SCHOLARLY COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: THE FOUR "SHOWERS OF GOLD"

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Abstract: Cognitive dissonance has been described as the result of a conflict or opposition between one's expectations and what he/she really gets at the end of his/her quest—or research, rather. In this case, a reader who knows that there is a Greek/Roman myth about Danae giving birth to Perseus after Zeus/Jove visited her as a shower of gold, expects that Zane Grey's novel Shower of Gold(a really peculiar case), Eudora Welty's "Shower of Gold" and Donald Barthelme's "A Shower of Gold" should share a number of characteristics or/and elements. As, generally speaking, they do not, frustration sets in and the reader/critic/scholar attempts to reduce the (effects of) cognitive dissonance and come to terms with what he/she chose to investigate. The paper is basically written from an ironic and self-ironic stance, since while experiencing the title syndrome, the author had to find a way/ways of reducing it, too.

Keywords: Shower of gold, cognitive dissonance, frustration, Grey, Welty, Barthelme

We intend to present here the mental/psychological implications of our readerly (scholarly) experiences while faced with three American narratives of (basically) the same title (just one extra indefinite article, "A," in one of them), that seem to have borrowed it from Greek/Roman mythology.

Chronologically, somehow, the first one is Shower of Gold by Zane Grey (1872-1939); the hesitation in "somehow" above is given by the fact that the western novel was first published as Desert Gold: A Romance of the Border in 1913, and as Shower of Gold: A Western Story (described on the blurb as "an unabridged version of Desert Gold) as late as 2007; so, the recent editorially marketing title does not precede the other two stories, i.e. "Shower of Gold" by Eudora Welty—of 1948/1949, and "A Shower of Gold" by Donald Barthelme—of 1963/1980.

"Shower of Gold" is not a very usual phrase—or title—so one needs to do his homework and find out what it is about—and that is the ancient Greek (then Roman) mythological story of Danae; it seems to have first been depicted on a vase dated 450-425 B.C., then in Bibliotheca—a history of the gods and an important source of mythology by Apollodorus (ca 140-115 B.C.); it had also been mentioned in Homer's Iliad (XIV) and, later, in Virgil's the Aeneid (VII), as well as in Ovid's Metamorphoses (V)—the books of Amores (Book II, Elegy IX). And it is in Ovid that the Venetian master Titian found his inspiration for at least five oil-on-canvas paintings (1553-1556), which, in their turn, influenced Rembrandt, Van Dyck, and Klimt, all of whom painted versions of the scene; and the scene is that of Danae receiving the "shower of gold," while accompanied by Eros, or a nursemaid, and/or a dog.

The legend or myth is about Acrisius, the ancient King of Argos, great-grandson of Danaus (hence Danae ?) and twin brother of King Proetus of Tiryus--and father of Danae. Warned by an oracle that she would bear a son by whom he, Acrisius, would be slain, he confined his

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daughter in a bronze chamber open to the sky (a tower, a cave or a dungeon in different versions); but the all powerful and very amorous god Zeus visits her in the form of a shower of golden light and Danae gives birth to Perseus. Mother and child were then placed in a wooden box and cast into the sea, and they drifted ashore on the island of Seriphos, ruled by King Polydectes; Perseus grew up there to be a hero, killing the gorgon Medusa and rescuing Andromeda among his feats of valor. Perseus, Danae and Andromeda return to Argos, whence they follow King Acrisius who had gone to Larissa; here, during some funeral games, Perseus accidentally kills his grandfather with a discus—so, prophecy fulfilled.

Perseus—eventually husband of Andromeda—thus remains one of the pleasantest heroes in Greek mythology, or, as Homer described him, "the most resourceful of all men," and all a reader can do is wait and see how he figures in Barthelme's postmodernist story—or side by side with Zeus in Welty's Mississippi story (cognitive dissonance on its way!); in other words, we have a mythical story about gods and humans, with their virtues and foibles, about kings and royal virgins, monsters and exciting encounters, mysterious births and deaths, an oracle and a prophecy—which, of course, cannot be avoided--, adventures and exploits, miracles and supernatural occurrences, ambition and retribution; i.e. all the stuff and ingredients that provide a myth with open disponibilities for later use; and, last but not least, about a "shower of gold" that can or cannot become emblematic for a series of 20th-century echoes, prolongations, appropriations, pastiches, take-offs… And thus any reader's expectations are very high in terms of how transnational literary traditions are built.

