hemingway was young, Ed persuaded him to have his tonsils removed by a friend, Dr. Wesley Peck. Even though it was Dr. Peck who performed the painful operation, Hemingway "*always held it against his father for taking out his tonsils without an anesthetic*" (Meyers 48). Hemingway saw the opportunity to portray his father in "Indian Camp" as the cold-hearted man who had his tonsils yanked out without anesthetics. In a reply to Nick's question about giving the Indian woman something to stop screaming, his father states, "*No. I haven't any anesthetic . . . But her screams are not important. I don't hear them because they are not important.*"

In "Indian Camp," Hemingway uses the conversation between Nick and his father, concerning the suicide of the Indian, to show his distaste for his own father's suicide:

'Why did he kill himself, Daddy?'
'I don't know Nick.'
'He couldn't stand things, I guess.'
'Do many men kill themselves, Daddy?'
'Not very many, Nick.' . . .
'Is dying hard, Daddy?'
'No, I think it's pretty easy, Nick. It all depends.'

Hemingway saw his father as a weak man who served his wife, Grace, unconditionally. Ed worked a full day only to come home to clean house, prepare food, and tend to the children; he had promised Grace that if she would marry him, she would not have to do housework for as long as he lived. Ill and depressed, Ed committed suicide in 1928. Hemingway later referred to the situation by stating: "*I hated my mother as soon as I knew the score and loved my father until he embarrassed me with his cowardice . . . My mother is an all time all American bitch and she would make a pack mule shoot himself, let alone poor bloody father.*" (Meyers)

Hemingway uses "Indian Camp" to express his feelings that his father was a coward. He did this by having Nick's father refer to suicide as being "pretty easy," which is comparable to a coward's way out of life.

Further observations

End of the narrative: Dawn as a symbol. A new day means a new start. So at the dawn of this new day, Nick is coming out of last night's confusions with a new understanding. The understanding Nick comes to, at the end of the narrative, isn't a very adult one. Death, or at least Nick's own death, seems impossible to Nick, even though he just witnessed it in another person. But this is his way of resolving the fact that he now has to live in a world where death is a reality. After all, do we go about our daily lives thinking about how we're going to die eventually? Remember, Nick is still a kid who *just* witnessed death for the first time, and he has to process this new information somehow.

And finally, the fact that Nick's dad is the one rowing the boat, with Nick in the stern shows us that Nick still isn't quite ready to steer the boat himself. He still needs guidance; but even this image seems to foreshadow the fact that Nick is going to one day have to navigate for himself.

Food for thought by way of conclusion

A brutal rite passage from innocence/adolescence to experience/knowledge but an incomplete passage; it is not sure Nick has come to a full awareness of the link between life and death; he is still under the delusion that death will spare him ("he felt quite sure that he would never die"). He hasn't yet come to "terms with life"→One can apply to the short-story the conclusion drawn from Etty Hillesum's *An Interrupted Life*, *i.e.* the notion of "coming to terms with life", something Nick seems to be unable to do:

"By 'coming to terms with life' I mean: the reality of death has become a definite part of my life; my life has, so to speak, been extended by death, by looking death in the eye and accepting it, by accepting destruction as part of life and no longer wasting my energies on fear of death or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability. It sounds paradoxical: by excluding death from our life we cannot live a full life, and by admitting death into our life we enlarge and enrich it" (Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, New York, A Holt Paperback, 1996)

« En disant: "J'ai réglé mes comptes avec la vie", je veux dire : l'éventualité de la mort est intégrée à ma vie ; car regarder la mort en face et l'accepter comme partie intégrante de la vie, c'est élargir cette vie. À l'inverse, sacrifier dès maintenant à la mort un morceau de cette vie, par peur de la mort et refus de l'accepter, c'est le meilleur moyen de ne garder qu'un pauvre petit bout de vie mutilée, méritant à peine le nom de vie. Cela semble un paradoxe : en excluant la mort de sa vie, on se prive d'une vie complète, et en l'y accueillant, on élargit et enrichit sa vie. » (Etty Hillesum, *Une vie bouleversée*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1985)

E. HEMINGWAY

“Soldier’s Home”

Although modern criticism has disavowed any attempt to evaluate literary works in terms of the personality and life of their author (this cardinal sin is called "biographic fallacy", *i.e.* the attempt at a literal one-for-one equation of fiction with the details of the life from which it grows), it is very difficult to read Hemingway's novels and short-stories without placing them in a biographical context. Imagination never works out of a vacuum and H. incorporated much of his experience into his work; consequently, just as H's life illuminates his work so his work does his life. However, in going over the main events of his life, I shall confine myself to factual particulars having a direct bearing on the novel under consideration.

Background information

E. Hemingway was a major figure of the literary movement known as "the lost generation" – a phrase coined by Gertrude Stein, the high priestess of the movement, to refer to the expatriate American writers of the rebellious and godless twenties, and to emphasize the impact of W.W.I on a whole generation of writers. The decade between 1919 and 1929 was an era of rebellion in which writers revolted against the narrowness of their prewar world; it was also an age in which all traditional values had been shattered by the cataclysm of W.W. I. Following the war, young writers disillusioned by the political attitudes of "return to normalcy" and "business as usual", left the States to pursue art and pleasure in Europe. They developed a new mode of writing growing out of the experimental attitudes of the prewar period, of the new psychology of S. Freud, and of a new freedom to do what one wished.

E. Hemingway (1899-1961), originator of the "tough style" (« *le style dru* »), a lean, hard and terse prose that was to be widely imitated, was basically concerned with individual human qualities of compassion, courage (defined as "grace under pressure") and endurance. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1954.

"*The lost generation*" was a war-wounded generation hurt in its nerves and bereft of all illusions concerning society and human nature after witnessing the atrocities committed on European battlefields. It was also suspicious of the spurious values of a society that had turned into "Vanity Fair". WWI was a conflict which ushered in a new era in the history of the USA. Until the outbreak of the war, the USA was a provincial nation with a naive and somewhat parochial outlook ; the conflict changed all that:

« La guerre apparaît soudain comme le viol d'une conscience collective exceptionnellement paisible, satisfaite et pour tout dire innocente... Pour tous les jeunes Américains, ce fut un appel individuel à l'expérience. Avril 1917 sonne le glas d'une certaine innocence typiquement américaine [...] l'Amérique rentrait dans l'Histoire. »
(M. Gresset)

Hemingway was born (1899) and raised in Oak Park ("a community where the saloons end and the churches begin"), Illinois, one of six children. His mother was a strong, active and strict woman: a music teacher, a lover of high culture and lofty principles. His father was a successful physician who enjoyed hunting, fishing, and living in the great outdoors; the young Ernest shared his father's passions and the family's lodge at Hortons Bay on the shores of Walloon Lake where the Ojibways, an Indian tribe, still lived, will be the setting of E. H.'s initiation to the wilderness and its way of living.

Behind a façade of bourgeois happiness, the couple experienced marital difficulties. H. didn't get on well with his mother and when he converted to Catholicism in 1927, it was according to French critic R. Escarpit:

« son catholicisme viscéral...a surtout été une façon de répudier le puritanisme. C'est sans doute très tôt, à son retour d'Italie, que s'est consommée sa rupture non seulement avec la foi de sa mère, mais encore avec l'esprit même de la religion. »

H. who refused to attend college, took a reporting job on the *Kansas City Star*, and WWI broke out he joined the ambulance corps. He was sent to Italy and within three weeks he was wounded by shrapnel: his career as a writer was rooted in the transformation of his inner vision by this experience. Wound = secret and mysterious source of many a feature of the man and his works:

"The wound culminates, climaxes and epitomizes the wounds he [Nick Adams] he has been getting as a growing boy. [...] From here on in the Hemingway hero is to be a wounded man, wounded not only physically but—as soon becomes clear—psychically as well. [...] This culminating blow in the spine is symbol and climax for a process that has been going on since we first met Nick; it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual dis-grace." (Ph. Young)

Back to the States, as a decorated hero, he found readjustment difficult and became increasingly estranged from his family, especially his mother: "In Italy the sense of life as both an adventure and a tragedy had grown upon him. In Oak Park it was neither. [...] Ernest was obviously out of joint with everything". (L. Gurko) Years later when his father committed suicide with a shotgun, H. blamed his mother for that death. From that moment on, H. had himself nicknamed "*Papa*" as if to assume the rôle of ideal father that Dr. Hemingway had been unable to embody to the end.

In 1920, after marrying Hadley Richardson (he married 4 times), he settled in Paris ("*I learned to write by looking at paintings in the Luxemburg Museum in Paris*") and got in touch with the large community of expatriate artistic and literary Americans already living there. He came to know G. Stein, Ezra Pound, S. Anderson, and F. Scott Fitzgerald: both the latter provided him with advice and helped get his book of short stories, *In Our Time*, published in the USA in 1925. In this collection, stories about the adolescent Nick Adams** as he grows up in Northern Michigan are alternated with very brief, powerful vignettes of war and crime. The affect is to portray the world of adulthood as an arena of danger and violence.

H. adapted journalistic reporting techniques ("*Be brief; be simple; be clear*") to a mode of writing that was almost telegraphic in style and presentation, depending heavily on direct description and dialogue with a minimum of narrator commentary and interpretation. "*I always try to write on **the principle of the iceberg**. There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows*". His prose style was built from what was left after eliminating all the words "*one could not stand to hear*".

As flamboyant in his personal style as he was severe in his writing E. H. became an international celebrity after the publication in 1926 of his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. A 2nd collection of short stories, *Men Without Women* appeared in 1927. *A Farewell to Arms* 1929

As he aged, his interest in certain purely masculine forms of self-assertion and self-vindication became more pronounced.

He served as a war correspondent in Spain during the Civil War (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 1940) and at the front in WW II; he hunted big game in Africa (*The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, 1936)

The novella, *The Old Man and the Sea* was published in 1952. Two years later H. was awarded the Nobel Prize. In 1953 while on a safari in Africa he was badly hurt in a plane accident; his body mended but he never recovered his mental health. Subject to despair and paranoia he was hospitalized several times and eventually committed suicide, as his father before him, in 1961.

** The myth of the Promised Land gave rise to a novel idea of human nature embodied by a new type of man, the American Adam *i.e. homo americanus* having recaptured pristine innocence. Sinful, corrupt Europe was an unlikely place for the emergence of this new avatar of humanity, but the American wilderness being a virgin environment was to prove much more favorable to the advent of a mythic American new man. As St John de Crèvecoeur stated in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782): "*The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions*".

The forefather of the American Adam was "the natural man" or "the noble savage" of Locke's and Rousseau's philosophies *i.e.* an ideal type of individual seen as the very opposite of the corrupt and degenerate social man. The American farmer, hedged in by the forest, partaking of none of the vices of urban life, came to be regarded as the very type of Adamic innocence:

"An individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his unique and inherent resources. It was not surprising, in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero (in praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall. Adam was the first, the archetypal man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent" (R. W. Lewis).

“Soldier's Home”

(A Reading)

Drawn from the collection of short-stories entitled *In Our Time* (1925), "Soldier's Home" is a tale of homecoming: the story of an ex-serviceman who, after coming back from the war, *i.e.* WWI, no longer feels at home in his family and his own home town. The situation depicted in the text has numerous counterparts in American literature: "Rain Down Home" in S. Foote's *Three Novels* – to quote one example –, also deals with the difficulties a veteran runs into when the time comes for rehabilitation *i.e.* return to civilian life, to normalcy.

The underlying structure of the story is also commonplace or better, archetypal: after leaving his home-town to achieve experience and maturity, the hero, a seasoned veteran, tries to return to his community but finds no access to it or feels alienated, out of place, like a peg in a square hole.

The text consists mainly of dialogue, interspersed with a few descriptive indications supplied by an extradiegetic narrator who obviously knows everything there is to know, and sees everything there is to see (Zero focalization: the focalizer's presence is imperceptible or diffused. This corresponds to an apparently objective, neutral, uninvolved focalization. This mode is mainly to be found in traditional or classical narratives, and often corresponds to *omniscience*).

