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THE MOTIF OF THE JOURNEY IN NEW AMERICAN GOTHIC (WITH REFERENCE TO THE PROSE OF THREE SOUTHERN WRITERS: CARSON MCCULLERS, FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND TRUMAN CAPOTE)

Abstract: *Leaving the safety of their room or of their "inner room" (the heart, one's inner world) sets the characters in Carson McCullers', Flannery O'Connor's and Truman Capote's gothic writings either on a linear erratic and rather destructive journey to "the other room," which can take the form of an odyssey, a quest or a rite of passage from innocent adolescence into a disappointing maturity, often ending with a return to the "safety of the vicious circle," or on a psychological one, "in the deeper recesses of the human spirit." The truly successful movement out of "the circle" is love put to a test according to our own "misquotation," "The road to happiness is paved with wicked temptations."*

Key-words: *journey, american gothic, odyssey, quest, a rite of passage*

In New American Gothic the typical heroes are weaklings, physical or mental freaks and they are constantly plagued by the anxiety to love or to be loved. Love becomes the vehicle by which they can create order out of chaos and strength out of weakness. The only way they can 'escape' their anxiety is through compulsion, i.e. after having been placed in a critical situation the weaklings are compelled to act. Hence, they will attempt to escape from their microcosm, from the haunted castle of the old Gothic and the hero-villain in it, but, owing to their obsessions, they will perceive reality in a distorted way, usually in the form of a cracked mirror, in which order breaks down, chronology becomes confused and their own identity is blurred. The total effect that we get is that of a dream marked by disorder. Consequently, more frightened by the reality outside the microcosm than by the already familiar disorder inside it, in the long run the defeated weaklings choose to return to the 'safety' of their microcosm, and the 'vicious circle' is thus closed.

This overall pattern recurrent in New American Gothic revolves round a central ingredient—the motif of the journey. According to Irving Malin,

> the voyage in new American Gothic opposes the other room. It represents movement, exploration, not cruel confinement. But the voyage is also horrifying because the movement is usually erratic, circular, violent, or distorted. The way out is as dangerous as the room itself. The polarities of room and voyage shrink to one point of horror.[1]

And the American critic is indeed right, but only up to a certain extent, as we believe that this issue is by far more complex. Without the slightest desire to establish an exhaustive taxonomy, we feel compelled to point out that the journey, or the "voyage into the forest,"[2] involves too many facets to be merely reduced to an escape to the "other room." Besides flight, with these three Southern writers— Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor and Truman Capote—, the journey also assumes the form of an odyssey, of a narrative of quest, of a rite of passage, or even of a fatal journey. Moreover, since the

[1] Irving Malin, *New American Gothic*. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), 106-7.
[2] Ibid., 79.

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characters are often spiritually aimless, with very few exceptions, the erratic journey is destructive. It can lead to 'absolute' destruction of the character (self-destruction), if at the end of the story the character literally disappears physically, i.e. a linear journey, or to a 'relative' destruction, when, due to an ironical reversal, the so-called 'flight' out of the 'vicious circle' and from the hero-villain is unsuccessful, when the hero/heroine succumbs to the 'charms' of the hero-villain and returns to the 'safety' of the 'vicious circle,' i.e. a circular journey.

There are many erratic trips in and out of the 'inner' room in McCullers' *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, but we believe that those undertaken by the two mutes, by Dr. Copeland, Mick, Jake Blount, and Biff are illustrative of the above-mentioned types of journey. The first two journeys are 'absolutely' destructive and fatal ones for Spiros Antonapoulos and Singer. After a severe illness, the former becomes suddenly ill-mannered and a real nuisance to his fellow townspeople (urinates in public, bumps into people and pushes them with his elbows and his belly, shoplifts) and is confined to the state insane asylum, where he dies shortly after (linear journey). The latter, visits his longstanding companion a few times but, when his last trip to the asylum fails (Spiros dies), Singer, too scared to find himself alone in a empty world, puts a bullet in his chest (circular, violent journey). Surprisingly, all the other journeys end or continue during the four parts of one single day – 21 August 1939. In the morning, Dr Copeland is forced to leave his room for the country house of his father-in-law (linear journey). Then, in the hope that the outline of his journey would eventually take form, Jake Blount leaves town in the afternoon and continues an erratic odyssey that has already taken him through Texas, Oklahoma, and the Carolinas. Mick's rite of passage from adolescence to maturity, marked by successive returns to her 'inner' world of music and a disappointing sexual encounter, ends in the evening, leaving the character with all hopes shattered and a very prosaic job at Woolworth's. Last but not least, Biff Brannon's journey is not a physical journey outside the New York Café but a psychological one in the deeper recesses of the human spirit; it is a journey, which, at night, when the novel closes, leaves him "suspended between radiance and darkness,"[1] between the past (Alice, Madeline and Gyp—his deceased wife and his former loves) and the future, with no one to cling to.

