IMAGES OF DEATH IN PAUL HARDING'S "TINKERS"

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Abstract*: The present paper explores the meticulously-created imagery of death that Paul Harding's* "Tinkers" *offers through the metaphor of the protagonist's vocation – that of repairing clocks – and the precision with which the author examines the details and the fragile relation between life and death through the experiences of three generations of a New England family. The image of George Washington Crosby lying on his deathbed appears to be Harding's technique of reinforcement of the large spectrum view he wants to give to the novel but also to the attention to details, indicating at the little wheels that keep human memory running.*

Keywords*: imagery, death, memory.*

Paul Harding's meticulously examining novel that follows the chaotic world of several generations has the same purpose of a family saga, entangling a web of characters with only one result: illuminating life's most profound experience, death. *Tinkers* (2009)[1] a "powerful celebration of life in which a New England father and son, through suffering and joy, transcend their imprisoning lives and offer new ways of perceiving the world and mortality"[2] follows the lives of three generations of a family whose members complement one other, mirroring the precision with which life passes by. Yet, it is not a novel about the tragedy of dying but rather about the process of the loss of life. The precision with which Harding packs an incredible amount of detail into the story reflects that of the protagonist as he performs his vocation of a clock repairman. The author's luxuriant style in the story betrays how much he trusts his reader's instinct. In his meditation about the spiritual meaning of cold, Harding implies that coldness actually forces us to acknowledge the frailty of life and remember what is important: "Be comforted in the fact that the ache in your heart and the confusion in your soul means that you are still alive, still human, and still open to the beauty of the world, even though you have done nothing to deserve it. And when you resent the ache in your heart, remember: You will be dead and buried soon enough" (Harding, 2009: 72). The protagonist thinks of cold mornings as being filled with "heartache about the fact that... we are not at ease in this world" (*Idem*) but at the same time believes that the ache in the heart actually reminds us that we are still alive.

Using the term "story" for Harding's mosaic of life experiences is dangerous as the novel has a setting, but no real distinguishable story structure:

> I think that the natural source you're talking about is "plot," something in which I'm not all that interested. If you have a good character, you don't need much plot. Plot emerges as a function of character. I also have a stylistic habit of laying the story out in full, right away, so that I can't resort to any kind of trickery, or what Thomas Mann called "mere effect" later on (e.g. "but his mother was really a HORSE!" etc.). The story is in the telling. I also strongly believe that knowing what's going to happen actually creates wonderful dramatic tension; it's just sourced in a different stratus of the writing. There's a tension that is created by what is inevitable. The more you become implicated in the character, the more

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[1] Won the 2010 Pulitzer Award for fiction.

[2] Pulitzer Prize Fiction 2010.

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> you start to dig your heels in against his inevitable and clearly declared demise. *Tinkers* is structured as a kind of countdown to the protagonist's death. The eight days it takes for him to die are also analogous to how long a standard wall clock will run before it stops and must be rewound, which dovetails with certain thematic variations in the book. (Arni)

The narrative centres around George Washington Crosby's final eight days, his deathbed delirium of elegiac images, pinpointing the complex wheels that keep memories turning in people's minds. No one can tell if George is senile or if he is experiencing the inevitable physical consequences of his condition. However, the novel abounds in intense moments of illumination and introspection that underline both the dread and awe of life, reminding of the implacable ticking down of a person's time. The metaphor of the clock's spinning wheels alluding to George's last spins between life and death is opening a new whole world full of vibrancy and meaning. Throughout *Tinkers* the narration alternates between the life experiences of the three paternal figures: George, Howard, and Howard's father. The legacy of consciousness and the quest for identity from one generation to the next is evident through the experiences of all three protagonists. This is also an idea developed by Naipaul who believes that "[i]t is as if we all carry in our makeup the effects of accidents that have befallen our ancestors, as if we are in many ways programmed before we are born, our lives half outlined for us." (Naipaul, 1987)

Harding offers a rich, rewarding journey that takes incredible patience and willingness to arrive at a revelation. Much of the tension of the story is centered on the way in which Howard's leaving his family without a warning affected his 12 years old boy. Without having many action scenes, the novel illustrates the sad truth of the past disappearing forever, together with the extinction of a person. George's gaze upon his approaching death shows Harding's somber analysis of the effect of death on the living and dying. He tediously takes us back to Crosby's impoverished country childhood, sweeping us into the thoughts of a dying old man, exploring the relationship between him and his epileptic father, who leaves his family after biting, in one of his seizures, his son's hand and after learning about his wife's plan of institutionalizing him.

