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“The Past Is Never Dead. It’s Not Even Past”: The Ambivalent Call of Nostalgic Memory in Richard Ford’s Short Story “Calling” (*A Multitude of Sins*, 2001)

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Abstract: This article focuses on Richard Ford’s short story “Calling,” collected in the volume entitled *A Multitude of Sins* (2001). It consists of the detailed recalling by a first-person narrator, from the vantage point of adulthood, of a duck-hunting outing with his father at a moment of acute family crisis when he was still a teenager. This episode, redolent of America’s nostalgic motif of male bonding and father-son transmission in the midst of mythical American nature, is shown to have proved a pathetic failure at the time, and the story stages—to pick up Svetlana Boym’s famous distinction between two main types of nostalgia—the enlightening “reflective” effects of recalling this moment of “restorative” longing for the protagonist. However, the highly analytical narrator does not consciously dwell upon the peripheral yet disturbing presence of two grotesque characters that, I contend, are the locus of the implicit meaning of the text. Through precise textual reading and references to Southern Gothic, I indeed argue that the subtext of “Calling” invites the reader to journey back into a region’s (the South’s) troubled collective past and to question its own relation to nostalgia. “Calling” thus also stages the ambivalence of nostalgic longing on the collective plane as it shows willful nostalgic recollection wavering in the face of the return of the historical repressed, that of America’s ineffable original sin.

Keywords: nostalgia; Richard Ford; pastoral; southern gothic; grotesque

1. Introduction

The first-person narrator of Richard Ford’s short story “Calling” confesses at the end of his tale:

My father lived thirty years after that morning in December, [when we went duck-hunting] on the Grand Lake, in 1961. By any accounting he lived a whole life after that. [. . .]

[. . .] I never saw him again [. . .].

Once, in our newspaper, early in the nineteen-seventies, I saw my father pictured in the society section [. . .].

Seeing this picture reminded me that in the days after my father had taken me to the marsh, and events had ended not altogether happily, I had prayed for one of the few times, but also for the last time, in my life. And I prayed quite fervently for a while and in spite of all, that he would come back to us [my mother and me] and that our life would begin to be as it had been. (*A Multitude of Sins*, Ford 2001, pp. 63–64)

This passage shows nostalgia literally, if fleetingly, at work. A teenager achingly longs for (*algia*) the recovery of home (*nostos*) as household: here, it is his father's return home that will bring back the perfect bygone days of family happiness. But the next sentence reads: "And then I prayed that he would die and die in a way I would never know about, and his memory would cease to be a memory, and all would be erased" (p. 64), which shows the nostalgic temptation being brushed aside, the hope for recovery yielding to the fantasy of erasure. However, the very narrative serves as contradiction to these dismissive words since its focus has precisely been the protagonist-narrator's detailed recalling, from the vantage point of adulthood, of that duck-hunting outing with his father at a moment of acute family crisis. By that time, his father had "gone off with a man," leaving wife and child "behind in New Orleans," and his "mother had let a black man [. . .] move into [their] house and into her bedroom." (p. 35). Furthermore, as the narrator tells us from the outset of his tale, it is precisely because "They're all dead now. My father. My mother. Dr Carter [my father's lover]. The black accompanist, Dubinion [my mother's lover]," (p. 35) that the call of nostalgic memory cannot be repressed and triggers off the need to tell, and therefore to keep a written trace of his parents, and more particularly, his father.

The short story thus hinges on an embedded nostalgic pull: thanks to his writing, the adult narrating-I returns to a childhood scene which the young narrated-I—pining for "how things were done when [his] father was [still] there" (p. 35)—experienced as an attempt to retrieve a lost family harmony.¹ The text, however, with its overwhelmingly bitter and dark tonality, belies any romantic hope in the possibility of recovery and reconstruction, and emphasizes irrecoverable loss. It therefore problematizes the straightforwardness of "restorative nostalgia" and opens up to the more unsettling space of "reflective nostalgia" (Boym 2001, p. 41). My purpose here will be more specifically to show how the highly archetypal episode that lies at the center of the story, a father-son reunion in the midst of idealized American nature, is turned into a counter-nostalgic topos. As defined by Jennifer K. Ladino in her introduction to her book *Reclaiming Nostalgia: Longing for Nature in American Literature*, "[n]ostalgia becomes 'counter-' when it is traditionally deployed to challenge a progressivist ethos. Counter-nostalgia is nostalgia with a critical edge. Counter-nostalgia depends upon a tactical reappropriation of more dominant strands of nostalgia through creative, often literary means; for that reason, its functions are historically contextual." (Ladino 2012, p. 15). Indeed, "Calling" does not only show that the lost home of one's nostalgic longing is often but an unreal place, a fantasy; I will argue that this highly private story requires that we look beneath the surface to see how Ford seeks to expose the morally-dubious mechanism of collective nostalgia that has enabled a region, the South, and a whole nation to obliterate history and rewrite it into myth. The progressivist ethos challenged by this story is that on which the "enlightened and forward-looking American" nation (Savoy 2002, p. 170) built its legitimacy. It originally rested on a number of biblical myths (those of the Promised Land, the Garden of Eden, Noah's Ark), themselves predicated on nostalgia, which made Americans God's chosen people and turned a historical moment into a Providential one. Yet, "[s]acred origins leave out the complexity of factors and the dynamics of power that characterize historical events" (Ladino 2012, p. 3). The "all-engrossing power of the Adamic idea" (Rezé and Bowen 1998, p. 24) has always fueled the American collective psyche, and "Calling," as an example of counter-nostalgic literature, acts as a reminder that "the American share[s] with his European forebears the burden of history and an imperfect nature." (Ibid.).

