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Figures of Violence in Ron Rash's *The World Made Straight*

The Efficacy of Indirectness

FRÉDÉRIQUE SPILL

Résumés

EnglishFrançais

In *The World Made Straight*, Ron Rash's writing, faithfully anchored in the Appalachian territory, takes the form of a temporal maelstrom, in which times reverberate and history mingles with stories. The violence of past events—in this case a bloody episode of the American Civil War—is repeated in the present of narration, which evokes the rampant drug culture in the 1970s. From one period to the next, though its motivations have changed, mimetic violence invariably hits the members of the same community. Strikingly enough, the omnipresent figures of violence in Rash's fiction are likely to adopt circuitous representational strategies. Their evocative power is reinforced by repetition, their inscription in ordinariness and the poetization of details that conceal as much as they reveal the multiple causes of violence.

Dans *The World Made Straight*, l'écriture de Ron Rash, fidèlement ancrée dans son territoire appalachien, se déploie dans un vertige temporel où les époques se font écho, la mémoire de l'histoire se mêlant à la fiction. La violence des événements passés—ici, un épisode sanglant de la Guerre de Sécession—se réverbère dans le présent de la narration, qui évoque le développement de la culture de la drogue dans les années 1970. D'une époque à l'autre, bien que ses motivations évoluent, la violence, constituée de façon mimétique, frappe invariablement les membres d'une même communauté. Or, bien qu'omniprésentes, les figures de la violence chez Rash privilégient l'esquive et la suggestion à travers l'attention portée au détail. Leur pouvoir d'évocation se trouve renforcé par la répétition, l'ancrage dans l'ordinaire et une poétisation du détail qui cache en même temps qu'il révèle les causes multiples de la violence.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : Les Appalaches, Guerre de Sécession, massacre de Shelton Laurel, fiction et histoire, répétition, mémoire, masculinité, violence du quotidien, modalités de représentation de la violence, esquivé, contournement, métalepse, détail

Keywords : Appalachia, the American Civil War, the Shelton Laurel Massacre, fiction and history, repetition, remembering, masculinity, quotidian violence, representing violence, indirectness, circuitousness, metalepsis, details

Texte intégral

“From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffered violence, and the violent bear it away.”
(St. Matthew 11:12)

- 1 In the fall of 1960 Flannery O'Connor, to whom the figures of violence in Southern literature certainly owe a lot, concluded a legendary talk with the following words¹:

I hate to think that in twenty years Southern writers too may be writing about men in gray-flannel suits and may have lost their ability to see that these gentlemen are even greater freaks than what we are writing about now. I hate to think of the day when the Southern writer will satisfy the tired reader². (O'Connor 50)

- 2 I would like to start this paper by appeasing Flannery O'Connor's qualms about the future—our present—of the literary tradition she represented so powerfully: southern letters are not dominated by white collars; they have not suffered from a detrimental sanitization sustaining the tired reader's indolent urge to “have her heart lifted up” (*Ibid.*, 48); that day has not yet come. In the early 21st century, Southern literature still draws a substantial part of its imaginative power from violence and its singular capacity for conjuring up freaks has remained unadulterated. The author of *The Violent Bear it Away* can therefore be reassured: Michael Kowalewski's remark that “American fiction is not for hemophobics” (11) still rings true.
- 3 Published in 2006, Ron Rash's *The World Made Straight* evidences the perseverance of a typically American literary formula involving gritty or lowlife characters—today's heirs of the gothic and grotesque figures that have haunted its pages for nearly two centuries—, many of who belong to “the hardscrabble underbelly of America” (Carpenter xiv). In keeping with the formula, Rash's third novel also contains a great deal of strong feelings, harsh words, conflicts, crimes and reprisals. In his *Raids on Human Consciousness. Writing, Anarchism and Violence*, while insisting on the indefinability of violence, Arthur Redding considers that excess is its commonest feature and may possibly be its hallmark: “Violence is that which by definition cannot be grasped; it is excessive” (34). At first sight, it seems that excess³—in the form of “the large and startling figures” evoked by O'Connor—forcefully operates in Rash's *The World Made Straight*, which he readily defines as “a meditation on violence⁴” with a universal import that reaches far beyond the Appalachian creeks and coves where it is set. But though violence certainly permeates both Rash's words and the world they depict, its representational strategies are circuitous, and probably all the more effective for their circuitousness. In *The World Made Straight*, as the present mirrors the past, violence is represented