The use of dialogue enables the author to make use very effectively of his famous "tough style" adapted from journalistic reporting techniques ("*Be brief; be simple; be clear*") *i.e.* a mode of writing that is "lean", in other words, almost telegraphic in style and presentation, depending heavily on direct description and dialogue with a minimum of narrator commentary and interpretation. "*I always try to write on **the principle of the iceberg**. There is seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows*". His prose style was built from what was left after eliminating all the words "*one could not stand to hear*".

Last but not least, as is often – if not always – the case with E. Hemingway there's an obvious biographical strain in this narrative; as we shall see, the author has drawn upon his own experience to depict both the mother's and the protagonist's figures and deal with a complex and confrontational mother-son relation.

Consequently, family relationships along with the theme of home-coming *i.e.* the difficulty of returning home, closely linked with the impossibility of communication and fitting-in, all consequences of the trauma of war, will be the main guidelines for our reading of this short-story, which is also, as all piece of fiction, the work of a "*wordsmith*", a novelist whose raw material is made up of life, experience and mainly words, sentences and rules of punctuation (as French critic R. Barthes put it, a writer is first and foremost "*un pense-phrases*").

Krebs enlisted and then stayed behind in Europe with occupation forces; when he comes back home "the greeting of heroes is over", "the hysteria" has subsided and "a reaction has set in": civilians are beginning to be fed up with war heroes. He is cut off from his fellowmen, and his war experience is incommunicable: in order to be listened to, Krebs has to lie, but his own lies devalue his past experience. He's overcome by "a distaste for everything" and no longer "feels cool and clear inside himself". So Krebs is led to deny that he was a good soldier, he pretends that he was "sickeningly frightened", consequently he loses everything *i.e.* self-respect, pride in having done his duty etc., hence his existential malaise and feeling of "nausea".

Krebs – whose name means "cancer" in German (note by the way that his first name is also highly significant since Harold means etymologically: "*Army*" + "*Power*") – is a sort of pariah out of step with the times and the people. Everything has changed, and he feels out of his element. Girls, for instance, are no longer what they used to be: the period saw the emergence of a new type of woman the "flapper" (*la garçonne*). He feels as if they belonged to another species ("the world they were in was not the world he was in"). They seem unattainable and what is more, Krebs is unwilling to "have to work to get them" *i.e.* to tell lies, be nice, etc. Hence his rationalization: "Besides he did not really need a girl", a typical attitude with the Hemingwayan hero who evinces a certain partiality for living in a universe of "*Men without women*". Krebs misses Europe, "another country" where they did things differently...more easily. Now he seems to have lost part of his manhood, as witness the shortening of his first name (Harold) to "Hare", an animal not particularly famous for its courage. The arrested infantilism of his life at home also appears in his sister's plea that he be her beau.

The change brought about in Krebs by war is most noticeable in his relations with his mother (here, Hemingway obviously settles accounts – through a fictional character – with his own mother. Krebs is a projection of certain kinds of problems Hemingway was deeply concerned to write about).

What we get here is a new episode or engagement in the everlasting war between males and females whether husband and wife or mother and son. Harold's mother cleverly avoids a frontal attack; she does things in an oblique way and starts by throwing a sop in her son's direction *i.e.* permission to use his father's car, a concession she obviously wrested from her husband as Harold immediately suspects.

This paves the way for the fateful question: "Have you decided what you are going to do yet?", a question she artfully and characteristically supports with a biblical quotation: "There can be no idle hands in His kingdom". Then comes the unbearable, sickening, motherly understanding ("I know the temptations you must have been exposed to") and the inevitable reference to the example of "the boys settling down [and trying] to get somewhere".

In her plea for conformism, she finally appeals to filial affection, the "*ultima ratio*" of mothers: "Don't you love your mother, dear boy?" (note the use of "boy", a way of negating Harold's manhood).

Under the pressure of what amounts to emotional blackmail, Krebs blurts out the horrible truth: "I don't love anybody", an admission of what the war did to him and turned him into – an emotional cripple, not physically but mentally hurt. A hurt he has to keep to himself because it's too deep – affecting his inner being –, but also too vague to find expression: "I was just angry at something". Krebs is "sick and nauseated" at this display of female possessiveness and gushing sentimentality. In desperation, Harold's mother plays her trump card and deals the final blow by asking him to kneel and pray, which Harold is unable to do for the simple reason that he's lost faith in God and man after the traumatic experience of W.W.I. as witness the prayer that Hemingway has one of his characters say in another text: "*Our nada who art in nada nada be thy name*"... (instead of "*Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name*" etc.).

Harold Krebs thus detaches himself from everything and everyone (through its laconism, the tone of the story is quite in keeping with the theme of uninvolvement) and is determined to drift through life without connections, in a state of emotional neutrality. His war experience has disrupted his former belief in the system of values (Americanism and the American way of life) his parents would like him to subscribe to. But his response to an oppressive situation is not rebellion or resignation but withdrawal: he no longer wishes to be an actor, to act and do things, but to retreat to mere spectatorship. He wants to avoid complications, sidestep scenes and entanglements, and lead a life that will go smoothly, but one may wonder whether this is life or a kind of death in life, mere escapism.

SHERWOOD ANDERSON "Hands"

Before coming to grips with "Hands", it is worthy of note that "hands" had a special significance for S. Anderson. They were the symbol of "communication between people" and "fellow-feeling" as witness what the author stated in one of his letters: "my fingers are always aching and itching to touch things". He also once defined himself as "a caresser of life" and wrote in one of his works:

O my beloved--men and women--I come into your presence. It is night and I am alone and I come to you. I open the windows so that you may come in. I am a lover and I would touch you with the fingers of my hands.

According to French specialist, R. Asselineau:

« Cette obsession remontait à son enfance, à la vision torturante des mains aimantes, mais atrocement déformées et gercées de sa mère, condamnée, pour gagner la vie de la famille, à faire d'interminables lessives. »

Such information provides the text with an unsuspected dimension.

The opening paragraph sets the scene in an almost pastoral atmosphere – "a small frame house" on the outskirts of town, it's berry-picking time etc., – yet establishes an opposition between "youths and maidens", *i.e.* the community and a nervous (the epithet recurs twice) individual who seems to be the butt of the berrypickers' jokes. The beginning of the text shows Wing Biddlebaum's isolation from the town and suggests a relationship between his alienation and his nervous little hands: he is the odd man out (different from the other people) and his characterization stresses exclusion, fear and nervousness. From the very start the hermeneutic code sets in (according to R. Barthes, one of the "voices" or codes constituting any narrative, out of which a narrative is woven): the text suggests that there is a question to be asked, an enigma to be solved: Why is W. B. "the town mystery"?

However Wing Biddlebaum's seclusion is sometimes relieved by visits from George Willard: between the two there exists "something like a friendship" and George seems to have the ability to draw Wing out of his shell (see the various changes he undergoes: voice, figure, articulateness). Note, by the way, since I have just used an image, how metaphors are woven into the text: the "sea of doubts" will lead to the image of "the fish returned to the brook". Likewise Biddlebaum's first name "Wing" paves the way for the metaphor of the hands "beating like the wings of an imprisoned bird" (note the use of the biblical phrase "like unto" which strikes a religious note reverberating again at the end of the text with the final metaphor of "the priest"/"devotee"/"rosary"). The "imprisoned bird" in turn will result in the image of "a giant woodpecker". The way those images evolve gives us an insight into the way the text is written into being. A last observation on this score: there isn't just animal imagery in text: the hands are also compared to "piston rods" in a complex machinery of expression.

What might be considered as the second part of the text starts with a self-reflexive remark: the text points to its own fictional nature: "the story of W. B. is a story of hands" and at the same time answers part of the enigma since it provides the reader with the origin of Biddlebaum's nickname. He was called "Wing" because of the fluttering of his hands which seem to have a life of their own, so much so that they sometimes alarm their owner as if they were separate parts of his body he couldn't control. They are articulate in both sense of the word and ambiguous as well (they connote gentleness and violence) since a hand can turn into a fist.

The self-reference is resumed a little further along: "the story...is worth a book in itself" and "It is a job for a poet", a very apposite phrase if one remembers that etymologically "a poet" is "a maker", "a creator". But G. Willard is no poet yet: he is just a cub reporter driven by curiosity for he senses that "there must be a reason for their strange activity and their inclination to keep hidden". On a summer afternoon, George will come very near to knowing the truth when Wing starts to speak "as one lost in a dream". In his vindication of dreams and the right to dream, Wing conjures up the picture of "a kind of pastoral golden age" suggestive of the garden of Epicurus who held among other tenets that the highest good is pleasure. Carried away by his evoca-

tion of the delights of ancient Greece, Wing is betrayed by his hands and about to caress the boy which causes "a look of terror to sweep over his face" and tears to come to his eyes. The spell is broken and George Willard is left alone, perplexed and frightened, with the awareness that "there's something wrong". But the adolescent will remain on the threshold of the expected revelation. The manifestation of truth is further delayed ("manifest" = "*manus+festus* / "*struck*" means that can be grasped, seized by the hand)

At this stage the narrator intrudes into the narrative to provide the missing information and assume responsibility for what is to follow: the disclosure of Wing's secret (cf. "Let us look briefly into the story of the hands" = an analepsis or retrospection, an evocation of events that occurred before the present moment or the moment when the chronological recounting of a sequence of events is interrupted to make room for the analepsis). The mystery is thus solved: Wing Biddlebaum, alias Adolf (meaning "noble"+"wolf") Myers, was a schoolteacher in Pennsylvania, but a special kind of teacher, a dispenser of romance, dreams and caresses, endeavoring to "carry a dream into the young minds" of his charges. But ironically enough, W. B. falls victim to his own dreams or rather to those of a half-witted boy who "tells his dreams as facts". W. B., the innocent is accused of indecent behaviour by another innocent, suspicions are aroused and the schoolteacher gets a beating and narrowly escapes lynching by the mob of angry parents. Note by the way that we also learn how W. B. got his last name from a box of goods seen at a freight station.

This is the end of the ellipsis and the narrative resumes at the point where the ellipsis interrupted its chronological course, note that the references to the veranda, the ravine, and the berries create an effect of circularity enhanced by Wing's loneliness as in the beginning of the narrative. There are however a few noticeable differences: his hands are quiet and his waiting will be frustrated since the boy – "the medium through which he expressed his love of man" – won't come back because he got a glimpse of something wrong if not evil.

Wing remains alone and the full irony of life is felt in the discrepancy between his religious posture and the meaningless drumming of his fingers as he plucks crumbs from the floor: Biddlebaum is a kind of defeated, strangely perverted priest of love. Thus the text ends on the religious and symbolic – if not mystical – note struck earlier in the narrative: the kneeling figure bent close to the ground aptly suggests the failure of an earth-bound creature to turn his clumsy hands into wings in order to soar to the realm of dreams and fancy.

SHELBY FOOTE
“A Marriage Portion¹”

“Trust the tale not the teller” (D. H. LAWRENCE)

The story takes place before the flood *i.e.* before the year 1927, and liquids – whether in the form of water, tears, champagne, alcohol or blood –, play an important symbolic role in the text (there takes place a parody/mock of baptism).

The narrative is told by one of its main protagonists, a woman, reminiscing about her engagement and wedding-night. The story is a first-person narrative, some sort of confession or monologue in which the narrating I apparently addresses an anonymous “*You*” that seems to interpellate/designate the reader as narratee (or addressee *i.e.* the agent implicitly addressed by the narrator, the second participant in the narrative communication situation) as a consequence, the reader is inclined to identify with this function. As French critic G. Genette explains:

“The more transparent the receiving instance and the more silent its evocation in the narrative, so undoubtedly the easier, or rather the more irresistible, each real reader’s identification with or substitution for that implied instance will be.”

Actually, the “*you*” stands for another character who is reduced to the passive stance of a listener : this character turns out to be the narrator’s lover, who remains silent throughout the narrative and is eventually dismissed at the end of the narrative: the narrative is thus based on a technical trick or device accounting for its deceptive nature.