I will first focus on the more private dimension, namely on the way the failed hunting outing is experienced by the teenager, the act of narrating eventually completing the protagonist's bitter realization that his father had always been and would always remain out of his reach. The regressive journey into both romanticized nature and memory thus enables the protagonist-narrator's awakening

¹ This is how the narrator retrospectively analyzes the call his father gave him when he invited him to go duck-hunting: "[W]hen we spoke that day, he didn't sound to me like some man who was living with another man in St. Louis. He sounded much as he always had in our normal life when I had gone to Jesuit and he had practiced law in the Hibernia Bank building, and we were a family." (p. 38).

to a more mature, if bitter, perspective on his past, present and future life. Surprisingly however, the highly analytical narrator does not consciously reflect on the disrupting presence of the somewhat grotesque expert duck caller that had accompanied him and his father on their duck-hunting game. Yet, as I will contend in the second part, this eerie character turned guide into “dark marshy terrain” (p. 51) seems enough to tint the would-be pastoral moment with hues of Southern gothic. Indeed, Susan Castillo remarks on the “abundance, in texts by Southern writers, of references to the distorted, freakish, and absurd elements which seem to be woven into the texture of everyday life,” and she notes that in much recent criticism, the terms “the Southern Grotesque” and “the Southern Gothic” “are used interchangeably.” (Castillo 2004, p. 486).² Considering this aspect of the text will eventually lead me to consider how “Calling,” under pretext of picturing a man’s individual negotiation of nostalgic remembrance through articulated language, finds its full meaning in its implicit invitation to journey back into a region’s troubled collective past, and to reflect on its own questionable relation to nostalgia. As explained by Susan Castillo:

In many ways, the style which critics call the Southern Grotesque can be described as a reaction to the discrepancy between the vision of the South as antebellum pastoral Arcadia on the one hand and the crude historical realities of a patriarchal, racist society on the other. It is thus instructive to wander through the gallery of freaks and deformities which abound in this genre, since they can offer us telling insights into exactly which unpalatable realities the South has repressed in its own vision of itself. (Ibid., p. 487)

Willful nostalgic recollection does not only fail the narrator; it is also blurred and eventually undone by the haunting return of the historical repressed, slavery. “The past is never dead. It’s not even past,” Faulkner—one of the most powerful embodiments of Southern Gothic and an author whose spectral presence can tellingly be felt in “Calling”—reminds us (Faulkner 1996, p. 85). Along with Teresa A. Goddu, we can say that “the Gothic becomes the mode through which to speak what often remains unspeakable within the American national narrative—the crime of slavery” (Goddu 2007, p. 63), or rather, considering the title of the collection in which “Calling” is included, the Gothic becomes the mode through which to speak America’s ineffable original sin.

2. The Pastoral Impulse

“Calling” obviously plays on the back-to-nature motif, and as such is part of these American nature narratives “often infused with nostalgia—for the western frontier, for unspoiled landscapes, for a pre-industrial golden age, or for pastoral communities with close connections to their environments.” (Ladino 2012, p. xiii). Father and son are identified from the start as two city-dwellers,³ their duck-hunting outing thus showing them to yield to what Leo Marx calls the “pastoral impulse”:

A notable fact about imaginative literature in America [. . .] is the number of our most admired works written in obedience to a pastoral impulse. By ‘pastoral impulse’ I mean the urge, in the face of society’s increasing power and complexity, to retreat in the direction of nature. The most obvious form taken by this withdrawal from the world of established institutions is a movement in space. The writer or narrator describes, or a character enacts, a move away from a relatively sophisticated to a simpler, more ‘natural’ environment. [. . . Its] significance derives from the plain fact that it is ‘closer’ to nature: it is a landscape that bears fewer marks of human intervention.” (Marx 1989, pp. 151–52)

² In *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O’Connor, one of the best-known representatives of Southern Gothic, devotes a whole essay to the importance of the Grotesque in modern Southern fiction. (O’Connor 1969, pp. 36–50)

³ The first sentence of the short story reads: “A year after my father departed, moved to St. Louis, and left my mother and me behind in New Orleans to look after ourselves in whatever manner we could, he called on the telephone one afternoon and asked to speak to me.” (p. 35)

