JEDEDIAH BERRY, *INHERITANCE*: AN APPROACH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE NEW CRITICISM

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Abstract: This paper approaches Jedediah Berry's short novel, Inheritance, a piece of magical realism novelizing the eternal matter of oppressive parental authority in a metaphoric story about the "beast" in the basement from the perspective of New Criticism.

Keywords: magical realism, symbolism, human psyche, modernism, New Criticism.

New Critics favoured poetry, and yet prose can be very well approached in terms of New Criticism, many short texts lending themselves to be interpreted and explicated, so much the more a literary work such as Jedediah Berry's *Inheritanc*e, a piece of magic(al) realism, overflowing with symbolism, one of the "articles of faith" asserted by Cleanth Brooks in *The Formalist Critics* being that literature is ultimately metaphorical and symbolic.[1]

In this short novel, Berry novelizes the eternal matter of an oppressive parental authority in a metaphor full of mystery, by showing (as showing is artistic, whereas telling is not, accordingly to Wayne Booth[2]) the beast in Greg's life, "the beast" in each and every one's "basement", namely humans' deep hidden secrets, their id, and that constitutes the "specific moral problem", the subject matter of literature, although the aim of literature is not to point a moral[3], this feature being another tenet of the New Criticism.

As concerns showing, for a modern writer "story is present without comment, leaving the reader without the guidance of explicit evaluation"[4], separating "technique", the "author's means of controlling his reader", from "all of the social and psychological forces that affect authors and readers"[5], and thus the very essence of New Criticism being fulfilled, as Brooks put it, that literary study should be "concerned primarily with the work itself"[6]. Focusing on the problem of unity, the whole made up by the literary work, as well the relationship between its parts (ten in this case) in building the story, is also a part of the New Criticism "creed". Each part has its own importance, adding to the structure of *Inheritance*, connecting characters and events to form a successful unitary literary work, making the format and content inseparable.

In spite of the fact that there is a "beast" in all humans' psyche, the existence of a dark, inaccessible part of our personality being a general and universal truth, Berry drives us to this conclusion by a concrete and particular case, be it a fictional one, by showing the beast Greg has inherited from his recently deceased father, whom he had not seen in thirty years. The beast, "it", as most of the characters name the creature, or "him", as Lilith, Greg's wife calls the animal, a "worrisome beast, its snout long and searching, head furry with woolly

[1] *Apud* Vincent B. Leitch, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (W. W. Norton, 2001), < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleanth_Brooks>.
[2] Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961. 2nd Ed. 1983 < http://www.rlwclarke.net/courses/lits2306/2009-2010/12BBoothTheRhetoricofFiction.pdf>.
[3] *Cf.* Allen Tate,"Miss Emily and the Bibliographers" in volume *Reason in Madness*, G.B. Putnam, New York, 1941, p. 121 < https://www.questia.com/library/1664434/reason-in-madness-critical-essays-by-allen-tate >.
[4] Wayne C. Booth, *op.cit.*
[5] *Idem.*
[6] *Apud* Vincent B. Leitch, *op. cit*.

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clumps around the ears, cloven hooves at the ends of its lean legs"[7], the mysterious, unreal, fairy tale element refers to religion, as well as to mythology, especially in connection with Lilith, who tries to humanize him. In religious terms, the beast could be the devil if the cloven hooves are to be taken into consideration; in a mythological approach, judging by the human parts, "the navel visible through wiry hair, the hairless brown nipples, eyes with something like a soul behind them"[8], it could be the goat-god.

On the other hand, Lilith, too has at least two possible references: one to the queen of the demons, the other female to the prior woman in the life of Adam, from whom she fled away for not wanting to submit him, as long as they both had been created equals, from the same dust, reason why she could not have accepted to lay under her man; Lilith as a demon who destroys newborns, and Lilith as a rebellious wife.[9] Therefore, as the queen of demons, she could have recognized and saved one of her babies, the beast itself (she washed him with warm water and a shampoo, dressed it with a blue overalls and allowed some of the children to touch its fur, as if she was proudly presenting her child, saying comforting words similar to a lullaby – reference to Lilith, the murderer of infants[10] –, takes it home saying: "come to Mommy"[11]) ; as a wife, unwilling to submit her husband, she is the one who initiates the sexual intercourse, she "straddles" him, "occupying" a superior position in the economy of the couple; her hair smelling of "faint rotting leaves"[12] exactly the same scent as the beast's, and letting him see that there is no room for three (in the bathroom, where she takes care of the wound on the beast's head). To these two instances of Lilith, there are more symbols to be added: as the demons' queen – the black and white movie, the black and white living room, the black and white wife, whose nightgown seemed made of bluish light, as she was a spectre from the underworld; as the rebellious wife – Greg takes the beast to Abe's because he "thought it would be good for her"[13], as if she was not entitled to an opinion; sending the beast away from the bed, and locking it in the garage, in spite of his wife's telling him that the beast was not feeling well, and moreover, she would have liked to take a photo, a family portrait (again, the maternal reference).