The deceptive nature of the narrative also raises the questions of **truth** and **falsehood**, appearance and reality. Everything is filtered through the consciousness of the “I-narrator” and her reliability is questionable as witness the admission: “a while back...ran off with a man”. The most interesting facet of the narrative is that it reveals a split between the I who speaks (the subject of speech-production) and the I represented in discourse (the subject of the utterance [énoncé]): there’s a division/contradiction between the self which speaks and the self which is only represented in discourse *i.e.* the self who speaks and the self spoken of. The self in order to “grasp itself” or express itself has to assume the mask of the I, which is just a substitute, a stand-in: entry into language inevitably creates a division between the subject.

Such a contradiction is also to be found in the presentation and definition of the various characters who somehow turn out to be different from what they seem to be. A case in point is Snooky: “Hard on the outside...soggy inside”; cf. also Louiza: “I slept true...she remarried within the month”.

Despite its title “A Marriage Portion” hasn’t got much to do with love; it is not a love story but rather a story about the failure of love or in one particular instance (Louiza’s) its very superficial and ephemeral nature. Four couples are mentioned in the text:

- the woman-narrator and Snooky;
- her parents;
- Louiza and Buster, the Negro servants;
- the narrator and her lover.

The three male characters have several features in common; they all fall into one category that can be defined in terms of “slackness”, “softness”, “sogginess”. Snooky, the lady-killer, the womanizer, the overbearing (domineering) male advertises his manhood in boastful slogans (cf. the writing on his car), but turns out to be a weakling.

Notice the possibility of reading his limited sexual capacities out of the make of his car: a cut-down Essex (S-sex, lacking stiffness) and the popular catchphrase: “Yes, we have no bananas” (from a promotion

1. Extracted from the collection of short stories entitled *Jordan County*, New York, Dial Press, 1954.

campaign on behalf of the banana. The phrase is said to have originated in a remark a composer claimed to have heard from the lips of a Greek fruit-seller cf. the song "*I had a banana/With Lady Diana*", underlining the sexual suggestiveness of the fruit)

The narrator's father is "a cotton man" (notice the double entendre : he trades in cotton ; he's in the cotton trade but he's also as limp as a rag, he's got no backbone): "he's lovable but dull, not only lovable but soft". He is also partial to "sugary toadies" – not a very manly drink – (as far as he is concerned, Snooky's father presents his son with a bottle of Champagne).

As to Buster, his bottom lip hangs "slack from feeble-mindedness": he is also true to type. Note that Buster never speaks in his own words; he merely reports other people's words. By the same token, Snooky rarely expresses himself directly; as for the narrator's father, he only utters a single sentence but it is of paramount importance since it provides one of the keys to the plot: "Looks like youve bout got her tamed." The three men have little or no access to speech, language, whereas women, and particularly, the anonymous narrator are remarkably articulate!

Much is revealed about the three men through their relationship with women: they are all of them manipulated or dominated by females who are more than a match for them. As we've already seen, Louiza – in spite of her professions of unflinching faithfulness – soon finds a replacement after Buster's death : the void he left was not so large that it could not be filled again!

The narrator's mother did not actually die as was claimed at the opening of the text but ran off with another man and left her husband and daughter stranded (high and dry). It is obvious that her mother's elopement left a deep imprint on the narrator's psyche ("I was terribly impressionable in my teens"). Hence her resolve not to follow in her mother's footsteps and to get what she did not have *i.e.* a "he-man", someone who could "handle her" or "get her tamed".

Well, as the wedding-night episode makes perfectly clear, even if much is left unsaid (left to the reader's guess or conjecture), the male is overcome by the female. Note, by the way, that there is a break in the sequence of events recounted, an implicit ellipsis (no coincidence between story-time and text-time: zero textual space corresponds to some story duration) →"and next thing I knew I was standing under the shower". There's a gap in the chronology and this most remarkable blank bypasses (draws a veil over) the painful memory of the sexual act... but I will, in my turn, let it go unmentioned.

To return to the two contestants – since this is exactly what the wedding-night represents – a skirmish, an encounter between two enemies, there is no unconditional surrender on the part of the narrator – she is no R. E. Lee in petticoats.

The latter observation is prompted by the fact that the wedding-night takes place at the Robert E. Lee Hotel (commander in chief of the CS Armies) in April, the same month when he signed the surrender of the South in 1865. The episode and the whole story are a re-enactment of the Civil War, another War of Secession, a new episode of the war of the sexes, the age-long antagonism between males and females which has become a staple in US fiction (part of the stock-in-trade of US literature)

Actually, as the narrator herself claims, she married Snooky "just to get him out of [her] system" and perhaps to debunk the figure of the sexually dominating male that Snooky symbolizes; as such, Snooky was a walking reproach to her own ineffective father. So, in a way, she takes revenge on Snooky.

The experiment ends in a divorce and Snooky consequently falls in status: the dazzling "sheik" now amounts to a monthly "check," and through some sort of nemesis or "poetic justice" the soggy character is given a hard time of it by his successive wives. There's an ironic reversal of situation since the title means "a dowry" (money, estate that a woman brings to her husband at marriage) and here, it is the husband who's got to shell out/ends up out of pocket since he's got to pay an alimony. The phrase may also be read, somewhat ironically, to mean "a portion, fragment of a marriage" thus foreshadowing the break up of the couple and the short period/span of time they spent together.

The dominant position of the female in her relationship with men is further enhanced by her curt dismissal of her lover: "I guess you'd better go..." No waste/excess of sentimentality. All in all, the lover played the function of a silent partner or rather, to use a more appropriate phrase, a "sleeping partner" in both the literal and figurative senses *i.e.* a bedmate and a person who provides some of the capital in a business enterprise, but who does not take an active part in managing the business.

Ironically enough, "A Marriage Portion" is a sort of variation on the theme of "*The Taming of the Shrew*" (an early comedy by Shakespeare), ironic because the male who was supposed to tame/handle the female is actually roughly handled or mishandled by his supposedly "better half".

The whole narrative actually amounts to some sort of "talking-cure", a catharsis effecting a purgation of passions (cf. the flood of water/tears under whose sign the narrative is placed), a discharge of pent-up emotions. The narrative serves the same function as a psychoanalytical session (note several similarities: the narrator is lying on her bed like the analysand on his/her couch and her partner remains silent as a psychoanalyst is supposed to) and its function obviously is to enable the narrator to air out some grievances, to vent or get some frustrations and painful memories out of her system.

By way of conclusion: two observations on the notion of truth:

« Il n'y a ni vrai ni faux avant la parole » (A. Kojève). La vérité est dans l'erreur, l'oubli, le lapsus, l'acte manqué, la déformation et la feinte → l'erreur est l'incarnation habituelle de la vérité. La vérité, c'est ce qui guérit et donc, peu importe que la vérité soit une fiction → la vérité du sujet, étant purement symbolique, a une "structure de fiction" » (J. Lacan).

« La vérité du sujet reste censurée dans la métonymie. Elle est patente dans la métaphore. La structure métonymique trahit le manque de l'objet mais elle permet par déplacement et substitution au désir d'investir un objet de remplacement. La structure métaphorique traduit l'irruption d'un sens caché. » (R. Geogin, *Lacan, Cahiers Cistre*).

ERSKINE CALDWELL

“Maud Island”¹

Dans “Maud Island”, trois personnages, Marvin Hutchins, un modeste fermier, qui est aussi prédicateur à ses heures, et deux adolescents, Jim et Milton, se disposent à passer une semaine entre hommes à camper, à pêcher et à prendre du bon temps sur une île du Mississippi. Mais leur paisible séjour est perturbé par l'arrivée inopinée d'une péniche, la *Mary Jane*, d'où débarquent un homme, Graham, et surtout deux affriolantes créatures, Jean et Marge, qui feront perdre la tête à oncle Marvin. Saisi par le démon de midi, le fermier lève précipitamment le camp pour se débarrasser des deux adolescents et, au grand dam de son épouse légitime, tante Sophie, s'en retourne sur l'île, jardin d'Eden soudain mué en jardin des délices. Telles sont, réduites à leur plus simple expression, les composantes de cette nouvelle comportant – comme tous les autres textes de *Men and Women* – de multiples indices de couleur locale sudiste (accents, coutumes, références au Mississippi, au Tennessee, etc.).

Notons tout d'abord que, loin d'être exclusivement physique ou géographique, l'environnement dans lequel s'inscrit la nouvelle est essentiellement d'ordre fictionnel ou diégétique ; le récit s'enracine dans un espace – l'île – qui est un des *topoi* littéraires fondamentaux mis à jour par la cartographie de l'imaginaire américain. L'île est par excellence un lieu-conteur, inducteur de fictions et opérateur d'images, et elle s'est manifestée dans la littérature américaine sous des formes aussi diverses que “Paumanok”/“Long Island” que célèbre Walt Whitman, “Sullivan's Island”, l'île au trésor de “The Gold Bug”, ou encore “Tsalal”, l'île antarctique des *Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym* ou “Typee”, l'île exotique chère à Herman Melville, sans oublier “Jackson's Island”, l'île-refuge d'où s'éleva la première voix authentiquement américaine, celle de Huckleberry Finn, qui trouve d'ailleurs son alter ego en Milton (clin d'œil intertextuel à l'auteur de “Paradise Lost” ?), le narrateur de “Maud Island”. C'est en effet non pas l'île marine mais l'île fluviale au milieu du Mississippi qui incarne le mieux la spécificité du Nouveau Monde et c'est là que se mettra en place un des mythes fondateurs de la fiction américaine : la cavale, la fugue loin de la société et de la civilisation, la tentative de retour vers un espace édénique.

“Maud Island” s'intègre ainsi dans une longue lignée d'îles fictives et l'on ne s'étonnera point de la voir dotée d'une indéniable dimension symbolique, archétypale et même morale ; en témoignent la référence au mal dont le début du texte annonce l'imminence sur tous les tons (cf. “It looks bad/downright/awful bad”) et les diverses polarités sous-tendant sa description. L'île, lieu vierge de femmes et consacré au *far niente*, entre en opposition avec le foyer/home, fief de la maîtresse de maison, placé sous le signe du labeur, de l'ordre, de la tempérance et de la propreté. Cette topographie symbolique n'est pas sans rappeler celle qui organise à l'univers de *Rip Van Winkle*, autre texte fondateur auquel la nouvelle renvoie indirectement.

Mais l'île elle-même est prise dans une nouvelle opposition significative puisqu'elle est décrite comme étant bornée à l'ouest par le Mississippi et à l'est par une sorte de gouffre (“a bottomless slough”) que Marvin Hutchins ne manque jamais de contourner en faisant un large détour. Ce marécage est un lieu de perdition jouxtant le paradis : cette fois-ci, c'est la topographie du *Pilgrim's Progress* qui n'est pas très loin (cf. le terrain fangeux, le “Bourbier du désespoir”, où patauge Chrétien quand il se met en route, et sa contrepartie à la fin du voyage, le fleuve qu'il faut traverser avant d'entrer dans la Cité céleste : “Then I saw that there was a way to hell, even from the gates of heaven, as well from the City of Destruction”²). L'île sera ainsi le théâtre de la lutte du Bien et du Mal, interprétation renforcée par l'onomastique puisque *Maud* est le diminutif du prénom *Mathilda* qui combine les deux sèmes de “might” + “battle”

Ainsi, ce lieu fortement investi de connotations symboliques doit, dans un premier temps, servir de cadre à la version américaine de l'Éden : un univers sans femme, une communauté virile, une fraternité d'hommes établie loin de la société corruptrice, au cœur d'une nature vierge. Mais ce havre de paix, ce monde “prélapsaire” va être corrompu par l'intrusion d'un bateau (répétition du scénario de la souillure du conti-

1. *Men and Women*, New York, Little, Brown and C°, 1961.