In *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Frazier Nash records America's changing attitudes towards Wilderness, and shows the growing appreciation of it on a romantic mode by people who did not face it from the pioneer's perspective. In the early nineteenth century, wilderness was felt to pose "an exciting, temporary alternative to civilization" and by the end of the century, "the widespread appeal of the uncivilized" had turned to "a cult" (Nash 2001, pp. 51, 60, 145). After the closing of the frontier in 1890, pioneering "acquired added luster [. . .] and came to be regarded as important not only for spearheading the advance in civilization but also for bringing Americans into contact with the primitive." (Ibid., p. 145).⁴ As notably underlined by Frederick Jackson Turner, it was life in the wilderness that shaped the national character, and "by virtue of being wild, the New World was a clean state to which idealists could bring their dreams of a better life." (Ibid., p. 146). Americans' long-lasting attraction to wild spaces indeed cannot be separated from what Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr. calls "the towering mythology of the West." (Brinkmeyer 2007, p. 1).

In "Calling," the protagonists are thus heirs to a long tradition, and for them nature stands more particularly for the virgin space where a new page of the complex and pressured father-son relationship may be written. The pastoral impulse thus intersects with another archetypal topos: that of male bonding in the midst of American nature, especially in its variation of the coming-of-age tale that features hunting as a rite of passage, the father or father-figure initiating his son into adulthood through the transmission of knowledge about wildlife and hunting. "I had never been to [the camp]," the narrator confesses, "but I knew about it from boys at Jesuit who came here with their fathers [. . .]. It was a famous place to me in the way that hunting camps can be famously mysterious and have a danger about them, and represent the good and the unknown that so rarely combine in life." (p. 47). He also no doubt knows about it from his readings: American literature indeed teems with the recounting of such initiatory episodes, from Fenimore Cooper's *The Deerslayer* (1841), to some of Hemingway's "Nick Adams stories," to Faulkner's perhaps best-known short story "The Bear" (1935) (Lamothe 2008, pp. 169–71; Tréguer and Henry 2008, p. 264). Father and son turn to restored tradition or, in Eric Hobsbawm's words, "'a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual of symbolic nature which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition which automatically implies continuity with the past.'" (qtd in Boym 2001, p. 42).

Both father's and son's reactions indeed show that they initially respond to the call of myth:

"I'm calling up [. . .] to know if you'd care to go hunting in the fabled Grand Lake Marsh. [. . .] My ancient father had a trusted family retainer named Renard Theriot, a disreputable old *yat*. But Renard could unquestionably blow a duck call. So I've arranged for his son, Mr. Renard, Jr., to put us both in a blind and call in several thousand ducks for our pleasure." My father cleared his throat in the stagy way he always did when he talked like this—high-falutin' [. . .]. (p. 37)⁵

I *wanted* to go duck hunting, to go by boat out into the marsh that makes up the vast, brackish tidal land south and east of our city. I had always imagined I'd go with my father when I was old enough. And I *was* old enough now, and had been taught to fire a rifle—though not a shotgun—in my school. (p. 38)

[Renard Junior] had yet to blow one of the calls, but I wanted him to, wanted to see a V of ducks turn and veer and come into our decoy-set, the way I felt they were supposed to. (p. 54)

⁴ Jennifer K. Ladino also insists on the nostalgic dimension of the American nature myths of the frontier and the pastoral (Ladino 2012, p. 11).

⁵ The archetypal motif of father-son transmission is reinforced by the suggestion that the narrator's father was taken on the same outings by his own father.

The typographic emphasis on *wanted* and the repetition of the same verb (last two quotes) betray the child's naïve expectations, as reality is bound to fall short of his imaginary projection: "And what I saw, coming low over the decoys, [. . .] was only one duck. [. . .] In my dreams, there'd been hundreds of ducks, and my father and I shot them so that they fell out of the sky like rain, and how many there were would not have mattered because we were doing it together." (p. 61). The adult narrator had warned the reader in advance: "And I remember becoming nervous [when my father called], as if by agreeing to go with him [. . .]—as if by doing these altogether natural things (going hunting) I was crossing a line, putting myself at risk. [. . .] Disappointment was what I risked, I know now." (p. 39).