In *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, we have three notable destructive journeys, two of which are 'absolute,' ending violently with the death of the characters. Alison's trip is linear and fatal, taking her from the 'safety' of her home to that of the sanatorium. Blinded by jealousy, Alison unleashes a conflict that eventually triggers her own destruction, i.e. deprived of love and motherhood she goes mad and dies. Private Williams's journey, on the other hand, is circular and fatal, as the secret passion that he develops for Leonora, after catching a glimpse of her stark naked, takes him repeatedly to the Captain's house until he is caught and killed by the latter. Captain Penderton's journey, however, resembles rather an odyssey, literally leading the character through "stages of the cross": from home to the barracks, the stables, into the woods, back to his study, his bedroom, and, finally, to his wife's bedroom. By shooting Private William, Captain Penderton annihilates the love-hate object of his own desires and, like Biff Brannon, remains suspended between two worlds: heterosexuality and homosexuality.

Miss Amelia's journey in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* fits rather the flight-and-return pattern. The arrival of Cousin Lymon, the freakish character, brings about a transformation in Amelia's life. Evolving from a beloved person to a love-giving one, she practically dares

[1] Carson McCullers, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. (London: Penguin Books, 1961), 312.

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to leave the safety of her 'inner' room. But, then, utterly deceived and defeated by the 'outer' world, when Cousin Lymon decides to leave with Macy, she is "hurled" back to the solitude of her 'inner' world.

In keeping with the tripartite structure of the novel (Thesis – Antithesis – Synthesis), Frankie's journey in *The Member of the Wedding* is, without doubt, the most complex of the trips to the 'outer' room hitherto discussed. Though assuming the form of a disguised rite of passage, in order to suggest the protagonist's presumed coming of age, but who, otherwise, at the end of it emerges as childish as ever, Frankie's attempt to seek communion with the "other room," the adult world, fails and becomes a trivial flight-and-return journey. Disappointed and feeling cheated by the latter, the protagonist relapses into the initial state.

Although in *Clock Without Hands*, McCullers' last novel, there are many movements, only two journeys, J. T. Malone's and Sherman's (both fatal ones), are clearly outlined. With the prospects of death before him, the former sets out on a journey resembling an odyssey with a pre-established dénouement. The latter's, however, is linear driving Sherman out of the relative 'safety' of Judge Clane's house to a wholly 'unsafe' house in the white section of the town where the character will end tragically.

Unlike her compatriot from Georgia and unlike Truman Capote, as we shall further see, with Flannery O'Connor, the journey motif achieves unprecedented complexity, moving far beyond the basic flight-and-return pattern to a theological, Christian dimension. On the other hand, it is a matter of common knowledge and a fact that highlights the futility of all argument that the narrative of quest, i.e. the journey motif, is congruous with Flannery O'Connor's imagination and with the "doctrinal progression" of her protagonists (via Recognition and Humiliation to Rebirth and Regeneration), since both the quest for Grace and the doctrinal progression, similar to the quest for the Holy Grail, imply motion—be it 'outside,' in the physical world, or be it 'inside,' in the psychological introspection—along with authentic "stages of the cross" to be reached and to be passed.