2. J. Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Classics, 1955, 148.

ment américain suite à la découverte et la conquête du Nouveau Monde) qui non seulement connote la féminité (il s'appelle le *Mary Jane*) mais encore transporte deux femmes. Le *Mary Jane* en provenance du Nord, de St Louis, Missouri (le détail n'est pas anodin), est ainsi le vecteur d'une double corruption : la luxure et l'alcool, qui coule à flots dès que les nouveaux arrivants installent leur camp. Les deux personnages féminins – très stéréotypés Jean, “*the dark one*” et Marge, “*the light one*” – sont les grandes prêtresses du “*fun*”, la gaudriole, les descendantes de l'archétypale Lilith, par opposition naturellement à Ève/tante Sophie, la bien nommée, qui incarne toutes les vertus du foyer et de la vie domestiques. Avec l'arrivée du bateau dit justement “de plaisance” le petit fermier va être soumis à rude épreuve : la chair est faible et surtout, comme le rappelle R. W. Emerson, « Notre foi vient à certains moments mais notre vice est perpétuel¹ ». Profonde observation, que Jim confirme à sa manière quand il explique à Milton que la vocation religieuse de leur oncle est à éclipse, relève de l'aspect ponctuel et non permanent : “[*Uncle Marvin*] *doesn't have to be a preacher now if he doesn't want to be one. If he told them he was a preacher, they'd all jump up and run and hide from him.*” Oncle Marvin raccompagne séance tenante tout son petit monde sur la rive et s'en retourne seul sur l'île en coupant au plus court sans plus se soucier du danger que représente le marécage : “*we had never seen anybody cut across so close to the slough [...] he did not seem to care how many chances he took of being sucked down into the slough.*” Voilà l'île tout entière livrée au stupre sinon aux forces du mal : c'en est fini de l'Arcadie. Mais le mal est plus grand qu'on ne l'imagine car il ne s'agit pas en fait d'une chute mais – pire encore – d'une rechute : l'interrogation de tante Sophie (“*Has that good-for-nothing scamp gone and taken up with a shantyboat wench again?*”) donne un tour itératif à ce qui est d'abord perçu comme du singulier. Marvin (étymologiquement “*sea friend*”), l'ami des eaux porteuses de délicieuses aubaines, n'en est donc pas à sa première incartade, et tante Sophie s'en console par une vigoureuse séance de ménage (“*We're going to have a house cleaning around this place.*”) symbolique remise en ordre du foyer conjugal perturbé. Ainsi se clôt ce *Redneck's Progress* où l'île fluviale, antithèse de la société avec ses contraintes et ses normes, s'affirme une fois encore dans l'imaginaire américain comme lieu du fantasme (retour vers l'Éden) et du désir (transgression de l'interdit).

1. S. Foote, *Tourbillon*, Paris, Gallimard, 1978, 256.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR

“A Good Man is Hard to Find”*

« *La masse est mauvaise, les gens de bien sont peu nombreux* » (HÉRACLITE)

One of the most famous short-stories in American literature, which accounts for its inclusion in most anthologies of American fiction. It a gruesome narrative about the shocking murder of an entire family by an escaped convict (The Misfit) that, as is systematically the case with O'Connor's fiction, serves to shatter the complacency of both readers and characters, challenge their world views and convictions. It's a narrative whose religious and spiritual background, and apparently gratuitous violence, haunt the memory of its readers for it leaves lots of fundamental questions unanswered... Note, by the way, O'Connor does not go about describing the grotesque in gory images, rather, in a matter-of-fact way. We only hear gun shots from afar when the other members of the family are killed.

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find" first appeared in a short story collection by the same name, which was published in 1955. This work of fiction exhibits all the characteristics for which O'Connor is best known: a contrast of violent action with humorously and carefully drawn characters and a philosophy that underscores her Roman Catholic faith. The story is disturbing and humorous at the same time—a quality shared by many of O'Connor's other works, including her novels *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*. O'Connor once stated about her thought-provoking narratives: “*The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism.*”

In “A Good Man”, O'Connor explores the Christian concept of “**grace**” – a divine pardon from God that is supposedly available simply for the asking. For O'Connor, God's grace is a force outside the character, something undeserved, an **insight or moment of epiphany**. Often, however, her characters miss moments of opportunity to achieve spiritual enlightenment or salvation; their spiritual blindness keeps them from seeing truth. In the present instance, it is the Grandmother – a petty, cantankerous, and overbearing individual – who apparently attains grace at the moment of her death, when she reaches out to The Misfit and recognizes him as one of her own children.

*Title

A modern-day proverb, espousing the difficulty of finding a suitable male partner. This phrase was coined by Eddie Green, as the title of his song *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*. It was composed in 1918 and first offered for sale as a piano roll in the *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, on 12th December that year:

A good man is hard to find
You always get the other kind
Just when you think that he is your pal
You look for him and find him fooling 'round some other gal
Then you rave, you even crave
To see him laying in his grave
So, if your man is nice, take my advice and hug him in the morning, kiss him ev'ry night,
Give him plenty lovin', treat him right
For a good man nowadays is hard to find, a good man nowadays is hard to find.

A similar outlook is expressed in the Bible, *Micah 7:2* King James Version: “The good man is perished out of the earth: and there is none upright among men: they all lie in wait for blood; they hunt every man his brother with a net.”

Noteworthy features and points for discussion

Let's go over the text as it unfolds and gather all the noteworthy points; 2 preliminary observations on a few features of the narrative:

- O'Connor's story is told by a third-person narrator, but the focus is on the Grandmother's perspective of events.

– The narrative is clearly built on a *dual/double pattern*: the first part, partaking of comedy, veers into tragedy with the intrusion upon the scene of the Misfit, the intruder, an avatar/embodiment of the *Dragon* which “*is by the side of the road, watching those who pass. Beware, lest he devour you. We go to the father of souls, but it is necessary to pass by the dragon.*” (St. Cyril of Jerusalem). As such, the Misfit is an agent/instrument of fate as well as of evil: its intrusion spells violence, violation; it’s a brutal disruption of the order of things.

– Rôle of the grand-mother as a *catalyst*; she is the one who brings about the disaster visited upon the family. She is a liar, a mythomaniac tending to embroider the facts and to manipulate people, she’s crafty and a terrible blunderer to boot; she succeeds in persuading her hen-pecked son to leave the highway (the straight and narrow?) to turn onto a dirt road leading nowhere but to their doom. Moreover, her cat Pitty Sin (petty sin?), which she hides in a basket, is the direct cause of the accident... (Symbolic value: a nocturnal animal, endowed with powers of evil; a black cat brings misfortune...).

– **Dramatic irony**: “*the grandmother didn’t want to go to Florida*” but to east Tennessee but when she talks Bailey into changing routes/going out of their way, they come across the Misfit who, according to the Press, was supposed to be “*headed toward Florida*”. Hence, the tragically ironic statement: “*I wouldn’t take my children in any direction with a criminal like that a loose in it. I couldn’t answer to my conscience if I did*”. Later on, concerning the proposed detour: “*It would be very educational for them*”.

– **Tragic nature of the narrative**: note the way the stage is set and the countdown to the appalling climax starts; from the very first sentence, the die is cast. The fates of the protagonists are going to unfold according to a pattern set a long time before, and nothing will change it. Their lives are decreed, pre-ordained, their fates inescapable, and all struggle and resistance are doomed to fail (will be to no avail). The protagonists are the powerless, helpless victims of an inexorable mechanism: wheels have been set in motion...and they are going to crush him. Cf. J. Anouilh’s definition of tragedy:

The spring is wound up tight. It will uncoil of itself. The rest is automatic. You don’t need to lift a finger. The machine is in perfect order; it has been oiled ever since time began, and it runs without friction. Death, treason and sorrow are on the march... In a tragedy, nothing is in doubt and everyone’s destiny is known. That makes for tranquillity. [...] Tragedy is restful; and the reason is that hope, that foul, deceitful thing, has no part in it. There isn’t any hope. You’re trapped. The whole sky has fallen on you, and all you can do about it is to shout.

– The text is scattered with foreshadowings and clues of what is to come, apparently meaningless details (e.g. “*hiding a basket with Pitty Sing*”) that will prove instrumental in the tragic turn the family’s outing will take, e.g.:

1) Bunch of white violets → Hidden virtue and beauty; modesty. In Christianity the violet depicts humility and the humility of the Son of God incarnate; the white violet is an emblem of the Virgin Mary. In Greek mythology it the flower of Io and Ares; violets grew from the blood of Attis (*Dict. of traditional symbols*):

Sur les monuments symboliques du Moyen-Âge, Jésus Christ porte la robe violette pendant la passion, c’est-à-dire lorsqu’il a complètement assumé son incarnation et que, au moment d’accomplir son sacrifice, il marie totalement en lui l’Homme, fils de la terre, qu’il va rédimer, avec l’Esprit céleste, impérissable, en lequel il va retourner (*Dict. des symboles*)

2) « *In case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once she was a lady* » cf. also Mr. Teagarden’s courtship: “*he was a gentleman*” → complacency, self-delusions + prolepsis or flash-forward, i.e. in storytelling, an interjected scene that takes the narrative forward. In a comical instance of foreshadowing, she takes pains to dress properly in a dress and hat, so that if she were found dead on the highway everyone would recognize her as a lady.

– Possible double entendre in the sentence: “*a good day for driving*” ←→ a good day for dying?

– Importance of the stop at The Tower, Red Sam’s place and ensuing conversation which enables the theme of “good people” to be introduced: “*People did right then*”

“*These days you don’t know who to trust*” [...] *People are certainly not nice like they used to be*”; “*Because you’re a good man!*” → to become a leitmotif, hence the title of the narrative → “*A good man is hard to find*”;

– Another **intimation of death**: “*Look at the graveyard! [...] That was the old family burial ground*”;

- “*Outside of Toombsboro she woke up and recalled an old plantation, etc.*”: the turning-point. Name of the town -- *To(o)mb* -- bears funereal connotations;
- Grandmother = *temptress like the Snake in Eden* when she leads her family into temptation: “*There was a secret panel in this house,*” she said craftily, not telling the truth but wishing she were...”
- “*A horrible thought came to her...the house she had remembered so vividly was not in Georgia but in Tennessee*”: key moment; realization of her lying and responsibility
- Accident: “*But nobody’s killed*”: irony
- Intrusion of evil: “*A car...a big black battered hearse-like automobile.*” “*Expressionless gaze...*” of The Misfit (note his accounting for this nickname: “*I call myself The Misfit, because I can’t make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment*” p. 7)¹)
- “*The grandmother had the peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew*” → paves the way for the final recognition scene...
- “*Children make me nervous*” vs. J. C.’s famous commandment “*allow little children to come unto me*”
- Ominous detail: “*the line of woods gaped like a dark open mouth*” = Dragon ready to swallow its victims; note by the way, “*the row of strong white teeth*” revealed by the Misfit;
- “*You wouldn’t shoot a lady*”: the grandmother clings to her delusions and plays craftily on a sense of solidarity – she vainly tries to establish a common denominator – whether social, moral or Christian – between the Misfit and herself:

“I know you’re a good man. You don’t look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people”

“You shouldn’t call yourself The Misfit because I know you’re a good man at heart”

“Do you ever pray?”

- “*Nome, I ain’t a good man, but I ain’t the worst in the world either*”; “*I was buried alive.*” The Misfit has been through many hardships which inspired him with his own peculiar and idiosyncratic philosophy of life:

“I found out the crime don’t matter”

“Jesus thown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as was with me except He hadn’t committed any crime...”

“Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead, [...] **No pleasure but meanness.**”

- Moment of doubt and weakness for the grandmother when her faith wavers since she calls into question one of the main tenets of Christian faith, resurrection: “*Maybe He didn’t raise the dead*”
- **Climax**: “*She saw the man’s face...‘Why you’re one of my babbies’...The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him...to clean them*”
- Death, sacrifice: purgation of guilt: “*her legs crossed under her like a child’s and her face **smiling** up at the cloudless sky*” = recovery of lost innocence?
- A funeral oration/parting shot: “*She would of been a good woman,*” *The Misfit* said, “*if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.*” Reminds one of Emerson’s “*Our faith comes in moments, our vice is habitual*”.