The narrative shows the hunting party precisely not to be a "natural thing" but a construct the child clings to for some time, all evidence to the contrary: "Naturally, I was thrilled to be there—even in my hated military school clothes with my drunk father dressed in tuxedo and the little monkey that Renard was, operating our boat. I believed, though, that this had to be some version of what the real thing felt like—hunting ducks with your father and a guide [. . .]." (p. 51). The child actually reverses the logic that presides over the hunting game: his disappointing dysfunctional experience, the simulacrum of a model scene, is in fact the real version of an imaginary representation that has allured him and his father alike, namely a myth that breeds on the nostalgic longing for sacred rites in the midst of a pristine American environment. Irony thus contributes to laying bare the child's romantic perspective. One also notes the presence of the opening adverb "Naturally" which, in the context, necessarily rings more literally than the weakened sense in which it is used, and ironically introduces a paragraph that depicts the young boy clinging to a fake idea, a nostalgic construct. The adverb is also ironical in that what spoils the scene is the father's out-of-place presence, as embodied by his drunken attitude but also precisely by elements that are linked to tamed nature, urban life, technological society and artifice:

[My father] was wearing a tuxedo with a pink shirt, a bright-red bow-tie and a pink carnation. He was also wearing white-and-black spectator shoes [. . .]. (p. 49)

My father had already gotten his black-and-white shoes muddy and scratched, and mud on his tuxedo pants and his pink shirt and even onto his forehead. He was an unusual-looking figure to be where he was. He seemed to have been dropped out of an airplane on the way to a party. (p. 55)

Beyond his inadequate attitude, the father's effeminate dress code weakens his symbolic role as the paternal figure and therefore saps the very core of the ritualistic and nostalgic motif behind the hunting game. The hunting outing unsurprisingly proves a fiasco. After several disappointing moments, the outcome is the child's anti-climactic choice of not killing the one duck that presents itself before him: "So that what I did was not shoot and lowered my gun." (p. 61). The cleft structure ironically foregrounds a non-action, while syntactical imbalance (the sentence is made up of a dangling subordinate clause and it ends on two incompatible verb forms: not shoot and lowered) blows to pieces the harmony supposedly fostered by such an idyllic moment. Furthermore, the refusal to shoot obviously goes counter to the phallic symbolism associated to gun-firing in such scenes.

The father, obviously disappointed, concludes: "'Come on, sonny boy. You've still got some growing up to do, I see.'" (p. 63). However, this authentic act of not-firing, which disrupts a fixed nostalgic myth, can be said to mark the child's real growth to maturity, his turning into a full-fledged person, into a man. A remark of the narrator's in the next paragraph might seem to sanction the father's appraisal: "And I am not interested in [. . .] causing that day to seem life-changing for me, because it surely wasn't." (p. 63). Yet, it is arguable that the absence of change in the boy's life is precisely what has enabled him to progress on the path of life: the regressive journey to idealized nature, by failing to change the boy's life back to his dreamed version of family life, has opened his eyes on the pitfalls of romantic fantasizing. Or, as underlined by Elisabeth Lamothe: "The topos of the hunting camp as a place of initiation to manhood is thus undermined in 'Calling': it is not a place where the narrator can bond with his father but one where he understands his own solitude and learns

the value of perceiving reality as it is.” (Lamothe 2008, p. 177). In parallel, clear-sighted writing about what remains a nostalgic memory, for all the shortcomings of the episode recounted, also seems to have helped the narrator reach greater maturity, which entails renouncing escapist attitudes: “And so the memory [of my father] was not erased. Yet because I can tell this now, I believe that I have gone beyond it, and on to a life better than one might’ve imagined for me. [. . . Since] that time, I have never imagined my life in any way other than as it is.” (p. 65). The modal opposition between the assertive “I can tell this [an honest account of the hunting party]” and the conjectural “a better life than one might’ve imagined” expresses a form of empowerment for the protagonist through clear-sightedness. And yet, throughout the story, the narrator seems strangely blind to two figures who, if truly faced, would bring him back to a more disturbing reality than that of his failed relationship with his father.

3. From Pastoral to Southern Gothic

The pastoral scene is clearly blurred by its taking place in the bayou surrounding New Orleans, “dark marshy terrain” (p. 51) into which an old *Yat*,⁶ Renard Junior, serves as a guide. The first description of this character suggests his strangeness: “A small stunted-looking man with a large square head and wavy black hair and wearing coveralls was hauling canvas bags full of duck decoys down to the boat.” (p. 48). Later, the duck caller is turned into an almost abnormal figure, as in: “Renard[’s lips] were big and sensuous. He was already an odd-looking man, with his star shirt, his head too big for his body—a man who was probably in his forties and had just missed being a dwarf” (p. 55), and “Renard Junior unexpectedly opened his mouth with his cigarette somehow stuck to the top of his big ugly purple tongue.” (p. 55). With his anomalous features, Renard seems to fit in the gallery of deformed or disfigured characters to be found in twentieth-century Southern fiction, a representative of the mode of the grotesque so characteristic of Southern Gothic. And his being brought back to the reign of animals or of things completes the process, the grotesque being also born of “the violation of basic categories [. . .], the conflict on the edges of the category system.” (Cassuto 1997, pp. 6–7). “This little *yat* rascal is Mr. Reynard Theriot, Junior,’ my father said, motioning at the small, wavy-haired man. ‘There’s some people, in New Orleans, who know him as Fabrice, or the Fox. Or Fabree-chay. Take your pick’” (p. 48) anticipates the already quoted “the little monkey that Renard was” (p. 51).