The first of these send-ups (or spoofs, even) looks almost like an accident, in so far as the title is concerned, since Zane Grey had never intended to write a Shower of Gold; instead, his Desert Gold is a typical western story (by an author better known for his Riders of the Purple Sage, The Vanishing American, The Lone Star Ranger, The Rainbow Trail…--to which some other ninety formula westerns could be added) about tenderfoot Richard/Dick Gale—the good guy--, and the vicious bandito Rojas in the Arizona desert; and another character, Ladd, who wishes happiness to the bride (Nell) and bridegroom (Gale), encouraging the latter with "she's sure your shower of gold"; most likely, what Ladd—and Zane Grey, for that matter—had in mind was an evergreen plant, and its flower, called "shower of gold" (Galphimia glauca or golden thryallis)—and there goes our Greek myth into complete oblivion and our scholarly expectation into another frustration. Then, one can also remember that, somewhere else in the narrative, "Lluvia d'oro" had been used in a description, but neither of these point to any kind of allusion to the ancient legend; so the comparativist's frustration increases as his cognitive dissonance acquires more uncomfortable accents; so we will need to find more ways of reducing it in the other two examples.

As a matter of fact, this may be as good a place as any other to attempt to at least vaguely clarify our central title concept and our source of dissatisfaction. The main assumption behind the psychological discussion about cognitive dissonance—a commonsense one, in fact—is that all individuals seek consistency between their expectations and some type of reality (a literary one included)—also the object of our cognition; so—consistency among our various cognitions, beliefs or opinions. Thus, our own knowledge of literature and literary history and theory results in believing that if Faulkner, for instance, writes "A Rose for Emily" in 1930 and another (American) writer publishes fifteen years later a story titled "Roses for Emily," any reader's expectations would be that the two stories are somehow related, or that the second writer was influenced by Faulkner and (implicitly) acknowledged it, or that the second narrative is a parody, pastiche, spoof, burlesque… of the former and so on; in no case would he, this reader, accept the idea that the two titles are similar/identical by some kind of weird accident; and this would result in cognitive dissonance and our reader (ourselves) would attempt, once again, to reduce or eliminate the discomfort and restore (psychological) balance by finding possible explanations (if there are any).

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Psychologists (Leon Festinger may have been the first) equated such a situation, among readers (in our case) who seek literary consistency, with a resulting mental stress or discomfort, as when one holds two or more contradictory beliefs or ideas or values at the same time; this frustration makes them motivated to try to reduce the dissonance—i.e. write a paper (like this one), for instance, in which to identify enough elements in the two/three or more stories that justify their being read and commented together in virtue of their title/s. Our own belief in consistency conflicts with those of the editors of Zane Grey's novel, or Eudora Welty or Donald Barthelme, who seemingly believe that they can use a title like "(A) Shower of Gold" for stories that have nothing or very little to do with the Danae myth—its characters, events and situations…--or with one another.

Other psychologists (John Dollard, Neal Miller, Roger Barker, Leonard Berkowitz…) would advise that such a frustration in a restless reader, as a result of the failure to obtain the desired or expected goal (consistency between myth and stories), may lead to aggressive behavior—but not always and not necessarily, though one may think of one's decision to write a paper and submit it to the attention of others as a form of aggression (elsewhere we discussed the problem of the writers' arrogance). But what we think we should focus on is the reduction of dissonance (something we probably have striven for all our life), which may be done (see Festinger) by: 1—changing our opinions (why, in fact, could not several unrelated stories have exactly the same title?); 2—new information acquired that overweighs the dissonant beliefs (facts in the intellectual biographies and in the work of the three writers that may explain their choice of the title); 3—decrease the importance of the cognitions (beliefs, opinions), and forget about Greek myths and American stories, and write another paper—or no paper at all.

Finally, we decided to look more attentively (having dismissed the Zane Grey novel as part of the dissonance) at the other two stories and writers—option two of the above. Eudora Welty (1909-2001), a Southern writer—a Mississippian, like Faulkner--, author of over forty short stories, five novels (The Robber Bridegroom—1942, Delta Wedding—1946, The Optimist's Daughter—1972…), three collections of nonfiction and one children's book, describes her own role as a writer in such essays as "How I Write" (1955), "Place in Fiction" (1955), "The Point of the Story" (1978): the importance of being an observer (she was also a photographer), the paradox of human relationships, mythological influences (n.b.), folk idiom and customs, conveying a sense of the inexplicable (perfect in reducing cognitive dissonance)…

Her 1949 The Golden Apples is a sequence of seven interrelated tales about a fabulous, invented small Mississippi community named Morgana, "a little town where everybody was living in a sort of dream world" (an important element in saving the reader from cognitive dissonance); Welty's magical realism method is sustained by borrowings from Greek and Celtic mythology, from Sir James Frazer's The Golden Bough, from local rumours and folk tales; the title itself sends one back to William Butler Yeats' "The Song of Wandering Aengus" and this hero's quest for "the golden apples of the sun" (the "shower of gold" is already close by); while "(Fata) Morgana" is the Italian name for the Arthurian sorceress Morgan le Fay, antagonist of King Arthur (whose half-sister she was) and Queen Guinevere, otherwise a phenomenon of atmospheric optics, a mirage that causes objects to be distorted, inverted, and become unrecognizable (like Zeus in the form of King MacLain—see infra).