George Crosby is confined to a hospital rented bed, in the middle of the living room of the house he built, surrounded by the antique clocks he had repaired and collected over the years and by his family members and friends who have come to say goodbye. The irony of the scene is that, unlike most deathbed scenes where souls float upward to heaven, George is trapped in a situation where everything crashes down and collapses on top of him; he can do nothing about it, not even control his own body, similarly to the consequences of a seizure. He is hallucinating about crawling insects, collapsing walls and debris from the ceiling and roof that start to shower over his bed, bringing down all kinds of objects – photographs, rusty tools, and parts of antique clocks. On several occasions in the story, Harding compares the wires to veins and the insulation to tongues, giving meaning to the house and life to the objects it contains:

> The second floor fell on him, with its unfinished pine framing and dead-end plumbing (the capped pipes never joined to the sink and toilet he had once intended to install) and racks of old coats and boxes of forgotten board games and puzzles and broken toys and bags of family pictures – some so old they were exposed on tin plates – mall of it came crashing down into the cellar, he unable to even raise a hand to protect his face. (...)The roof collapsed, sending down a fresh avalanche of wood and nails, tarpaper and shingles and insulation. There was the

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> sky, filled with flat-topped clouds, cruising like a fleet of anvils across the blue. George had the watery, raw feeling of being outdoors when you are sick. The clouds halted, paused for an instant, and plummeted onto his head. (Harding, 2009: 9)

As George dies, Harding uses powerful metaphors, in describing the transcendence of his body from life to death:

> [T]he dark blood retreated from his limbs. First, it left his feet, then his lower legs. Then it left his hands. He was aware of this only from a great distance. When the blood left, it was as if it had evaporated; it was as if the blood had turned to some fumy spirit too thin to carry its own minerals. And so, it evaporated and had left a residue of salt and metal along the passages of his dry veins. His bloodless legs were hard like wood. His bloodless legs were hard like wood. His bloodless legs were dead like planks. His bone-filled feet were like lead weights that were held by his dried veins – his salt-cured, metal-strengthened veins, which were now as tough as gut, and strong as iron chains. (Harding, 2009: 29)

As the hours pass, George detaches himself from reality and is transported to places from his past, focusing sharply on Howard, his father, who travelled from town to town, selling goods from his wooden wagon and who also took pleasure in fixing and mending broken items, earning his living as a tinker and a peddler of household goods. But Howard's world breaks apart, not in death, but in terrible epileptic seizures that have a reverse-image parallel in the ticking of George's clocks:

> Tinker, tinker. Tin, tin, tin. Tintinnabulation. There was the ring of pots and buckets. There was also the ring in Howard Crosby's ears, a ring that began at a distance and came closer, until it sat in his ears, then burrowed into them. His head thrummed as if it were a clapper in a bell. Cold hopped onto the tips of his toes and rode on the ripples of the ringing throughout his body until his teeth clattered and his knees faltered and he had to hug himself to keep from unraveling. This was his aura, a cold halo of chemical electricity that encircled him immediately before he was struck by a full seizure. (*Ibidem*, pp. 15-16)

With Harding, narrative memories are part of some chaotic but rational order of things in which the body is not what matters the most; its impermanence augmented by the characters' easiness to disconnect from their physical selves also explains George's painstaking attention to clocks. George's reflections transform *Tinkers* into an investigation about the meaning of life. The distance between the three Crosbys is the cause of George's strange sense of physical self, alimented by Howard's reluctance to share with his son the story of his own father, the minister, who showed signs of mental illness and was escorted out of his home, without ever being seen again by his family:

> I realized that this thought was not my own but, rather, my father's, that even his ideas were leaking out of his former self. Hands, teeth, gut, thoughts even, were all simply more or less convenient to human circumstance, and as my father was receding from human circumstance, so, too, were all of these particulars, back to some unknowable froth where they might be reassigned to be stars or belt buckles, lunar dust or railroad spikes. Perhaps they already were all of these things and my father's fading was because he realized this. (Ibidem, p. 22)