The familiar, frozen nostalgic scene of American myth—the very embodiment of “[r]estoration (from *re-staure*—re-establishment) [. . .], a return to the original stasis, to the prelapsarian moment” (Boym 2001, p. 49)—is obviously disrupted by the presence of such an uncanny figure. Richard Ford says about the genre of the short story: “Finally I do like best of all stories whose necessity is the implied recognition that someplace *out there* exists an urgency—a chaos, an insanity, a misrule of some dire sort which can end life as we know it [. . .].” (qtd in Tréguer and Henry 2008, p. 149). The would-be haven *out there* in a primeval natural environment precisely turns into the locus of a disturbing encounter with a chaos and a misrule that the protagonist was trying to escape. The pastoral retreat as stasis can be said to give way to a gothic journey (Donaldson 2007).⁷ As explained by Leonard Cassuto in *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture*, “the grotesque is a floating variable in the perceptual field, shifting with the boundaries of what is known and categorized [. . .]. The experience of the grotesque is active and highly volatile” (Cassuto 1997, p. xvi); and he adds: “The grotesque is that which is in constant motion on the edges of fundamental boundaries within [a] shared system.” (Ibid., p. 7). The fog that envelops the scene from the very beginning is proleptic of the way the hunting game will not have the well-defined contours of the idealized literary topos: “The morning air felt heavy and velvety, and a light fog had risen off the bayou [. . .]. The mist

⁶ Definition of *The American Heritage Dictionary Online*: “A member of a lower- and middle-class segment of the white population of New Orleans.” (<https://ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=yat>).

⁷ Susan Donaldson in her article “Faulkner’s Versions of Pastoral, Gothic, and the Sublime,” opposes the two notions of “pastoral retreat” as stasis and “gothic journey” as motion.

clung to my hands and face, and made my hair under my cap feel soiled.” (p. 48). The teenager longed to make a ritualistic, highly coded experience with his father and fantasized that it would be but the initial step towards a retrieval of the fixed order of his boyhood (normality in his eyes); instead, the duck-hunting outing projects him into a space of in-betweenness, and strands him onto uncertain ground: “[The grotesque object] generates a moment of hesitation between coding and decoding and recoding, which suspends our judgment. [. . . It] challenges the fixed system of physical harmony and proportion, and reintroduces movement in the perception of reality,” Marie Liénard-Yeterian explains (Liénard-Yeterian 2012, p. 98). A literally grotesque character, and thus “a figure for [one’s] essential displacement” (O’Connor 1969, p. 45), Renard Junior is what the teenager’s nostalgic dreams of recovered home collide head-on with, much more so than the simply ludicrous, out-of-place presence of the father.

Yet the short story goes further, as another man also seems to intrude upon the safe spaces the protagonist tries to take refuge in. This character is Dubinion, the mother’s “colored boyfriend” (p. 37), whose presence in the homeplace is felt to be intolerably intrusive by the young boy, as made clear by the initial presentation of him by the narrator: “My mother [let] a tall black man who was her accompanist move into our house and into her bedroom” (p. 35). The zeugma, which plays on an unsettling combination of two elements, efficiently expresses the boy’s perception of a disruption of the familiar. The somewhat childish shortcut and the boy’s instinctual rejection of Dubinion might obviously appear as elements of psychological verisimilitude, since a child will tend to reject their parent’s lover—whoever they may be—in the wake of a separation; however, the physical description of the lover, which emphasizes the massive presence of a black other, immediately situates the issue on a wider scale, that of racial identity. And tellingly, it is once again the uncanniness of the man that the narrator returns to again and again in his descriptions of Dubinion, whose presence in the house seems enough to cast a gothic shadow on the familiar setting:

He was a tall, skinny, solemnly long yellow-faced Negro with sallow, moist eyes, a soft lisp and enormous, bony, pink-nailed hands he could stretch up and down a piano keyboard. [. . .] He often parked himself in our living room, drinking scotch whisky [. . .]. He usually looked at me only out of the corner of his yellow Oriental-looking eye [. . .]. (p. 42)

[H]e played a chord in the bass clef, a spooky rumbling chord like the scary part in a movie. (p. 43)

He was a strange, powerful man who had seen life I would never see. And I am sure I was both afraid of him and equally afraid he would detect it, which probably made me appear superior and insolent and make him dislike me. (Ibid.)

The objectifying process discernible in “[Dubinion] often parked himself in our living-room” is complemented by the suggestion of his animal dimension through the hypallage in the following description: “I could see outside through the glass door to where William Dubinion was on his knees in the monkey grass that bordered my mother’s camellias.” (p. 37).