In "Shower of Gold" (first published in the Atlantic Monthly, May 1948, pp.37-42, and written in one day of October 1947) Mrs. Katie Rainey, the narrator who can both "churn and talk," tells, from a slightly ironic stance, the story of her neighbor, an albino woman named Snowdie, a "sweet and gentle" mother of twins, caught in a failed marriage to King MacLain; after the tryst with her wayward husband (which caused her to become pregnant with Lucius Randall and Eugene Hudson, neither of them albino), the narrator refers to her as looking "like more than the news had come to her. It was like a shower of something had struck her, like she'd been caught in something bright."

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And this is just about all that there is in terms of consistency with the ancient myth: acquiescent Snowdie and her twins (who, later, were to scare away their father on some Halloween afternoon) do not fit the Danae-Perseus kinship, while King (i.e. Zeus!)—a non-practicing lawyer who becomes a traveling tea and spice salesman—is so infrequently present that he seems, to one critic, almost a figment of Katie Rainey's imagination (whose gossipy voice dominates the narrative); the character may have (like Zeus, and Aengus, or Perseus even) the features of a mythic—at times ubiquitous-- wanderer (with a penchant for disguise—into a shower of gold?—and a flair for the dramatic, with mysterious appearances and disappearances in Morgana) from town to town, state to state and from one woman to another (with a host of illegitimate children scattered throughout the country); but he is fundamentally a flat, comic, untrustworthy character, a classical trickster figure who even faked his death from the very beginning of the story—"a real familiar stranger" throughout and "a willful and outrageous… scoundrel": "With men like King, your thoughts are bottomless. He was going like the wind."

Thus faced with Welty's cognitive dissonance, the reader can find two rather narrow ways out; one has already been suggested—Morgana, where everything is distorted, inverted, upside-down, so both King and Snowdie (Rainey and Snowdie—anything here?)could be completely deformed images of Zeus and Danae, and a totally absent Perseus; and the second, in the author herself, who tells this reader, in her "On Writing," that "there is no explanation outside fiction for what the writer is learning to do"; so you can experience any sort and any number of cognitive dissonances, as you will just have to live with them; no room for scholarly frustrations, therefore.

Our last "shower of gold" author, Donald Barthelme (1931-1989), once (at least) described as the father of postmodernist fiction, does not seem to care about his readers anyway (their occasional cognitive dissonances included); he thus often reminds them they are reading a story (and nothing else) and that (in his novel The King, 1990) "the thing about books is, there are quite a number you don't have to read" (so, save yourself trouble!); and Jacob Appel may have remembered this when, in 2010, he thought Barthelme was "the most influential unread author in US history." Not unlike Welty, he is the author of short stories (over one hundred this time), four novels (the 1967 Snow White and the 1975 The Dead Father among them), and one children's book (with his daughter). His two brothers Frederick (b. 1943) and Steven (b. 1947) are also writers of fiction.

Barthelme's existentialist and absurdist influences include Pascal, Husserl ("transcendental phenomenology"), Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Ionesco, Beckett, Sartre, Camus…; hence his angst and his angry sado-masochism, irony, skepticism, tragic humor, amoral absurdity and nihilism in unsettling narratives constructed as accumulations or juxtapositions of seemingly unrelated details, disjointed syntax and fractured dialogues, surrealist collages, and erudite allusions (such as "a shower of gold").

This celebrant of unreason, chaos and decay seems to be telling his readers that he can always take a well-known folk tale (like that of "Snow White" in the novel of that title) or a myth (like that of Zeus-Danae-Perseus in "A Shower of Gold") and reinterpret—or misinterpret—it in a postmodern way with no worry about consistency, indebtedness or other parallel re-interpretations and let his readers worry instead; and here we are.