The imagery is very rich – starting with the very beginning, in Abe's basement, which was his "sanctum" – and in the description of the place there is an irony, because according to its name, it was supposed to be perfect, and yet it contained all sort of imperfections: a leaking cooler, stale pretzels, a Phil folding all the hands, though he was always a risk-taker, but even so, this is another kind of an id, an orderly one in spite of the loss affecting his life, one with all the model ships, having suggestive names, such as *Bonne Homme Richard* (again an irony as long as Abe would ask Greg to shot the beast and give him the weapon; also a reference to the ship that victoriously fought against the British vessel during the American Revolution, as so does Greg against his dark inheritance); one model ship for each month passed since Corey, Abe's wife left him (the name Corey might as well refer to core, the basic, the essence, the ego).

Then again, the meddlesome Mrs. Heck (heck – an euphemism for hell; also, the name is derived from the Greek Hektor meaning to hold, to possess[14]), the one who triggers the

[7]Jedediah Berry, *Inheritance*, "Fairy Tale Review", editor Kate Bernheimer, Department of English, University of Alabama Tuscaloosa, AL 35487 p. 27 < www.fairytalereview.com>.
[8] *Idem*.
[9] http:/www.lilitu.com/lilith.
[10] To guard against Lilith, superstitious Jews would hang four amulets, one on the wall of each room of a newborn babe, with the inscription "Lilith - abi!" ("Lilith - begone!") which some think is the origin, much later, of the English word "lullaby". < http://rkangel.tripod.com/lilith.html>.
[11] Jedediah Berry, *op. cit*., p. 30
[12] *Ibidem*.
[13] *Idem.*
[14] http://www.behindthename.com.

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death of the beast with her insistency in knowing everything concerning her neighbours, who used to seat in a corner in Greg and his father's house and cut coupons from their newspapers (allusion to intrusiveness) with a pair of scissors (allusion to the three divinities from the Inferno, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos who spins, reels and cut the thread of life, respectively).

Not only the movie on the TV was in white and black as to suggest oppositeness, extremeness, or maybe Lilith's firm position, but it was about a pair of cops stepping in front of a house, which looked like his father's (foretelling what would happen), while the music reached a crescendo as if to announce the peak of the action, both in film and in Greg's life.

Greg, a history teacher seems to spend too much time on the Holocaust (causing the parents' concern), as if to try to understand better his long-estranged father, whom he refers to as Lyle, and not as his father, in his memories of the scene at the hospital, and who was "muttering commandments"[15] – the term having a triple referentiality as military command, law, and religious bidding – all the meanings of the word having its well defined place in the structure of the story, each intertwining with the others, complementing reciprocally, giving hints to Lyle's nature. In order to complete the portrait, Berry "offers" us Lyle's photographs, all from the war, found by Greg in the his father's dresser. In all he was grinning (not smiling, grinning encompassing also the negative connotation), in some he was "pointing straight at the camera as if to say, "Hey, you there!"[16], and this pose, this superior attitude betraying a powerful and fearless, determined and imperative nature, as well as his unuttered threat are proofs of his domineering and authoritative attitude. As concerns the last photo, Greg flipped it quickly because it showed Lyle behind the controls of his bomber plane – and probably the latter was one of the pilots who launched bombs during the World War Two (hence Greg's insistence on teaching longer about the war in his attempt not only to understand his father, but also to find the way of easing somehow the guilt he felt for his father's past mistakes and guilt, part of his inheritance).