The hints at the grotesqueness of the character and the presence of the word monkey lead to a super-imposition of the two peripheral characters, Dubinion and Renard; later on, the evocation of Renard’s “big and sensuous [lips]” (p. 55)—a stereotypical attribute given to African Americans—and of his “dark complexion” (p. 48) confirm the matching portrait. It can thus be argued that what seems insistently to unsettle the protagonist is this reminder of the race issue in the South. For all his protestation, tellingly in passing (“It was still the race times then, and colored people were being lynched and trampled on and burnt out all over the [other] southern states. And yet it was just as likely to cause no uproar if a proper white woman appeared in public with a Negro man in our city

[. . .], New Orleans” [p. 41]), racial relations are no trivial matter for the protagonist,⁸ or for New Orleans. What the short story stages through the presence of these figures perceived on the mode of grotesque otherness is a return of the American repressed.

4. “The Past Is Never Dead. It’s Not Even Past”: America’s Ineffable Original Sin

With its uncanny characters, its spectral fog and its atmosphere of morbid decline, in other words with its gothic imprint, the story is clearly less about a young American unsuccessfully recapturing a lost idealized past than about America’s guilty past coming back to haunt him as a young sensitive Southerner. There is great irony in the fact that nostalgia seeks a return to the idealized side of the familiar, while the uncanny consists in the return of the darker side of the familiar which has been repressed. Freud theorized the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) as “that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar, [. . . something] that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light” (qtd in Savoy 2002, p. 171). The insisting presence of the gothic in American fiction and in Southern Literature in particular through what is known as Southern Gothic has more precisely been interpreted by critics as the expression of a return of the historical repressed, which comes to challenge the complacencies of the enlightened American project and its progressive ideology. As expounded by Eric Savoy in “The Rise of American Gothic,” “American gothic narratives [. . .] express a profound anxiety about historical crimes and perverse human desires that cast their shadow over what many would like to be the sunny American Republic” (Savoy 2002, p. 168). Those historical crimes are, first and foremost, the institution of slavery and the spoliation and massacre of the native inhabitants.⁹

And indeed, everything falls into place when, in this story set in the South, the natural setting associated with the topos of the ritualistic hunting party—the same pristine Eden-like setting the early settlers in quest for a lost innocence pined for—actually turns to be the “dark marshy terrain that is the Grand Lake and is in Plaquemines Parish and seems the very end of the earth.” (p. 51). The hackneyed simile of sunset as fire takes on added meaning when the sky turns “a dense, warm luminous red at the horizon, as if a fire was burning at the far edge of the marsh” (p. 58). The longed-for paradise regained is nothing but a hell-like place, “a flat black treeless expanse that ended in darkness” (p. 49), “a great surface of gray-brown water broken by low, yellow-grass islands where it smelled like tar and vegetation decomposing, and where the mud was blue-black and adhesive and rank-smelling.” (Ibid.). In such a context, the two peripheral figures of Renard Junior and Dubinion, perceived on a freakish or monstrous mode, are central because of their revealing role. Indeed, as is well-known, the grotesque mode is primarily used for its capacity to show hidden truths: the etymology of the adjective “monstrous” goes back to the Latin *monstrum* < *monstrare*—to show. Renard and Dubinion serve as markers of the country’s darker historical truths, in total opposition to the Edenic myth on which it laid its foundations. “Gothic images in America [. . .] suggest the attraction and repulsion of a monstrous history,” Savoy explains (Savoy 2002, p. 169). Exaggerated distortion is what allows for greater clarity of vision. As famously put by Flannery O’Connor: “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures.” (O’Connor 1969, pp. 33–34).¹⁰

⁸ As betrayed by the presupposition on which the fragment “it was just as likely to cause no uproar if a proper white woman appeared in public with a Negro man in our city” hinges: “proper white woman” takes for granted the implicit presence of the reverse adjective “improper” before “Negro man”, sapping the supposed open-mindedness of New Orleans inhabitants, protagonist included.

⁹ Leslie Fiedler, in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1966), writes: “Our literature as a whole at times seems a chamber of horrors disguised as an amusement park ‘fun house’, where we pay to play at terror and are confronted in the innermost chamber with a series of inter-reflecting mirrors which present us with a thousand versions of our own face [. . .]. Through these gothic images are projected certain obsessive concerns of our national life: the ambiguity of our relationship with Indian and Negro, the ambiguity of the Encounter with the nature, the guilt of the revolutionist who feels himself a parricide . . . ” (qtd in Liénard-Yeterian 2012, p. 81).

¹⁰ The full quote, in keeping with Flannery O’Connor’s religious perspective on a modern secular world which has lost all sense of evil, reads: “The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him,

The half-dozen references to the hunters' blind, that is their hiding place (pp. 53–59), are certainly no coincidence, nor is the fact that it is Renard's eyes that are said to be "penetrating." (p. 48).