1. “Maybe the world is in a balance: so much sin and evil, so much good. Maybe we ought to be thankful to the one that gets in trouble,” Shelbt Foote, *Follow Me Down*, New York, Dial Press, 1950):

“*There had to be a balance in the world, so much corruption to so much sanity, or everything would come undone. People were little wheels in one big clockwork, so when one wheel turned in one direction, the one alongside it, meshing, had to turn too, in the other direction*” (*Follow Me Down*, 99). Virtues and vices, profanations and expiations, just like « les biens et les maux, représentent une somme invariable, qui ne saurait subir aucune modification » (Cioran). The idea of balance, equilibrium or compensation seems to imply that, all told, The Misfit’s crimes are but an attempt to redress the balance. His punishment did not actually fit his crime, he paid too high a price/too much for his sins : there occurred a sort of overcharge/excess in the meting out of justice either divine or human. By committing this new crime, The Misfit squares accounts with fate, which goes to prove that « *tout sacrifice est un échange, est sous le signe de Mercure* ».

Last sentence: *"It's no real pleasure in life"* = tragic but paradoxical absurdity of the moral of this grim, lurid narrative

Additional observations for an attempted overall interpretation

The story is enjoyable for its humorous portrayal of a family embarking on a vacation; O'Connor is unforgiving in her portrayal of these characters—they are not likable. However, in creating characters that elicit little sympathy from readers, O'Connor carefully sets the premise for her main argument: that grace is for everyone, even those who seem unpleasant/unlikeable.

Her conversation with The Misfit reminds one of the literary precedent of Scheherazade, the legendary Persian queen and the storyteller of *One Thousand and One Nights* who managed to ward off/avert death by relating to the sultan a fascinating story every night, promising to finish it on the following night¹. The grandmother talks her head off to delay the moment of truth, the time of her execution, but to no avail. She lies to the Misfit as she lied to her family when she assures him that he is a good man.

At the moment of imminent death – the transformative moment – the grumpy Grandma appears to undergo a sudden and miraculous change of heart: she reaches out lovingly to the very person who has killed her family and is about to kill her; she looks at The Misfit in a new light, realizing that her existential predicament is not much different from the criminal's. She says to The Misfit:

"Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children! She reached out and touched him on the shoulder."

But her epiphany comes too late for herself.

"The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest."

While we see the murder of a seemingly innocent old woman, albeit hypocritical, O'Connor delivers the verdict of our human condition ironically by the words of The Misfit: *"She would of been a good woman," The Misfit said, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."*

For The Misfit, every choice one makes, every decision one takes in one's life directly depends on the existence or not of God:

Alternative dostoevskienne : soit le chemin de la sainteté soit la voie du crime : « Si Dieu existe, toute volonté est Sienne et je ne peux sortir de Sa volonté. S'il n'existe pas, toute la volonté est mienne et j'ai le devoir d'affirmer ma propre volonté » (*Les Possédés*)

According to O'Connor :

« Le Désaxé est touché par la Grâce qui émane de la vieille dame quand elle le reconnaît comme son enfant. Et elle aussi est touchée par la Grâce qui, chez le Désaxé, prend l'aspect de souffrances particulières. S'il tire sur la vieille dame, c'est dans une suprême révolte, par horreur de cette humanité dont elle est pétrie. Mais le temps que l'acte s'accomplisse et que le meurtrier essuie ses lunettes, il a subi l'effet de la Grâce ».

Conclusion

A short but intense story well worth the read: « Si la nouvelle continue à nous hanter comme un cauchemar en plein jour, ce n'est pas à cause de l'opération du Saint-Esprit, mais parce que l'horreur du mal et la terreur de la mort s'y racontent avec une simplicité bouffonne et implacable. » (A. Bleikasten)

1. According to the story that serves as the collection's framework, the Sultan Shahryar found his first wife unfaithful, and, after deciding that he hated all women, he married and killed a new wife each day. Scheherazade, daughter of his vizier, in an effort to avoid his previous wives' fate, related to him a fascinating story every night, promising to finish it on the following night. The sultan enjoyed the stories so much that he put off her execution indefinitely and finally abandoned the idea altogether... enjoyed the stories so much that he put off her execution indefinitely and finally abandoned the idea altogether.

No examination of O'Connor's view of her fiction would be complete without mentioning a couple of comments that she made concerning the nature of her work; in fact, anyone particularly interested in O'Connor should read *Mystery and Manners*, a collection of O'Connor's occasional prose, selected and edited by the Fitzgeralds. At one point in a section of that book entitled "On Her Own Work," O'Connor notes, "*There is a moment in every great story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected even though the reader may not recognize this moment.*" At another point, she comments:

"From my own experience in trying to make stories 'work,' I have discovered that what is needed is an action that is totally unexpected, yet totally believable, and I have found that, for me, this is always an action which indicates that grace has been offered. And frequently it is an action in which the devil has been the unwilling instrument of grace."

Without becoming totally bogged down in the Catholic doctrine of grace, one should be aware of what O'Connor means when she uses the term in connection with her stories. Loosely defined, Illuminating Grace (the type of grace most frequently used by O'Connor in her stories) may be described as a gift, freely given by God, which is designed to enlighten the minds of people and help them toward eternal life. It may take the form of some natural mental experience, such as a dream or of some experience imposed from outside the individual — for example, from hearing a sermon or from experiencing an intense joy, a sorrow, or some other shock.

Man, having been given free will, may, according to the Catholic position, elect not to accept the gift of grace, as opposed to a Calvinist position, which argues for a concept of *Irresistible Grace* — that is, man cannot reject God's grace when it is given to him.

Even though O'Connor notes that she looks for the moment "*in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected,*" one should not assume that she is attempting to pass judgment on the ultimate fate of her characters. That, from an orthodox point of view, is not possible for man to do. It is for this reason (much to the bewilderment of some of her readers) that O'Connor can say of the Misfit, "*I prefer to think, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture . . . will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become.*"

Even though O'Connor's vision was essentially religious, she chose to present it from a primarily comic or grotesque perspective. In a note to the second edition of *Wise Blood*, her first novel, O'Connor wrote, "*It is a comic novel about a Christian malgré lui [in spite of himself], and as such, very serious, for all comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death.*" A paradoxical and unorthodox statement that perfectly applies to "A Good Man Is Hard To Find".

WILLIAM HUMPHREY
“*The Last of the Caddoes*”

The last short story in a collection of ten published in 1968 under the title of *A Time and a Place*. The stories were finally finished in London in 1965; for a time, the work was to be called *Red River Valley*.

A Time and A Place is a sardonic portrait of the impoverished victims of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. All the short stories comprising the book “are on a related theme: the discovery of oil in my parts of Texas-Oklahoma when I was a boy and the effects (disastrous) that this sudden wealth had on the poor-whites and Indians whose land it was found on”. The work was made into a short film by Ken Harrison.

“*The Last of the Caddoes*” deals with three main themes:

- an adolescent identity crisis (“Jimmy was passing through a difficult phase”; “that would have been never really to know *what* he was”;
- the warfare between mother and son (“He was getting to be more than a match for his mother”; “the warfare between them going on”) – or, in broader terms, male and female;
- and the question of race (“the savage [the Indian] in you coming out”) linked to that of heredity and heritage (“blood calling to blood”; “blood, they said, would out”).

In this narrative, Jimmy Hawkins, an adolescent happens to learn, in the course of an argument with his mother, that a little Indian blood flows through his veins (remember that Humphrey himself had Indian ancestry and could get no details from his grandfather) and that he happens to be “the last of the Caddoes” *id est* the Indian tribe that used to occupy part of the state and adjacent Louisiana.

This is a shattering revelation that changes his life, and he begins a process of change which estranges him from his mother (“Overnight Jimmy began to look like an Indian”) and, to a lesser extent, from his grandfather seen as a “renegade half-breed,” tamed and “bleached” by civilization: “65 years of plowing, hoeing, picking cotton had taken all the noble savage out of the man” = grandfather’s degradation.

Thus the unfolding of the narrative is punctuated by a series of crises or confrontations between mother and son and slowly builds up to a climax taking place when on the eve of “entering upon his manhood” Jimmy decides to “make a pilgrimage to his ancestral shrine: the Caddo burial mound on his grandfather’s farm. In order to come into the heritage that all his family have turned down, he sets about digging up the burial mound:

“Commanded by the voice of his people *to know himself through knowing them*, Jimmy had bared the buried history of the Caddoes, *delving backwards in time from their end to their beginning*”. (Emphasis mine)

On the occasion of his thirteenth anniversary – “Today I become a man” – Jimmy has another row with his mother who, after visiting the mound, calls him “*A-snake-in-your-mother’s-bosom*”, (Note the reference to the snake paving the way for what is to follow: “As if a snake coiled at her feet to strike” and the mother’s realization that “they were hopelessly sundered”).

The adolescent, realizing that his forebears are speaking to him through his mother’s words, adopts the insult as a kind of secret nickname (“his man’s name”). This symbolical dubbing heals the break in tribal ties ; the adolescent can take up his rightful place in the lineage from which he had been excluded. The conflict between mother and son comes to a head: “You will be the death of me”; Jimmy leaves home to take refuge in the mound where a remarkable **epiphany** takes place: an ancient black snake sloughs its skin before the adolescent’s very eyes, and leaves it to him as a token of a new covenant. But this portentous confrontation, akin to a rite of passage and initiation, is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of the mother coming to reclaim her rebellious son (“You can’t get away from me”).

The snake image undoubtedly comes from Aeschylus’s play, *The Libation Bearers*, the 2nd work in the *Oresteia* trilogy: Clytemnestra dreams of giving birth to a snake who bites her bosom, and her son, Orestes, who has come to Thebes to kill her, recognizes that he is the snake.

The end of the short-story, which intimates that one day Jimmy will take his revenge on his arch enemy, merits quoting in full:

In obedience to his victim's nod, Snake-in-His-Mother's-Bosom took up his suitcase and followed her down the steps and across the barren field to the car. In its rearview mirror he watched the mound diminish and finally disappear. The snakeskin rode on his lap. Now he must wait. Must wait for their next, their final command. It would not come soon; they sipped their pleasures slowly. Many times yet he would have to hear his mother say that he would be the death of her. So many times that when the final order came it would be almost welcome, a release. Distant and ghostly, it sounded already in the echoing silence of his mind. Over and over, like a phonograph record when the needle cannot find the starting groove. "Kill me at once then and be done with it!" his mother's voice was saying. One day the needle would find the groove. Then out would come the command loud and clear and with the sudden shock of long-expectedness. Then Snake-in-His-Mother's-Bosom would strike, accomplish his mission and fulfill the prophecy; and then at last the ghost of the Caddoes could lie down at peace in their many-tiered mound and haunt the land and him no more.

The adolescent's daydreaming stands in contrast to the Christian representation of the Virgin Mother trampling underfoot the accursed serpent's head. Now the serpent will take his revenge and dispose of the rival, *i.e.* the mother, the female, vying with it for Jimmy's affections.

W. Humphrey's narrative provides evidence that there exist, as L. Fiedler claims, two versions of original sin:

There are, finally, two archetypal versions of the Fall in the Garden: one inherited from the Old World, one created in the New. In the first, Man and Woman are portrayed living at peace in an Earthly Paradise until the Serpent enters; in the second, Man and the Serpent are presented as cohabiting amicably until Woman comes on the scene.

The burial mound is the scene of a debunking of the American pastoral; it reveals that at the heart of the American past there lurks not an original innocence but a primal guilt (the dispossession and destruction of the Aborigenes) and shows how the New World, a Promised Land, a geographical Paradise, was turned into hell by history.

If space is, in the words of a French historian, "the unconscious of civilizations," then the mound – the locus of the repressed of collective history (the spoliation and rejection of the aborigines) – is an essential *topos* of American literature because it displays the fundamental dialectic of innocence and guilt, and reveals that the pastoral ideal has left the inhospitable, ephemeral world of facts to take refuge in the permanent world of fable.