Furthermore, it was Lyle's basement the beast was found in, chained and half-starved and although Lyle is dead, and even if they have not been visiting each other for thirty years, (the name of Lyle stands for solitude, for isolation[17]), Greg feels his presence around, and the moment when he feels it the most intensely of all is when they went to take back the beast from Mrs. Connors's and Lilith sat with it on the back seat of the car, holding its right arm and gently squeezing it, while Greg "couldn't see its face, but smelled the earthy breath, felt it hot on the back of his neck"[18] – as if he cannot still cope with the reality, since he has not fully understood his past and did not unburden hid heart. Besides, the name of Greg stands for alertness, guard, and he eventually decides to put an end to the past and the connection to it, to cast away his inheritance by accepting to shot the beast and thus guarding everybody against the trouble it represented.

Gordon, the son of Phil and Elise, is another character with a devious behaviour, showing a tendency of being domineering – entering on a run in Greg's house, with his arms raised, he makes the beast inch from him, blinking, and says, "Now it knows who's boss"[19] ; he is the vector of all the unpleasant situations (stealing the key, he unleashes the beast which goes to Mrs. Connor, who calls the police, namely Abe; he bruises the beast's nipple; he hurts the beast and gets hurt too).

[15] Jedediah Berry, *op. cit*., p. 31.
[16] *Idem*, p. 33
[17] http://www.behindthename.com.
[18] Jedediah Berry, *op. cit*., p. 35.
[19] *Idem*, p. 31.

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Abe, the policeman, friend of both Greg and Lyle, acts like a real patriarch (Abraham meaning "father of many"[20]), not only advising Greg, for instance that the beast should not be taught to speak, "Nobody wants to know what it would have to say"[21] (alluding to the fact that id is repressed and so it should remain), but also giving him the weapon to cut out the ties to his burdening and troublesome legacy.

But it seems that Greg himself took a resolution. He mistakes the days of the week, and so he wakes up early, prepares breakfast and asks the beast to do more than rolling oranges, to rip one apart and to "just tear into it"[22], thus recognizing not only the force of the unconscious, but the fastness it takes to destroy if the dark side could take over. Somehow relieved, as he made a decision, he goes to school, and fills the blackboard with notes as "his lesson plan was the best he'd ever written"[23] – that is the best resolution ever taken. In the evening, he is awaken by Gordon's screaming, and after Elise, Phil and Abe have arrived too, Abe taking over and telling everybody what is to be done, Greg puts on "the clothes he'd worn to school"[24] – to maintain his resolution – and goes together with Abe to Lyle's place and shots the beast in the same clearing where he used to play when he was a boy. Paradoxically, Greg who could not stand the idea of killing an innocent beast when it was suggested by his father in his childhood in order to cover his fort with a skin taken off from a deer (implying that he should have killed the deer first), who did not know how to fire a gun, succeeds in firing it, bringing everything to a close, thus silencing his dark, deep hidden inner-self.

Returned back from there, Greg faces day-to-day reality, discovering that the world remained unchanged, that life goes on as usual, while Abe, silencing the radio, concludes that they could use some quiet. This quietness seems ambiguous – it could be a well deserved one, a time to ponder upon and to relax, but on the other hand, it could be the silence before the storm, the pause before what is to come.

As a conclusion, quoting the critic Raoul R. Ibarguen, it is obvious that *Inheritance* with its narrative structure, in a very close relationship to its meaning, with its third person narrator, with its "specific moral problem", not to mention the artistic skillfulness of Jedediah Berry – the rich imagery, the heavy symbolism, which assigns him a meritorious place among the most gifted postmodernist writers –, meets the requirements of the New Criticism:

> First, the text has a "structure" because it is something made, something assembled from or discovered from an assembly of language. This is the sense in which T. S. Eliot spoke of "technical excellence", and of the artist "surrendering himself to the work to be done". Second, the text has a "structure" because its tensions and discords may be experienced-read-as a unified whole. As something made, the structure of the text is alienated from the artist's consciousness. Eliot speaks of the "impersonality of great art: it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." But as something experienced, the structure of the text constitutes consciousness. Richards asserts that this experience unifies the personality such that the "mind does not shy away from anything, it does not protect itself with any illusion, it stands uncomforted, unintimidated, alone and self-reliant". […]The use of symbolism, rather than plot, to structure the text is the proverbial hallmark of high modernism.[25]

[20] http://www.behindthename.com.
[21] Jedediah Berry, *op. cit*., p. 36.
[22] *Idem*, p. 37.
[23] Jedediah Berry, *op. cit*., p. 37.
[24] *Ibidem.*
[25] Raoul R. Ibarguen, *Narrative Detour: Henry Miller and the Rise of New Critical Modernism* <http://www.henry-miller.com/narrative-literature/new-criticisms-modernist-canon.html>

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