"Calling" is the third story in a collection entitled *A Multitude of Sins*. The expression "A multitude of" clearly downplays the gravity of the sins committed, and the book indeed presents mostly commonplace characters engaged in petty transgressions. And if it can be argued that the book first and foremost foregrounds the sin of adultery, the latter is admittedly treated on a casual mode. However, through a subtle and tight network of allusions and symbols which it would be too long to detail here, the capital sins of America are exposed.¹¹ Moreover, the volume, with its nine short stories and its final novella entitled "Abyss," has been shown by critics to borrow its structure from Dante's *The Inferno*,¹² each of the first nine stories corresponding to one of Dante's circles of hell. It is telling that the first explicit references to this hypotext are precisely to be found in "Calling," in two passages respectively involving the disruptive characters of Dubinion (pp. 42–43) and Renard (p. 49).¹³ The first passage is particularly interesting:

The one thing I remember [Dubinion] saying to me was during the days before I went with my father to the marsh that Christmas [. . .] I came into the great shadowy living-room where [. . .] my mother had established a large Christmas tree with blinking lights and a gold star on top. I had a copy of *The Inferno*, which I had decided to read over the holidays [. . .].

"That's a pretty good book," he said in his soft lisping voice, and stared right at me in a way that felt accusatory.

"It's written in Italian," I said. "It's a poem about going to hell."

"So is that where you expect to go?"

"No," I said. "I don't."

"*Per me si va nella citta dolente. Per me si va nell'eterno dolore.*" (pp. 42–43)

Not only does the dialogue betray the teenager's patronizing stance (he obviously takes for granted that Dubinion is unlettered, showing his difficulty shaking off preconceived representations), but the passage interestingly pits Dante's *The Inferno* against the ritualistic celebration of Christmas, all complete with the decorated tree. In Western culture in general, and anglo-saxon culture in particular, Christmas time is arguably a moment imbued with nostalgic longing, with its celebration not only of the birth of Christ but also of family unity shared in the warmth of home; and the protagonist's mother is shown to cling to this chimera even in the face of family dissolution. Christmas is also a celebration predicated on a lie: that of the existence of Santa Claus, who eventually rewards all children, reassured that they are indeed well-behaved and on the side of good.

This element calls for one last argument. What the story also does is question the white South's historical propensity to believe in myth, its collective restorative nostalgic bias, as attested by its capacity to withdraw into fantasies of a glorious past. This the South did after military defeat in 1865 and the humiliating period of Reconstruction, when there surfaced a cult of antebellum splendor; just as the South was deemed the New South, it retreated into a legendary vision of itself, wrote a

and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."

¹¹ See Gay (2007, pp. 59–62). Through a network of allusions woven between the various stories, Ford refers to America's guilt towards the Indians and African Americans, but also alludes to the nation's responsibility in the elaboration of the atomic bomb.

¹² See in particular Tréguer and Henry's book *Lectures de Richard Ford: A Multitude of Sins*, pp. 81, 174 and 181–82.

¹³ The only other explicit reference is to be found in the story "Charity" (*A Multitude of Sins*, Ford 2001) on page 188.

“comforting collective script” through the creation of “a delusionary homeland” (Boym 2001, pp. 42–43), that of a golden Old South “gone with the wind.” This it also did when, in the late 1920s, a group of famous Southern writers known as The Agrarians published a manifesto: *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, that extolled the South’s rural way of life in opposition to the rampant industrialization of their region. The very title of this text betrays the potentially arresting power of nostalgia when it becomes a reactionary political tool. Faulkner, for all his ambivalence toward his region and his attachment to the outward signs of past Southern splendor,¹⁴ never shared the Agrarians’ romantic vision of a pastoral South, and at that same period, was producing the masterpieces that contributed to the flourishing of Southern Gothic (*Sanctuary*, *Light in August*, or later *Absalom! Absalom!*). Faulkner thus seems to fit Svetlana Boym’s definition of the “modern nostalgic” as someone who can be “homesick and sick of home, at once.” (Boym 2001, p. 50). Of Renard Junior, the narrator’s father says: “If you drive the streets of Chalmette, Louisiana, sonny, you’ll see men and women and children who’re all actually blood-related to Mr. Fabrice, standing in their little postage-stamp yards wearing hip boots with unlighted Picayunes in their mouths just like you see now.” (p. 55). It is telling that it is precisely through this character that Ford seems to pay homage to Faulkner, who famously explained that one day, he had “discovered that [his] own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about,” (Faulkner 1956, p. 27) and who spent his tormented career painting it with the most horrid and somber gothic hues, acknowledging in one of his late books, *Requiem for a Nun*: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” (Faulkner 1996, p. 85).