Notes on William Humphrey

The Little Big Man of Southern letters

William Humphrey, a lesser contemporary writer. Birth: 18 June 1924 in Clarksville (Texas, the matrix of H's fiction). Seems to have suffered from a birth injury, a deformed foot.

Humphrey's parents, Clarence H. and Nell Varley, were children of poor farming families, which put them at the bottom of the social scale. Death of his father in a car accident: a traumatic experience which somewhat caused H. to bear his father a grudge for this untimely disappearance → Fathers and sons are a preoccupation of his fiction, a central theme in every one of his novels

Left Texas in 1944 and lived for many years in Italy, France, England and New York

Brief involvement with Marxism; became a member of the Young Communist League; after Pearl Harbour decided to enlist in the navy

Drank heavily (1969-70) → suffered a crack-up

Main literary influences: Humphrey's work is influenced by Hardy's *Wessex*

A most industrious writer → "My Flaubertian fretting over each word"

– Death on 20th August 1997

H. was a very diminutive person who felt his small size acutely. He was deprived, economically, socially and culturally, and wanted to make himself into a great writer, someone worthy of the Harvard Classics—in compensation for what he lacked:

"I don't want to create a seasonal stir. I want to be remembered after I'm dead."

"But I wonder whether the main reason is not fear of death, of going into the grave without having lived as fully as I might have, to cram into one life more lives than one, to experience in imagination adventures I have not, and never will, have."

Unfortunately, Humphrey found his sales and reputation declining book by book for all his attempts to renew his work; ironically enough, one of the main complaints about his work has been his tendency to strain for greatness: even if he's credited with skill at construction, Humphrey – according to some critics – wears his reader through "overzealous attempts at greatness" and shows a tendency to overplot his novel. If, according to La Rochefoucauld: "*it is the height of art to conceal art*" then Humphrey seems never to have achieved it. So Humphrey failed to achieve his goal – becoming a great writer – and his papers are filled with distressed passages about prizes he has not won, and anthologies which have not included him. Was this failure at least a splendid one? Nothing is less certain... His relative obscurity led a ruthless critic to dub him "*a poor man's Faulkner*" (note, by the way, that Faulkner was his pet hatred). The comparison is apposite, for at least 3 reasons:

- firstly, because Humphrey like Faulkner was "*a destroyer of myths*";
- secondly, as with Faulkner, Humphrey's work evinces "*the successful combination of the particular and the universal: it is true to the life of the country and age of its production, and true also to general human nature everywhere and always*".
- thirdly, because one recurrent question about Humphrey bears on his status: Is he a southern or a southwestern regionalist? Actually, although he was a Texan born and bred, Humphrey repeatedly stated that: "*I think of myself as a southerner, of my characters as southerners, not westerners*"; cf. "*How tired I am of hearing about Texas literature*" and "*The South is tragedy, the West is comedy*".

However, for all his disclaimers, while he aimed at dealing with universal themes and situations, Humphrey was still a vivid chronicler of the state of Texas which was a nation for a decade, had an extensive Indian frontier, its ethnic mix was unique, and the struggle with the land was harsher than in most parts of the US.

"William Humphrey, 73, Writer Of Novels About Rural Texas"

By Mel GUSSOW
August 21, 1997

William Humphrey, whose highly acclaimed first novel, *Home From the Hill*, and other books dealt with the play of small-town family life in northeast Texas, died yesterday at his home in Hudson, N.Y. He was 73.

The cause was cancer, said Nick Lyons, a friend and one of his publishers.

In his career, Mr. Humphrey wrote 13 books, including five novels, collections of short stories, several works about fishing and a memoir, *Farther Off From Heaven*. William Goyen wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* in 1958 that Mr. Humphrey's first novel was "without doubt a work of size and merit" and called it "one of the most distinguished firsts by a young writer (he is 33) to appear in some years." That proclamation, in one way or another, resonated through the other reviews of the book, which established the author's reputation as a novelist in the Southern literary tradition.

When the novel was sold to Hollywood, a headline in *Variety* announced, "Humphrey Sells Book for \$750,000." As Mr. Humphrey dryly observed: "Unfortunately, they had one zero too many." But the income was enough for him and his wife, Dorothy, to buy a farm in Hudson. He is survived by his wife, who lives in Hudson, and by a stepdaughter, Antonia Weidenbacher of Woodstock, N.Y., and her two children.

In 1960, Vincente Minnelli directed the MGM film version of *Home From the Hill*, starring Robert Mitchum and Eleanor Parker.

With *The Ordways* in 1965, Mr. Humphrey broke the second-novel jinx. In *The New York Times Book Review*, Elizabeth Janeway compared this novel to Mark Twain and William Faulkner and said: "Funny, vivid and moving, this is a fine piece of work and a delight to read." If his subsequent fiction never matched the heights of the first two novels, he still had a long, diverse career.

One of the oddities of that career is that Mr. Humphrey left his hometown of Clarksville, Tex., at the age of 13 (after his father was killed in an automobile accident) and did not return for 32 years. With his mother, he moved to Dallas and he spent most of his adult life in New York State, but he retained the memory of his boyhood in Red River County as a most intense experience. He was, said his friend, the poet Theodore Weiss, “a small and lean” version of a rangy Gary Cooper, “a master craftsman and a man of authenticity.”

STEPHEN CRANE

“The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky”

“Modern American literature may be said, accurately enough, to have begun with Stephen Crane.” (Carl Van Doren)→ Crane’s impact has been felt mostly in the genre of the short story, for which he displayed a personal preference. “*The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky*”, “*The Open Boat*”, “*The Blue Hotel*”, etc. are some of the finest models of American literary achievement in this genre, and the greatest successes of modern American short story writers hark back to these models. “Accuracy in details, conciseness, and effective rendering, framed and supported by an ironic structure, are now frequently regarded as essential requirements by practitioners of the short story.” (J. Cazemajou)

S. CRANE : A SLICE OF LIFE

Crane was born in Newark, New Jersey, on November 1st, 1871. He was the 14th child of Jonathan Townley Crane (D. D.), a clergyman who died in 1880 leaving the young Stephen under the care of his mother and elder brothers. Crane was brought up in a religious atmosphere but he did not follow in his father's footsteps and kept himself aloof from religion. However, he remained dominated by fundamental religious patterns and precepts – charity, fraternity, redemption and salvation which he kept at an earthly level.

In 1892, he became a free-lance journalist in New York after attending many schools and colleges where he evinced little taste for academic life. In New York he began his apprenticeship in bohemianism and learnt the value of careful on-the-spot study and observation of what he wanted to write about. His experience with life in the slums found expression in *Maggie*. In this novel, Crane showed himself to be impelled by the spirit of religious and social rebellion.

When Crane published *The Red Badge of Courage* in 1895, his second attempt at novel-writing met with triumphant success. With his Civil War story, Crane became famous almost overnight ; at the time of publication he was chiefly a picturesque figure of the world of the press, the breeding-ground of many American literary talents.

The Red Badge of Courage saw print first in serial form and then as a book in New York and London where it was warmly received. Celebrity did not divest him of his feeling for the “underdog” for in that same year he ran into trouble with the metropolitan police force on account of a prostitute unjustly accused and bullied. Crane had to leave New York and accepted a commission to report the insurrection in Cuba against Spanish rule.

In 1897 he met Cora Howorth, the proprietress of a house of ill fame. In spite of the scandal raised by such an association, they were to live together for the rest of his life. Crane deliberately sought experiences where he could pit himself against danger ; he covered the Greco-Turkish War for the *New York Journal* and the *Westminster Gazette* and decided to stay on in England at the end of his commission. In 1898, he published *The Open Boat and Other Tales of Adventure*. In England he associated with such writers as Conrad, Wells, James etc., but soon got tired of country life and itched for action again. He left England to report the Spanish-American conflict but this new experience seriously impaired his health. He was back in England one year after and turned out an impressive body of fiction to avoid bankruptcy (one volume of verse : *War is kind ; Active Service*, etc.). Meanwhile his body and brain gradually weakened but he went on writing to the end. S. Crane died on June, 5, 1900, in Badenweiler (Germany) where Cora had taken him in the hope he would miraculously recover from tuberculosis.

"The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" was published in February 1898 in *McClure's Magazine*, but had been actually composed in England after a stay in the West and Texas where S. Crane had gone to collect literary material with a view to composing a series of sketches and short-stories

In this short-story about "*The Passing of the West*" Crane reached a peak in his use of irony and parody. "The Bride" raises the western story to the level of the classic by consistently applying to a trite but dramatic situation the powerful lever of irony.

It deals with a very unromantic event, the homecoming of a town marshal after his wedding with a plain-looking and timid bride he brings to the "frontier" town of Yellow Sky (Texas), at a time when the Old West is being slowly but inevitably civilized.

Jack Potter, the town marshal is afraid of nothing except public opinion (note by the way the connotations of the epithet "yellow" in American English: cowardly [*Random Dict.*]) and, since his marriage was secretly arranged, he fears the hostile reactions of the inhabitants of Yellow Sky, an obvious projection of Crane's own predicament in his life with Cora. Ironically enough, Jack Potter, the last marshal is tamed by a prosaic marriage.

When after walking through the deserted town, the couple reach the door of their home, they meet Scratchy Wilson, the local outlaw and blustering braggart. A bloody encounter to come, we might think, the stereotypical and seemingly inevitable gunfight, a staple feature of Westerns, but in fact nothing happens; what is supposed to be the climax of the story turns into anti-climax: the outlaw is defeated by the mere sight of the town marshal seen for the first time as a married man and walking home unarmed.

"Defeated by a woman's mute presence" might have been the headline for such a story if it had been printed in a "yellow" newspaper. The reader senses that all such gunplay is a thing of the past, that in fact Crane is describing the "end of an era." His occupation gone, the last Bad Man, a part-time worker anyhow, shuffles off into the sunset dragging boot tracks through the dust like the tracks of the last dinosaur.

Crane thought "The Bride" was "a daisy," (*i.e.* "someone or something of first-rate quality") and he was right. From beginning to end, this charming tale proves that the whole mystique of the wild West was for him nothing but a game, and he enjoyed watching this game in its closing stages.

Structure

Two parallel narrative lines (exactly like railway lines) – the first dealing with J. Potter and his wife // the second with Scratchy Wilson – that eventually intercross (the climax) and then resume their parallel course... (note the concluding image ("funnel-shaped tracks"). The short story can be divided into 4 stages.

Part 1

Crane describes the progress of the "great Pullman" train across Texas and the description provides an important clue to the underlying meaning of the story: "The plains of Texas were pouring eastward...all were sweeping into the east, sweeping over the horizon, a precipice."

The West is symbolically swallowed up by the East→Opposition between the East (standing for civilization, culture, sophistication, etc.) and the West (frontier, wilderness, violence, anarchy, etc.).

The train acts as a "vehicle" to bring Eastern civilization to the West. In fact, Yellow Sky has already been civilized, despite the anachronistic presence of Scratchy Wilson, who seems determined to preserve the "good old days." But, Scratchy's clothes reveal the extent to which even he has been "Easternized": he wears a "maroon-coloured flannel shirt" made by "some Jewish women on the East Side of New York," and his red-topped boots have gilded imprints beloved by "little sledding boys on the hillsides of New England." So, Jack Potter is heading West again after a detour, a trip to the East to find a spouse (= a civilizing influence coming from the East).

Note that the train with its luxurious appointments ("the dazzling fittings of the coach"), is a foreign country to the newlyweds; the couple are so self-conscious and intimidated by their surroundings that the staff and passengers bully or mock them. The scene allows Crane to play on the gap between perception and reality, a favourite device of his to create irony: "To the minds of the pair, their surroundings reflected the glory of their marriage." The passengers and the black porter are not impressed, however, for they see the bride's "under-class countenance," her "shy and clumsy coquetry," and the groom's self-consciousness and lack of sophistication.