Hence, with almost no exception, O'Connor's voyages are two-leveled, with the physical journey, the character's actual movement from one site to another, backing up or serving as basis for the psychological and the spiritual quest. Inhabiting withered landscapes and often too blind to the existence of Grace in their proximity, her protagonists travel, as if trying to find Grace elsewhere. In doing so and in keeping with one of the writer's adored quotations from St. Cyril of Jerusalem—"The dragon sits 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..."[1]—the protagonists encounter the forces of evil and their destiny. The violent clashes that result make the journey a dark and dangerous one and may lead up to the physical annihilation of the protagonist.

Thus, in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and in "The River," two of the most frequently anthologized stories, the journeys are absolute, with no possibility of return for either the Grandmother or her family, or for Harry (Bevel) Ashfield. In the former story, despite the fact that the Grandmother refuses to go to Florida because of the Misfit—a famous criminal heading that way—the journey is linear and, as result of ironic reversal, it drives the family straight to their violent death by the hands of the very Misfit and of his companions. In other words, very grotesquely, the flight from trouble leads inevitably to trouble. In the second story, the journey that Harry, the child of an alcoholic and atheistic family,

[1] Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works*. (New York: The Library of America, Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1988), 806.

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undertakes to the river chaperoned by the religious Mrs. Connin, is in a first phase circular (a journey of initiation into Faith through Baptism), and then linear (flight from drab reality and from 'evil parents' to what is to be, in a child's naïveté, a more promising country). The forces of evil, which the protagonist encounters during his quest, are all associated, again in the child's naïveté, with the swine imagery: firstly, in a book Harry finds a picture of Jesus driving a crowd of pigs out of a man, secondly, he is literally attacked by a live shoat at Mrs. Connin's place, and, thirdly, to him Mr. Paradise with the cancerous deformity on his ear looks like a giant pig. So, what starts as a journey of initiation into Christianity ends as a journey of self-destruction precipitated, of course, by the forces of evil.

In another group of stories, "Judgment Day" (a reworked story of "The Geranium" and of "An Exile in the East"), and "The Enduring Chill," the protagonists embark on journeys home to die. In the former, the reader becomes witness to an imaginary journey, in which Old Tanner (previously Old Dudley), fallen asleep, dreams of traveling back home to Corinth, Georgia in his coffin. At first, his daughter does not intend to keep her promise, but after the old man dies, the broken promise literally haunts her at night, so that she has the body dug up and shipped to Corinth. The message that Flannery O'Connor wants to convey is clear: for the faithful, spiritual victory over humiliation and defeat is granted even after death. In "The Enduring Chill," Asbury Fox does indeed travel home to die (physical journey), firmly believing that his death will come as a punishment on his family but, due to ironic reversal (his supposed illness is caused by the prosaic unpasteurized milk), the journey does not end in death. Nevertheless, by way of a second ironic reversal, Asbury's "physical" victory turns into his moral defeat. His conversation with Father Finn discloses the protagonist's pseudo-intellectualism, that he is a complete failure, devoid even of the self-pity that would have "alleviated" his death.

Two memorable O'Connor stories with symbolic titles, "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," are based on what we venture to call 'pedagogical' journeys, not for the protagonist, as one might well expect, but for the reader. In other words, they may serve as moral lessons because, in both cases, the protagonists act contrary to the message that the title conveys. In doing so, they pay a heavy price. In the former story, showing a powerful class and race consciousness, Julian's mother does not know when to stop playing the white mistress. Although she accepts the Negroes' emancipation, she cannot accept alikeness. Moreover, she will not "converge with everything that rises" and, hence, will "fall flat," i.e. she will trigger her own destruction. In the second story, Tom Shiftlet, as if not to contradict his name, hides behind what he believes to be grand words, "Lady, a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit . . . A body and a spirit . . . The body, lady, is like a house: it don't go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like an automobile: always on the move,"[1] otherwise a very cheap philosophy that foreshadows his escape. To a certain extent, he is right, as the human soul wanders indeed, but according to Christian faith, it has to move toward God and salvation, not toward destruction. Whereas Mr. Shiftlet being actually concerned with the body, his 'journey,' or we should rather call it his defection, is like many other in Flannery O'Connor's prose, self-destructive for the protagonist.