through an endless series of echoes. Yet, though violent acts, whether present or past, are relentlessly disseminated throughout the narrative, Rash's poetics of violence, which is rooted at the crossroads of his two acknowledged obsessions, "history and landscape" (Zacharias), is likely to elude graphic demonstrations of violence. Instead, his narrative stance readily positions itself at the heart of the singular tension that either precedes or follows the facts. Consequently, whereas both the causes and consequences of violent actions are represented, the action itself is somehow abandoned to the folds of the text. This paper will therefore try to demonstrate the efficacy of circuitous narrative strategies in Rash's representations of violent occurrences.

History and stories: duality and continuity

- 4 The plot interweaves two distinct time periods and narrative threads that are equally violent: reminiscences of the Shelton Laurel Massacre—an exceptionally bloody episode of the American Civil War that occurred in early January 1863, in Madison County, North Carolina—are entangled with the action in the present of narration, which is set in the same region, covering about a year sometime in the 1970s⁵. The extreme violence of the massacre, in the course of which family, friends and neighbors turned against one another as a result of their conflicting political allegiances, is echoed by the evocation of the rampant drug culture over a century later: "The worst thing the nineteen sixties did to this country was introduce drugs to rednecks" (30)⁶. In the present, the community is considerably damaged by the effects of drug consumption, sometimes literally disfigured by the violence of the behaviors generated by peddling and purchasing drugs. From one period to the next, while the very nature of its motivations has shifted, mimetic violence⁷ keeps engendering similar attitudes, hitting the same people—the Sheltons and Clanders of successive generations—and the same places.
- 5 Structurally, *The World Made Straight* splits into two parts: the first part contains seven chapters, the second eight chapters. Though both parts are of more or less equal length, the overall structure suggests a disquieting sense of unbalance. The length of individual chapters is extremely variable: some chapters are rather short; most of them are about 20-page long; the initial and the last-but-one chapters, which respectively correspond to the exposition and to the denouement, are the longest. Ten of the novel's fifteen chapters are followed by a ledger entry. Each of these ledger entries is preceded by a blank page marking a clear separation between the text of the present and that of the past, also characterized by a different typography and the use of italics. Preceding Chapter One, Part One—hence, the novel—also starts with a ledger entry, dated "*August 5, 1850*" (3): it consists of a page-long emotionless inventory of three patients' ailments, each case being followed by the corresponding treatment and fee. Though rather fragmentary, the syntax of the ledger entries conveys a strong sense of historical verisimilitude that owes a lot to Rash's thorough preparatory work for his novel and his preoccupation with historical accuracy: "I did a lot of research on nineteenth-century medicine; so everything in the journal is what a doctor would have done" (Spill 7). As the reader is immersed in the novel's first page, what emerges is a rural world inhabited by humble farmers and fieldhands who, subjected to ordinary,

timeless afflictions (“*coriza*,” “*locked bowels*,” pregnancy), pay for good advice and their cures with flour or eggs. The hand that, day by day (almost hour by hour, actually), carefully registers their discomforts can be identified as that of a well-educated doctor, who makes himself available to his patients and shows them and their overdue payments great patience. The anonymous doctor is also strikingly aware of his own limitations as, in a mirror effect echoing the writer dealing with his own sources, he dutifully reports the books consulted to determine his diagnoses. Though such an entrance into a novel is a little perplexing, the impression thus conveyed is that, in these peaceful pre-Civil War days, people in the community were taken good care of. The upcoming violence significantly stands out against (and, possibly, sprouts from) a deep-seated sense of good care. In the light of the coming developments, people's ailments will retrospectively appear rather ingenuous.