As the train nears Yellow Sky, Jack becomes "commensurately restless" primarily because he knows that he has committed an "extraordinary crime" by going "headlong over all the social hedges" and ignoring his "duty to his friends," members of an "innocent and unsuspecting community."

The hyperbolic description of his apprehension also contributes to the story's ironic tone. Clearly, marrying his bride is not a heinous crime, but Potter only feels that way because he has violated the traditions of the West. Towns like this one, after all, strongly prioritize manly males and tend to valorize violence; marshals in frontier towns apparently do not marry because they need to be free of domestic entanglements. Because Jack and his bride sense their "mutual guilt," they "slink" away from the train station and walk rapidly to his home, a "safe citadel" from which Jack can later emerge to make his peace with the community.

Part 2

While Jack and his bride make their way to his house, Crane shifts the focus of his narrative to the Weary Gentleman saloon, where six men, including the Eastern "drummer", sit drinking at the bar. Note once again the detail in the description of the setting that exposes its spuriousness:

"Across the sandy street were some vivid green grass-plots, so wonderful in appearance, amid the sands that burned near them in a blazing sun, that they caused a doubt in the mind. They exactly resembled the grass mats used to represent lawns on the stage."

The figure of the drummer is also a symbol of the East. Like the Swede in "The Blue Hotel," the drummer does not fully understand the circumstances of the West. He is uncomfortable in the Western setting and unused to its tropes: "The drummer seemed to be swayed between the interest of a foreigner and a perception of personal danger". He is thus more nervous than the residents of Yellow Sky, who are more accustomed to Scratchy Wilson's behavior. They simply take cover until he has calmed down or gone away. The drummer's character thus serves as a foil to the Western men, especially Scratchy Wilson and Jack Potter, the one man who will directly confront Scratchy.

While the drummer tells a story, another man appears at the door to announce that Scratchy Wilson is drunk and "has turned loose with both hands." The remainder of part 2 is exposition: the "innocent" drummer, whom Crane describes as a "foreigner" is told that there will be some shooting, that Scratchy and Jack are old adversaries, and that Scratchy is out for blood.

Part 3

Scratchy, a relic from the past, "the last one of the old gang that used to hang out along the river here." makes his appearance, which completes the preparation for the "show down," the anticipated gunfight of part 4. Emphasis on the braggadoccio and bluster of the character who issues unanswered challenges, shoots at a dog, and howls challenges and epithets at Jack's empty house.

In part 4

Jack and his bride encounter Scratchy near Jack's house. Crane elevates the meeting of Jack and his bride with Scratchy to myth: the "apparitional snake," the satanic force which introduces evil into the new Edenic estate, is the drunken Scratchy Wilson; Jack and his bride are the innocent Adam and Eve; the "rite" is the fall from grace. Surely, nothing could be further from reality. The mock-heroic style is epitomized in the bride's reaction to the meeting with Scratchy: "She was a slave to hideous rites, gazing at the apparitional snake."

Crane depicts Scratchy not as a mature adult, but as a child-man, an adult who refuses to "grow up." His boots are related to children, and he "plays" with the town, which is described as a "toy for him." When Jack tells him that he has no gun¹, Scratchy warns him that he "won't be taken for no kid". Crane undermines Western manliness and makes it a myth...

1. Double meaning of the term: in American slang a "sex gun" means "a penis." Jack is symbolically castrated/ emasculated by his marital status or, to be more specific, by his wife (cf. John Updike's revealing play on words: "Wife, that knife of a word").

The suggestion that perhaps Potter has been to "Sunday-school" clearly indicates that Scratchy suspects Potter of having been subjected to a feminine influence, and consequently, of losing part of his manhood.

Jack's response is to Scratchy almost as unlikely: "I'm married." In taking a bride, Jack has broken with the traditions of the Old West and also become a civilized man; unable to deal with "this foreign condition" in the presence of which Scratchy is like "a simple child of the earlier plains," he infers that "it's all off now" and walks away.

This revelation completely alters the dynamic of their relationship. The arrival of a woman, of domesticity, entirely disrupts Scratchy's Western myth of a violent and purely masculine world. Potter's new domesticity cannot coexist with Scratchy's violent antagonism in his version of the mythic West. The era of the mythic West has gone and passed... The only code Scratchy Wilson has ever known to live by, the frontier code, is over, definitely a thing of the past.

As is suggested by the death imagery pervading the story (Crane describes Jack "as one announcing death" and compares his mouth to a "grave for his tongue"; as Scratchy walks the streets, the stillness forms the "arch of a tomb over him."), we are witness to the demise or disappearance of an old world and the birth of a new era (which parallels Potter's new "estate" resulting from his marriage): "Yellow Sky," "the hour of daylight," as Crane defines it, replaces the twilight of the Old West¹.

1. *Further suggestions for an analysis of the text:*

Construction sur le mode tragique : tension croissante, le calme qui précède la tempête.

Renversement de situation.

Récurrence de l'idée de nouveauté : Potter est un homme neuf et c'est peut-être ce qui le sauve.

Le shériff ne porte pas d'arme (émasculatation ?) et Wilson, qui est toujours prêt à faire feu, est désarmé par tout autre chose qu'une arme : une vision, une épiphanie insoutenable (celle du couple).

Scratchy Wilson : l'Ouest anarchique vs. Jack Potter, le représentant de l'ordre et renfort imprévu, son épouse. La présence de la femme détruit l'univers uniquement masculin des chevaux et des revolvers ; l'Ouest est censé être un univers de "*Men Without Women*" pour reprendre le titre d'un recueil de nouvelles d'E. Hemingway.

J. Potter s'abandonne au souvenir du wagon pullman où il a pourtant été l'objet d'humiliations constantes. En fait, il s'est soumis aux humiliants rites (costume, épouse, pas d'arme, etc.) d'initiation qui marquent l'entrée de l'homme de la frontière dans le monde des villes : il s'est laissé "civiliser". *Wilderness* vs. *Domesticity*

Les cow-boys sont fatigués ; en fait, on a affaire à des anti-stéréotypes → l'accoutrement de Scratchy Wilson est peu authentique : sa chemise vient de New York et ses bottes de la Nouvelle-Angleterre → Fin du code de la Frontière ; heurt du rêve et de la réalité. Entreprise de démythification et de démystification : le paysage de l'Ouest est absorbé/englouti par l'Est. De l'Ouest d'antan, il ne reste que des "traces de pied" et des traces sur la feuille blanche.

S. CRANE

"THE BLUE HOTEL"

A story written in early 1898 and finished in February at Bede Place in England. It takes place in Nebraska at the turn of the century and deals with the irruption upon the quiet little town of Fort Romper (Romper = "one who plays or frolics in a lively or boisterous way"; "a romp" is also a lively and enjoyable activity which is usually noisy and amusing. Is the meaning relevant?) of three characters who turn up at Scully's Palace Hotel in the midst of a raging blizzard. One of them is a "shaky, quick-eyed Swede" who is said to "resemble a badly frightened man", the other two are "a tall, bronzed cowboy" and "a silent man from the East", a tailor from New York. The Swede "who shows signs of an inexplicable excitement" obviously suffers from delusions of persecution as witness the three following quotations:

"he said that some of these Western communities were very dangerous..."

"I suppose there have been a good many men killed in this room"

"I see you're all against me.... I suppose I'm going to be killed before I can leave this house"

So the Swede is "clear frightened" and the question is, as one character puts it, "What at?". The Easterner ventures an explanation: "*Oh I don't know, but it seems to me this man has been reading dime-novels, and he thinks he's right out in the middle of it - the shootin' and stabbin' and all.*" Whereupon the cowboy replies: "*This ain't Wyoming. This is Nebraska*" i.e. this is not the Wild West. The Swede wants to leave and the hotel-keeper detains him and tries to buck him up with a lot of whisky so that the Swede is rather drunk when he insists on a game of cards with the cowboy, and old farmer and Scully's son, Johnnie. The already tense atmosphere suddenly explodes when the Swede accuses Johnnie of cheating, which leads to a fist-fight. The Swede gets the upper hand and, more arrogant than ever, checks out of the hotel and swaggers down the street to a neighbouring saloon.

A few preliminary remarks before delving into the text:

– note the impressionism of the title, an illustration of Crane's famous use of color and color-words. What does blue stand for? ("Blue" = "depressed in spirits", any relevance?);

– note also how the narrator both makes use of the myth of the West and deglamorizes/debunks it. For instance, he uses some of the stereotypes of the Far West: the main characters are designated almost as figures in an allegory: the Easterner, the Cowboy and the protagonist is referred to as the Swede. The characters are mere labels but at the same time none of the characters is true to type (they actually are anti-stereotypes):

– the Swede instead of conjuring up the image of the sturdy, fearless Swedish pioneers who tamed the American Continent, is a hysterical paranoid;

– the cowboy is ineffectual and a bit of a swank;

– the Easterner, far from being the traditional, naive laughing-stock of the true Westerner, plays a positive rôle: he tries to calm the excited opponents and even points out the moral of the story ;

– the hotel-keeper is not the guardian of the traditional values of the West but an advocate of Progress: "*in two years Romper'll be a metropolis*";

– the arrival of the Swede which leads the reader to expect a sort of heroic adventure quite in keeping with the legend of the West actually marks the beginning of an anticlimax i.e. a drop from myth and legend to the banal and commonplace. We have to do with a trite but dramatic "*fait divers*" (thus Crane achieves an ironic effect and deflates the myth of the West);

– the West Crane describes is not the glamorous West of the Gold Rush, the Indian Wars or cattle thieves but more prosaically the drab universe of small town America.

– the narrative in this tale is conducted on two levels: straight story telling and ironic counterpoint cf.: "*We picture the world....conceit of man*".

After his victorious fight, the Swede feels as if he had undergone an initiatory rite; he feels confident and is ready to pick a fight (cf. "like a rooster"). He swaggers down the street to a saloon lit by "an indomitable red light". After an anticlimactic beginning there's going to be a new heightening of tensions and this is foreshadowed by the change in the colour-scheme i.e. shift from the blue hotel and a place where blue was the

dominant hue ("*the covered land was blue with the sheen of an unearthly satin*") to another circumscribed by red (red light/blood stains). So there are differences but also similarities between the two episodes (re-enactment of the first pattern = intrusion of a stranger into a quiet room where another game of cards is going on). A noteworthy point: the Swede declares that the weather suits him and one is tempted to say that his bluster is in keeping with the blustery weather outside; it's almost as if the blizzard raging outside, the frantic winds wailing like a chorus in a Greek drama were let in whenever a door is opened, an observation borne out by the fact that in the first part of the tale the quiet is broken by the sudden flinging open of the door. Be that as it may, the arrival of the Swede brings about the same reaction as before on the part of the four card-players who "*encased themselves in reserve*".

The composition of the group is as curious as the previous one: some local businessmen (a suggestion that the West is given over to trade/business ?); the district attorney, representing law and order and a professional gambler said to be "square" i.e. "honest, having all accounts settled" (is this a foreshadowing of the ending, the final settling of accounts?). Note the irony in the description as if the narrator were delighting in reversing the traditional pattern:

- 1) the gambler looks superior "to the men of more reputable pursuits";
- 2) he is a paragon of virtue leading an exemplary home life;
- 3) he is described as generous, just and moral = an ironic embodiment of the loftier values qualifying him for the rôle of Nemesis (the goddess of divine retribution) he's going to play to sanction the Swede's "*hubris*" (excessive pride or arrogance, a tragic flaw). Actually his trade consists in exploiting "*the absolutely invulnerable stupidity of people*" / "*a wolf preying upon reckless or senile farmers*". Note the narrator's irony when describing the way the gambler stabs the Swede reduced/deflated to the status of a melon – which is not as surprising as it may look when one knows that a swede is also "a type of round yellow vegetable like a turnip" (in French: "*un rutabaga ou navet de Suède*" !) As to the final touch, it is supremely cruel: "This registers the amount of your purchase", a clever way of showing that the fate of the Swede is a perfect example of the self-fulfilling prophecy: he even got more than he bargained for.