Avoiding, however, all unmerited and unjustified reasoning, we believe that the journey of initiation in "The Artificial Nigger," otherwise not the only of its kind in O'Connor's prose ("The River," "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," even "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"—

[1] Ibid., 179.

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a journey of initiation into gratuitous evil and violence), is by far the most discussed and the most frequently offered example in its class. For that speaks the complexity of the story and the fact that it fits the doctrinal-progression pattern in almost every detail.

What is initially meant to be a journey of initiation into the real world, i.e. Nelson's first trip to the city, and a moral lesson on the sin of pride: "The day is going to come," Mr. Head prophesied, "when you'll find you ain't as smart as you think you are . . . ,"[1] becomes at first reading a succession of short and erratic voyages (Mr. Head and Nelson rush to catch the train, then they walk through several cars to the diner, they walk down the wrong streets in circles, etc.)—like separate bits of a large jigsaw puzzle. But when the puzzle is completed, we come to the conclusion that the journey of initiation has gradually become for both characters "a pilgrimage into a Dantesque hell,"[2] that the characters have passed through all the stages of O'Connor's doctrinal progression: Recognition (of self-deception and, implicitly, of the sin)—Humiliation (Nelson will not forgive his grandfather for his denial and turns his back to the old man)—Divine Grace (which falls upon them through a hierophany—the statue of the artificial nigger)—Rebirth/Regeneration (acting as a catalyst, the statue restores the relationship between the two).

Finally, of the many points of convergence between Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* and her novella *The Violent Bear it Away*, undoubtedly, the closest is the journey motif, which in the two pieces becomes a quest for a vocation, i.e. following a three-step *rite of passage*—transplantation, prophecy, and return—combined with reversal moments, both protagonists, Hazel Motes and Francis Tarwater, become preachers. In his journey of quest, quite contrary to the childhood-prophecy, Hazel Motes first repudiates his fundamentalist upbringing and becomes a rebel (transplantation/separation phase). Paradoxically, or we should rather say ironically, Hazel's rebellion is converted into a step forward towards the fulfillment of the prophecy. In fact, he becomes an anti-prophet and decides to found a new sect, the Church Without Christ. The murder of Solace Layfield, a hypothetical rival, on the one hand, and the discovery that Asa Hawks is merely an impostor, on the other hand, function as the second moment of reversal in the *rite of passage*. Repenting and accepting the futility of the new sect, Motes completes his quest and, after a supreme act of self-blinding with quicklime, returns to the God of his youth. But it is all in vain, because Hazel's spiritual but grotesque odyssey ends in an equally grotesque manner—he is clubbed to death by two patrolmen for not having paid his rent.

Francis Marion Tarwater of *The Violent Bear it Away*, as we have already explained, sets out on a similar prophetic but less labyrinthical quest, which takes him through the same the stages of denial and rejection, ritualistic cleansing, and acceptance of mission (separation, transition, and return). In the end, as the epigraph from Matthew 11:12—"*From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away*"—suggests, after Recognition and Humiliation, through divine Grace, the protagonist is finally accepted to serve the Kingdom of Heaven as one of its many prophets.

To conclude, we feel tempted to say that, despite their grotesqueness, in the fictional pieces of this Southern authoress, where the journey motif grows into the tangible, material support of the three-stage doctrinal progression, thus emphasizing suffering, penance, and piety, the reader is left with the impression of literally taking part in a pilgrimage, of

[1] Ibid., 211.
[2] Gilbert H. Muller, *Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), 54.

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engaging on the road to Heaven, whereas in the others, by extension, it looks rather like the road to Hell.

As for Truman Capote, we are compelled to mention that, with him, the journey/quest/flight motif is much simplified and reduced practically to its basic patterns, the unsuccessful circular journey, with its two phases of escape and return, and the equally unsuccessful linear journey between two precise points, that of departure and that of destination. If in the former type of journey ("Master Misery," "Shut A Final Door," "Miriam"), the phase of return represents undoubtedly the protagonist's defeat and his succumbence to the hero-villain, the "evil parent," in the latter type of journey ("The Headless Hawk" and "A Tree of Night), the succumbence occurs within the frame of the very journey between the two 'inner' rooms.