When he saw that his first novel, *A Piece of My Heart* (1976), which borrowed from Southern gothic, led critics to compare him with Faulkner, Mississippi-born Richard Ford decided to shun his Southern legacy: “I always wanted my books to exist outside the limits of so-called Southern writing. [. . .]he people who wrote about the novel all said that it was a Southern novel, and I just said, Okay, that’s it. No more Southern writing for me.” (Lee 1996, p. 229). And with a touch of humor, he found himself another excuse: “Fortunately [Eudora Welty and William Faulkner] have written about my birthplace so well, that I don’t ever have to worry about it. Mississippi is well on the literary map.” (Barton 2003, n.p.). Richard Ford indeed went on mostly to write about the West—*Rock Springs* (1987),¹⁵ *Wildlife* (1990)—and the Northeast (The Franck Bascombe Trilogy—1986–2014), venturing even into Mexico (The Ultimate Good Luck—1981) and Canada (Canada—2012). Similarly, the stories of *A Multitude of Sins* have various settings, all but two of which are not Southern.¹⁶ Yet the short story studied here proves that the call of Southern history is something Ford has not always been able to ignore. In the wake of his illustrious predecessor, Ford returns to a guilty past that is not even past; or, to borrow Philip Weinstein’s formulation about Faulkner, Ford hears “the call of a past that refuse[s] to pass.” (Weinstein 2010, p. 7).

5. Conclusions

When he starts his retrospective narration, the narrator of “Calling” already knows that his prayer, as a teenager, that his father would come back and that their life “would begin to be as it had been” (p. 64) is the expression of a chimera. The detailed narration of the failed duck-hunting episode never leaves much space to naïve hope, the nostalgic dream of returning to a perfect moment and place in

¹⁴ One thinks here of Faulkner’s house Rowan Oak, built in the colonial style and redolent of the typical plantation house with its cedar-lined drive and its large white columns, a house he acquired in early 1930 and spent his life working on.

¹⁵ The last story in this collection, “Communist” (*Rock Springs*, Ford 1987, pp. 215–35), already stages a hunting outing, this time between a teenager and his mother’s boyfriend, an episode to which the teenager returns as adult narrator twenty-five years later.

¹⁶ “Puppy” (*A Multitude of Sins*, Ford 2001, pp. 77–110), another story whose action is set in New Orleans, tellingly reproduces the motif of the uncanny and the return of the repressed, this time through the figure of a small puppy that intrudes upon the protagonists’ sacred homeplace and becomes an eerie presence, a network of allusions here again making of class and race relations a subtext to the story.

the past being clearly shown to be delusive. From the standpoint of adulthood, the narrator is able to analyze life's inexorable pull away from an ideal reality:

Life had already changed [before that day]. That morning represented only the first working out of particulars I would evermore observe. Like my father, I am a lawyer. And the law is a calling which teaches you that most of life is about adjustments, the seatings and reseatings we perform to accommodate events occurring outside our control and over which we might not have sought control in the first place. So that when we are tempted, as I was for an instant in the duck blind, or as I was through all those thirty years, to let myself be preoccupied and angry with my father, [. . .] I try to realize again that it is best just to offer myself release and to realize I am feeling anger all alone, and that there is no redress. We want it. Life can be seen to be almost nothing else sometimes than our wish for redress. As a lawyer who was the son of a lawyer and the grandson of another, I know this. And I also know not to expect it. (pp. 63–64)

However, this observant man does not realize that choosing the same profession as his father and his grandfather is yet another way of desperately clinging to the past. He also seems unable to widen his analysis and to envision the broader meaning of his private story. Although, according to Svetlana Boym, “reflective nostalgia has a capacity to awaken multiple planes of consciousness” (Boym 2001, p. 50), the narrator proves unable to see “the patina of time and history” that this kind of nostalgia lingers on (Ibid., p. 41). He indeed never shows any explicit awareness that the past as idealized homeland to which Americans are irresistibly tempted to return, as in the fabled stories involving a nostalgic relationship to pristine nature or to the Old South as antebellum Arcadia, is the fake past of myth, a myth that erases the darker truth. Surprisingly, the lawyer-narrator also fails to envisage the need for redress of the victims of American history.

In fact, referring to the characters of Renard Junior and Dubinion as little more than elements of the *décor*, and keeping them to the margins of the text, as it were, might well be a self-protecting attitude on the part of the protagonist-narrator, each reference to them betraying their strongly disturbing effect on him. These grotesque figures embody the burden of a guilty past—Southern, American and universal—irresistibly returning to the surface with the haunting force of the uncanny, that strangeness that catches the most innocent unaware, and forever unsettles them as it refers them back to their familiar yet repressed selves:

I looked at Renard Junior [after not shooting the duck. [. . .] He looked at me and made a strange face, a face I'd never seen but will never forget. He smiled and began to bat his eyelids in fast succession, and then he raised his two hands, palms up to the level of his eyes, as if he expected something to fall down into them. I don't know what that gesture meant, though I have thought of it often—sometimes in the middle of the night when my sleep is disturbed. Derision I think; or possibly it meant he merely didn't know why I hadn't shot the duck and was awaiting my answer. Or possibly it was something else, some sign whose significance I would never know. Fabrice [Renard Junior] was a strange man. No one would have doubted it. (p. 62)

It falls upon the reader to carry on the reflective process, and precisely to see themselves in the mirror that is held out to them; and because “[r]e-flection suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis” (Boym 2001, p. 49), they too must accept to be displaced from their comfortable landmarks and certainties in the process.

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