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Uncertain if his memories of his father will pass on to the next generations, and in an attempt to give infinity to his thoughts and memories, George tries to make a voice recording in which he recounts the events of his life, but after listening to it he is embarrassed by the way everything sounds out loud and burns the tape. Harding's novel that focuses on the mechanism of transmitting the message also sounds as if it were the product of a similar resentment. However, the unsuccessful attempt at an autobiography turns George into an agonizing moribund that wants to remember but is not capable of doing so in a controlled manner. The narrator actually appears to be George's literary executor, some kind of *tinker*, fixings and inserting a series of fragments about George's impressions of his father in order to provide a context that could explain George's life and memories as much as possible:

> I will remain a set of impressions porous and open to combination with all of the other vitreous squares floating about in whoever else's frames, because there is always the space left in reserve for the rest of their own time, and to my great-grandchildren, with more space than tiles, I will be no more than the smoky arrangement of a set of rumors, and to their great-grandchildren I will be no more than a tint of some obscure color, and to their great grandchildren nothing they ever know about, and so what army of strangers and ghosts has shaped and colored me until back to Adam, until back to when ribs were blown from molten sand into the glass bits that took up the light of this word because they were made of this world even though the fleeting tenants of those bits of colored glass have vacated them before they have had even the remotest understanding of what it is to inhabit them, and if they – if we are fortunate (yes, I am lucky, lucky), and if we are fortunate, have fleeting instants when we are satisfied that the mystery is ours to ponder, if never to solve, or even just rife personal mysteries, never mind those outside –are there even mysteries outside? (Harding, 2009: 10)

George loves the fixed precision of time but this need for order puts him in his final days at the mercy of chaotic forces and unattached to everyday human existence. Using one of the most common elements in all of literary history as a central metaphor in the book reflects the novel's complex (yet not complicated) structure. His passion for fixing, tinkering, building, and repairing things looks like the consequence of a childhood trauma about growing up in a *broken* family and longing for a *broken* paternal figure. On his deathbed George enters a state of ecstasy that augments the metaphysical suspense through the reproduction of Howard's pastoral daydreams:

> The quilt of leaves and light and shadow and ruffling breezes might part and I'd be given a glimpse of what is on the other side; a stitch might work itself loose or be worked loose. The weaver might have made one bad loop in the foliage of a sugar maple by the road and that one loop of whatever the thread might be wound from – light, gravity, dark from stars – had somehow been worked loose by the wind in its constant worrying of white buds and green leaves and blood-and-orange leaves and bare branches and two of the pieces of whatever it is that this world is knit from had come loose from each other and there was maybe just a finger width's hole, which I was lucky enough to spot in the glittering leaves from this wagon of drawers and nimble enough to scale the silver trunk and brave enough to pike my finger into the tear, that might offer to the simple touch a measure of tranquility or reassurance. (*Ibidem*, p. 8)

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In the end, all three paternal figures struggle with the same issue, the inability to have control over their own personas: George, because he is dying, Howard, because he is an epileptic and Howard's father, because he is mad. The message of the novel that comes in layers and images consists in the unity we use to measure life – the passing of time is not necessarily marked by clocks and calendars, even if a similitude can be observed, but by the accumulation of memories:

> Paul Harding's prose is like the interior of an antique clock; the copper wires of rhythm bound to sentences like brass gears that control the movement of loss. These marvelous mechanics propel readers through the provinces of memory – the angle of winter light on ankle-deep snow, the clink of metal spoons in wooden drawers, the missing father and his mule-drawn wagon making their way away from the embracing warmth of home.[1]

Although it may seem that Harding's main preoccupation in this novel was the exploration of the psychological impact of disease, the meditation of the ravages that age and disease bring upon the candour and righteousness of humanity, the project is more ambitious than that. The illnesses of the protagonists are only used as a dramatic way of presenting the limitations of the body, the disruption of the links between people, and, by extension, nature. The author's interest in the world's entireties (nature, time, memory, abandonment, parenthood, family, disease, grief, loneliness, death) shows a particular need to explore the period between the clock's few last ticks and final disappearance, the thin line between memory and reality, between life and death.

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