"A Shower of Gold" (The New Yorker, December 28, 1963, i.e. fifteen years after Welty's "Shower of Gold") seems to be addressing Barthelme's constant theme—absurdity—most clearly (if such an adverb does not become oxymoronic here); as he himself explains (in two interviews), "around the time that was written, a debased Sartrean language was on every lip. Peterson's barber in the story has written four books called The Decision to Be and the television people are all babbling madly about authenticity… The piece was not about values but about language"; and "the key line is 'How can you be alienated without first having been connected.' I'm very fond of the barber…"

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Peterson is a minor artist, a sculptor who needs money, so he answers an ad to take part in an existentialist TV game show "Who Am I?" (how else?!), meant to introduce a fantastic world (of alienation, estrangement, desperation, anguish, loneliness, a sense of abandonment, anonymity of course, sickness, a Godless Nietzschean universe, nothingness) "ridden by the jargon of analysis, business, and pop existentialism (all crude borrowings from Nietzsche, Buber, Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Fromm) and by the pressures of politics, money and sexual freedom that there is no room left for him." (Flower, p.9) During his first encounter with the producer, Peterson proves to be familiar with the learning ability of mice, schizophrenics' fingerprints, what dreamers do with their dreams, and, also, that he has a large liver.

Peterson's workshop, or "studio," is in a loft on lower Broadway where, at the time of the story, he is working on a post-modernist sculpture titled Season's Greetings, and made up of a combination of three auto radiators (showers of heat?) welded together. The number of individuals he encounters is meant, probably (a must word in any such commentary), to help reveal who he is: Miss Arbor in the TV Graybar Building on Lexington Avenue (in New York City); a cat-piano player with a "disingenuous smile," who can produce tail-notes and paw-notes (art-through-suffering) and tells Peterson he is surrounded by "a gigantic conspiracy"; three freedom-loving hippy-girls from erotic California (Sherry—who quotes from Pascal--, Ann, and Louise); President Lyndon B. Johnson himself, who rushes in his loft with twelve Service Men and smashes the three radiators and other sculptures; a karate expert "in pajamas" and an airline pilot in full uniform; Peterson's barber, named Kitchen, who also quotes from Pascal—and Nietzsche (see supra); his dealer, who speaks about "the possibilities of authentic selfhood"… Other inexplicable and/or hilarious references, brought together by the roll-the-dice mentality of the author, include "Golden Earrings"—a song from a 1947 film with Marlene Dietrich, a Debussy score for a sacred drama, Tchaikovsky's 1869 overture to Romeo and Juliet, a 1944 hit by David Rose, an "Olivetti showroom" where people could type crazy messages, a German expressionist painter (Emil Nolde, 1867-1956)…

And, toward the end of the TV show and of the story, Barthelme remembers the myth, so he has his character humbly confess: "My mother was a royal virgin… and my father a shower of gold." So he is Perseus; or rather Hamlet's godlike man: "'As a young man I was noble in reason, infinite in faculty, in form express and admirable, and in apprehension…' Peterson went on and on and although he was, in a sense, lying, in a sense he was not." The "on and on" above probably included all of Act II, Scene 2 in Hamlet, while the Prince, in a "room in the castle," talks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculties! In form and moving, how express and admirable! In action, how like an angel! In apprehension, how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so." (pp.956-7)

"In a sense" the reader feels, while reading this story, as if anything could happen—and it does happen—from sentence to sentence; looking for any consistency or coherence of any kind (logical, narrative-literary, rhetorical…) can always be answered by "this is the literature of the absurd," or "this is po-mo"…, a mixture of levels, forms and styles, irrationality, nihilism, meaninglessness and arbitrariness; i.e. we all live in an entropic world (like Peterson's) in which communication is impossible (so what are we trying to do here?) and illusion (Morgana?) is preferred to reality; or this is the negative criterion, by which all we know is we know nothing (Socrates) and only the madman is absolutely sure (R. A. Wilson) in a purposeless universe; a world where the "words of the Teacher/Congregator/Gatherer/Preacher—in various translations and interpretations--, son of David, King of Jerusalem" are "Meaningless! Meaningless!" (Ecclesiastes, 3rd-century B.C.)

We can easily remember now that Barthelme himself was a teacher/professor (in Houston, Boston, Buffalo and New York), while an internet site titled Donald Barthelme's Syllabus

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informs us—tireless and already cognitively dissonant readers—that we can find "a list of 81 books that the writer Donald Barthelme would give to his students as suggested reading material"; number 74 in this list is "Collected Stories—Eudora Welty"; but, having learned our lesson, we will not ask why he chose to give Welty's title once he knew about her story, as the answer is simple: no use to think about reality, existence, mind, meaning, truth, value…, parallelisms, influences, comparative literature…, because everything is absurd—criticism included. All that remains is frustration and dissonance—and Peterson's/Barthelme's own absurd conclusion: "Everybody knows the language but me"; or the complementary one of Zhuangzi/Chuang Tzu or Master Zhuang (4th century B.C.)—probably the real father of the absurd: "Words are for meaning; when you've got the meaning /which is meaningless, is it not?/ you can forget the words"; q.e.d.

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