Another point deserving consideration: "*a cry of supreme astonishment*". Crane's tales are often studies in vision, in discovery, in revelation of human vanity and its consequences.

At this stage – for the story might end with the death of the Swede –, a provisional conclusion is in order: the Swede is a victim of a lifetime of dime novels and romanticism about the West. Upon reaching Romper, he is so convinced of plunging into the legend of the West that he manages to bring about the incident that will be fatal to him and by projecting his own aggressiveness on to the others he imposes upon his companions rôles they did not want to play. For instance, the professional gambler is forced to act brutally like so many of his counterparts in fiction or motion pictures.

The story bears on the passing of the West and the discrepancy between the myth of the Wild West and a quiet almost tame West where people are more interested in making a living or enjoying peaceful lives than in preserving the traditional way of life for which the West was notorious. Humour stems from the fact that the representatives of the "New" West get rid of an embarrassing witness or rather survival/relic from the Old West, a quixotic traveller who comes out of the blue to disrupt the small community of Fort Romper.

Though the tale might have ended at this point, for it forms a self-contained whole, the final section (IX) provides another point of view/angle of vision. Many critics and readers found fault with this sort of appendix where the author intrudes to preach a deliberate moral, but it is part of the story and must be dealt with. The conversation between the Easterner and the cowboy provides the reader with further information. We learn that the gambler got only three years' imprisonment – a light sentence – and are acquainted with something that bears out my contention that the characters are not true to type viz. "*If the bartender had been any good he could have gone in...and stopped all this here murderin*", but the conversation also gives the narrative an ironic and tragic twist since we learn that:

– "*The Swede might not have been killed if everything had been square*" (cf. the use of "square" to define the gambler)

– "*Johnnie was cheating*". This last piece of information gives the reader a new perspective on the Swede's attitude and reaction: what the reader mistook for braggadocio and bluster was just righteous indig-

nation at being taken for a sucker. What the Easterner goes on to say ("*And I refused to stand up and be a man...etc*") shows that they are all guilty of the Swede's death ("*We're all in it*") and somewhat exonerates the gambler: "*This poor gambler isn't even a noun. He is kind of an adverb*", which, I daresay, means that the gambler was not exactly an agent *i.e.* someone wholly responsible but a sort of modifier, someone who just put the finishing touches to an already written, preordained tale.

If we compare the fate of the Swede to a sentence – in both senses of the word: 1) “a phrase or a group of clauses” and 2) “a judgment specifying the punishment to be inflicted upon the convict” – or a series of sentences (*i.e.* a text and this is exactly what it is since we're dealing with a piece of fiction, a literary work) or again a succession of words (nouns - adjectives - verbs - adverbs), the gambler's status is reduced to that of an adverb; he does not achieve the dignity or function of a noun *i.e.* a willing participant; he is just an instrument of fate: cf. "*he came merely as a culmination, the apex of a human movement*". And the Easterner gives utterance to a conclusion that is typical of Stephen Crane (the author had already put it forward in his famous novel *Maggie, a girl of the streets*): "*Every sin is the result of a collaboration*".

By way of conclusion: with all this philosophizing if not preachifying, "The Blue Hotel" evolves into a moral study on the theme of collective and individual responsibility. The "Blue Hotel" thus illustrates one of Crane's most forceful assertions *viz.* that "*Indifference is a militant thing*" (*L'indifférence est une forme de militantisme [au service du mal]*), a conviction that is more than ever valid.

ROBERT FROST

“MENDING WALL”

Probably the nation’s best-known and best-loved serious poet. President JFK invited him to read a poem at the inauguration in 1961. Reasons for his success? He welded traditional verse forms (the sonnet, rhyming couplets, blank verse) with an unmistakably American vocabulary and regional speech rhythms; his poems focussed on country life with the assumption that it confers special vision if not wisdom.

Although Frost can’t be dissociated from New England (he passed for the epitome of the New England sage) he was actually born in 1874 in San Francisco, California, where he spent the first 10 years of his life...about as far geographically and culturally from rural Vermont and New Hampshire as can be.

Family background: a violent father and a deeply mystical mother account for F’s deep psychic instability. After his father’s death when Frost was 11, the family moved to New York. A rebellious and lazy pupil, he dropped out of school very early and got a job in a shoe-factory in order to eke out the family finances: this was his introduction to that industrial world he was later to reject.

His attitudes toward studies changed; he attended Harvard with a view to going in for teaching. Had to drop out because of poor health. He married, had 4 children, went through hard times, became very depressed even suicidal; doctors advised him to turn to farming for therapeutics.

A new start in 1912: Frost sold his farm and moved to London where he got his 1st book, *A Boy’s Will* published and met outstanding British and American poets. E. Pound e.g. praised his 1st book and the 2nd, *North of Boston*, was widely praised both in England and then States.

After the outbreak of war, F returned to the US; he settled as a farmer in New Hampshire, attained financial stability; that was the beginning of “The Years of Triumph” but his private life was clouded by a series of disappointments and tragedies: a son committed suicide, and a daughter suffered a complete mental collapse. Hence perhaps his view of poetry as “*a momentary stay against confusion*”, “*one step backward taken*”, an instant of resistance to time, chaos and decay. By the time he died in 1963, he had become a national institution

“MENDING WALL”

« *Les murs, tout autant que l’écriture, définissent la civilisation.* » (R. Harrison)¹

– Cf. L’interprétation proposée dans *Guide de la littérature américaine des origines à nos jours*, Paris, Ellipses, 2008, p. 127.

– Cf. également la section “Frost” dans P.-Y. Pétilion, *Histoire de la Littérature américaine*, p. 57

– Claude Quétel, *Murs: Une autre histoire des hommes*, Paris, Perrin, 2012

As the inaugural quotation suggests, this poem bears on a little noticed fact: the importance of walls in all cultures and civilisations:

- the Great Wall of China,
- the Hadrian Wall,
- the Berlin Wall,
- the Western Wall or Wailing Wall in Jerusalem (a remnant of the wall surrounding the Second Temple),
- the Wall between Israelis and Palestinians,
- the Wall between Catholics and Protestants in Belfast, etc. are testimony to this.

Cf. also an interesting literary use of the motif in P. Auster’s novel *The Music of Chance* (1990):

“We’re going to build a wall.”

“A monument, to be more precise,” Flower said. “A monument in the shape of a wall.”

1. Robert Harrison, *Forêts : Essai sur l’imaginaire occidental*, Paris, Flammarion, 1992.

[...] "To my mind, there's nothing more mysterious or beautiful than a wall. I can already see it: standing out there in the meadow, rising up like some enormous barrier against time. It will be a memorial to itself, gentlemen, a symphony of resurrected stones, and everyday it will sing a dirge for the past we carry within us."

"A Wailing Wall," Nash said.

"Yes," Flower said, "A Wailing Wall, A Wall of Ten Thousand Stones" (86)

The wall would not be a punishment so much as a cure, a one-way journey back to earth" (110)

Walls are symbolic of the sacred enclosure, which is both a protection and a limitation. City walls, 'the Great Round', represent the enclosing, sheltering feminine principle of the centre and the womb; round walls are often associated with the protection of the magic circle... Walls also are a symbol of the threshold→ passage from outer profane space to inner and sacred space.

Something there is that does not love a wall: there apparently exists a mysterious force at play in Nature that undermines walls; walls will crumble

"Mending Wall" is typical of Frost's manner *i.e.* on the surface, his work has a disarming simplicity: "Mending Wall" seems merely descriptive and anecdotal yet the reader, on second reading, senses that F is driving at some point one isn't quite able to grasp.

The poem is deceptively simple; on the surface – the tip of the iceberg – there doesn't seem to be much food for thought yet, beneath appearances, the text reveals unsuspected layers of complex meaning.

As such, it is emblematic of the duality of appeal of Frost's poems – his "*two-layer poems*" – *i.e.* they may be read on two levels: the *primary one* is the purely descriptive, phenomenal = a vignette of country life done with great acuteness of observation but underlying this primary meaning is a secondary universal meaning transcending the particular... the poem shifts/veers from the anecdotal (or moment described) to the highly significant/far more significant areas of experience.

To sum up the poem: two neighbours meet once a year at spring to mend the stone wall separating their estates/plots of land; the speaker suggests that they don't need the wall; it's almost an unnecessary wall:

There where it is we do not need the wall:

He is all pine and I am apple orchard.

My apple trees will never get across

And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him

Yet they keep mending the wall year in, year out as the restoration has become a kind of **ritual**, meaningless on the surface yet answering a deep, latent purpose and function the reader is left to make out. Note that the ritual actually existed:

The Romans worshiped a god of boundaries named Terminus (one of their important household gods). Annually Terminus was honored in a ritual which not only reaffirmed boundaries but which also provided the occasion for predetermined traditional festivities among neighbors.

The festival of the *Terminalia* was celebrated in Rome and in the country on the 23rd of February. The neighbours on either side of any boundary gathered around the landmark [the stones which marked boundaries], with their wives, children, and servants, and crowned it, each on his own side, with garlands, and offered cakes and, bloodless sacrifices. In later times, however, a lamb, or sucking pig, was sometimes slain, and the stone sprinkled with the blood. Lastly, the whole neighbourhood joined in a general feast.

One of the main reasons for the strict observation such an annual rite is the conservatism of the neighbour (an illustration of one of the components of the New England character): the farmer rebuilds the useless wall out of sheer habit, in unreflecting obedience to his father's saying "*Good fences make good neighbours*".

The neighbour's adherence to tradition is indicative of the narrowness and blind habit of the primitive: "*He moves in darkness as it seems to me...*", yet this primitivism is somewhat in keeping/at one with the primitivism of nature.

Contrariwise, the speaker strikes one as being a more sophisticated and urbane character; he is in sympathy with some elemental spirit in nature which denies all boundaries (*Something there is that doesn't love a wall*)→the poem portrays a clash between these two points of view and leads the reader to wonder which is right, the speaker or his Yankee neighbour?

As usual with R. Frost, symbolic/metaphorical meaning stems from what seems at first sight a commonplace event; "Mending Wall" is not simply an incident from rural life but a disquisition on an important question: Should people tear down the barriers isolating individuals from one another or should they recognize that distinctions and limits are necessary to human life?

Frost does not really provide an answer though the poem presents the speaker's attitude more sympathetically than the neighbour's.

The wall becomes thus the symbol for all kinds of man-made barriers (class divisions, the barriers of racial prejudice, differences of religion...) and the two views of it represent general attitudes towards life – the one, a surrender to the natural forces which draw human beings together, the other, the conservatism which persists in keeping up the distinctions separating them. But be that as it may neither exhausts the meaning of the poem which doesn't point to a single meaning but open outward upon a vista of meanings

By way of conclusion:

Emphasis on a paradox underlying the poem: if it were not for the purpose of mending the wall between their fields, the 2 neighbours might never get together; mending-time is also meeting-time: "we meet to walk the line", a line of demarcation but also a ritual drawing two people together for the ironical purpose of setting a wall between the two of them. If they let the wall crumble down they won't have any motive for working together. Walls and fences are thus instrumental in the retention and renewal of human relationships...

"To mend (one's) fences": make peace with a person→Is it too late to mend fences with your ex-wife?

"Good fences make good neighbours", Prov. It is easier to be friendly with your neighbor if neither of you trespasses upon the other's property or privacy.

According to R. Frost: *"A poem should not be, but mean"*, which is a reversal of MacLeish's definition in his *Ars Poetica*: *"A poem should not mean / But be."*

"Stated ideas in poetry are as colors in painting, the material rather than the meaning."

Pastoralism: a mode of viewing common experience through the medium of the rural world. Pastoral comes to life whenever the poet... casts himself in the role of the country dweller and writes about life in terms of the contrast between the rural world, with its rustic scenery and naïve, humble folk, and the great outer world of the powerful, the wealthy, and the sophisticated.

The remoteness of the pastoral Arcadia is counterbalanced by its closeness to nature and hence to the physical reality underlying all life