By writing and successfully publishing three of his best 'dark' stories prior to the début novel, we believe that in them Capote managed to experiment with certain patterns of which he will then make full use in his *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. And very interesting, in this respect, is the handling of the journey motif. In fact, as we have previously mentioned it, the whole book may be interpreted as a great, archetypal journey, a composite of smaller, unsuccessful movements, representing a succession of circular escape journeys reunited all under the canopy of a journey of quest and a rite of passage. In search of a physical and a spiritual father, Joel Harrison Fox embarks upon a three-stage linear journey that takes him from New Orleans via Paradise and Noon City to Skully's Landing. The tragic discovery that he makes (his father is a helpless paralytic) turns the boy's odyssey into a gradual but sinuous search for identity (a second journey of quest with recurrent escape-return phases), which at the end of the *rite de passage* leads to the protagonist's loss of innocence and his final succumbence to self-love and homosexuality.

Nevertheless, what we believe to be still worth highlighting, is the fact that the patterns of the escape journey and the journey of quest (both linear and circular) transcend the imaginary borderline between Capote's 'nocturnal' and 'daylight' prose and are extended to the latter type. Thus, in "Children on Their Birthdays," despite the somewhat static character of the story (an intermission between two bus rides), Miss Lily Jane Bobbit is on a journey, coming from out of nowhere but, according to her words, heading for Hollywood. However, fate plays a trick on her (or rather the Devil has fulfilled her plea) on the very day of her departure. Instead of Hollywood, the same bus that had brought her into town takes her now on a ride to eternity.

Then, by finding shelter in the Chinaberry tree house, the five non-conformists in *The Grass Harp* hope to escape the crushing conventions of their community and protect their private dream world from the brutal intervention of the outer world. And they do so until the dream vanishes, until the *rite of passage* (the quest) is completed. Their journey is circular—but not the circularity of closed rings—and spiral as they return to their community, changed and with greater understanding of themselves and of their fellowmen.

The fragile spiral journey in *The Grass Harp* becomes well-marked and conspicuous in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, where Holly, despite her repeated flights and returns to her flat (closed circularity), finds the necessary force "to break the spell" of the setting, of the microcosm in which she lives, and flee to South America and Africa, in pursuit of the same hedonistic lifestyle but in another setting, and then another and another. Consequently, the initial closed-circularity movement evolves into a full-fledged spiral journey, with no end in sight. But, despite its being apparently aimless and never-ending, it is one of Capote's few successful journeys, in which the protagonist manages indeed to escape the forces that keep him/her tied to the "haunted castle."

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The truly successful movement out of the circle—the quest for love—is completed in the joyful story "House of Flowers," where Ottilie by force of love succeeds in breaking away with her past (a prostitute in Port-au-Prince) and marry Royal Bonaparte. Love, as if put to a test, endows the protagonist with the necessary energy to resist, first, the forces of evil (Old Bonaparte with her voodoo sorcery wants to cast a spell on her) and, then, all temptations (Baby and Rosita, fellow prostitutes) to return to town and to the previous lifestyle. "*The road to happiness is paved with wicked temptations*," the reader might think paraphrasing a well-known adage. So, despite some hesitance, in this romance, the movement becomes linear and with a clear destination in sight, if we dare say, symptomatic also of Capote's own sinuous journey from the 'nocturnal' to the 'daylight' fiction.

CONCLUSIONS

Upon perceiving Irving Malin's limitation of the journey to a mere opposition to the "other room," and sensing again the complexity of the issue, in the present paper we have attempted to identify the journeys and, whenever necessary, to describe and comment on them. The result was most rewarding, as with the type of movement and the destination in mind, besides the classical *escape*/*flight* motif to the "other/outer" room, with all three writers we have managed to spot a wide range of journeys, which we have classified as follows: *the flight-return journey*, *the erratic odyssey*, *the journey of quest*, *the journey of initiation*, *the psychological journey* (an inward journey into the recesses of the human mind), *the pedagogical journey* (which conveys a moral message), *the fatal journey* (of absolute or relative destruction), *the imaginary and the physical journey*, *the linear and the circular journey* (of closed and of open circularity, i.e. the spiral journey).

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