6 *The World Made Straight* is therefore made of two distinct texts, making Rash's fictional rewriting of history—in the form of the eleven ledger entries—commingle with stories, i. e. the fifteen chapters making up the plot in the present of narration. There is in fact a twelfth text akin to the ledgers that is to be found at the end of Chapter 13, in the form of an undated note reporting Doctor Candler's death in June 1863⁸, supposedly “a good death” (255) as opposed to the evil deaths endured by other men in the community. In this note, the anonymous writer, a “friend” of Joshua Candler, also makes sure the last volume of the ledgers will ultimately get in the hands of the doctor's wife in Marshall, in case he should die. The man's initiative reveals his great concern that the past should be passed down. Though he is obviously not as literate as the late doctor⁹, the man appears to be fully aware of the gravity of their present, sensing the need for transmitting experiences that will soon become history. It is such gestures that eventually make stories possible, while reasserting the indefectible bond between history and stories. In between the ledgers entries that are endorsed by a very unobtrusive first-person pronoun¹⁰, the novel develops as a third-person narration with two alternating focalizers. While most of Part One is told through Travis's vision, most of Part Two is narrated through Leonard's perspective. To be more accurate, eight of the fifteen chapters focus on Travis, upon whose perspective the novel logically ends, as he survives Leonard and goes on with his life. Once the ledgers have been closed and their successive owners have passed away¹¹, Travis is eventually able to put distance between him and the shadows of the past. On his own at last, he can literally start a new chapter: indeed, as Travis begins “the long ascent north to Antioch” (289), ahead of him spreads an unknown future that will develop outside the book.

7 With its two parts, two timeframes, two intercrossing narratives and two distinct focalizers, the novel is fraught with figures of duality. Yet, echoing the uneven chapter number, the third voice emerging from the ledgers interweaves a third thread, somehow a third path, that exudes a paradoxical sense of continuity. Indeed, the initial sense of disruption between texts, genres and times is soon overcome by repetitions, echoes and resonances, as the same family names keep reoccurring on both levels. For example, while the novel's first page marks the reader's introduction into Shelton territory—“*Summoned to Shelton Farm*,” writes the doctor—, Chapter One soon identifies Travis, the young man who “came upon the marijuana plants while fishing Caney Creek” (5), as a Shelton “from the Laurel” (14), about one hundred and twenty years later. The novel's opening demonstrates that, while violence persists, the place and its people pretty much remain the same across times and

generations: this uninterrupted continuity is part of why characters in the present cannot help being affected by the past of their region, which is also their family history. As collective time merges with personal time, history can no longer quite be distinguished from stories. While characters appear to be increasingly haunted by their pasts, they keep revisiting the same places—one of them being Shelton Laurel, its marker, its minimalist gravesite. The obsessive power of traumatic memory actually prompts them to reenact the initial massacre, repeating it with variation. As the text relentlessly evokes the same events, the characters are magnetically attracted to the locus of the initial trauma until they, at long last, find a way to settle their scores there, decades and generations later. While repetitions and echoes shape the harrowing remembrance of violence, a sense of continuity transcends the figures of duality, both pointing to the permanence of conflicts and somehow making their violence all the more intolerable: the tighter the clans, the more durably violent the rifts and heartbreaks.

- 8 At the core of the novel stands a memorial that allows writer and readers to bridge the gaps between history, real life and fiction, as it is simultaneously anchored in the three worlds, thus somehow allowing circulation between them. Rash's posture is, in that respect, quite different from that of other contemporary American novelists who revisited the Civil War. Though also dealing with clearly identifiable historical events, Daniel Woodrell's *Woe to Live On* (1987) or Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* (1997) are exclusively set in the past; they do not interact with the present—that of other, later characters; ours—, which somehow stamps their inherent violence as past and done with, in a word: historical. Rash's narrative choices somehow enhance the pervasiveness of violence, regardless of boundaries. The small historical marker at Shelton Laurel epitomizes—let alone monumentalizes—the intimate combination of historical and apocryphal elements in *The World Made Straight*, which can be interpreted as Rash's own attempt to do what Faulkner once described as “sublimating the actual into the apocryphal” (Meriwether 254). The real-life marker at Shelton Laurel is evoked several times in the plot; it also stands on the fringe of a meadow that can actually be visited¹². The words engraved on the marker convey a chilling summary of the events that lie at the core of Rash's novel: “Thirteen men and boys, suspected of Unionism, were killed by Confederate soldiers in early 1863” (Bjerre 218). The facts, analyzed at length in historian Phillip Shaw Paludan's 1981 essay, *Victims. A True Story of the Civil War*—a book that is entirely devoted to the Shelton Laurel Massacre and that Rash acknowledges as his main source at the end of his novel—still have the impact of an unbearable truth, so much so that several commentators and critics of Rash's Civil War novel have resisted understanding what really happened at Shelton Laurel, painfully misunderstanding how political loyalties were then distributed¹³. These typical cases of “misreading, in which one reads in the print or writing something different from what is actually there” (Freud) may result from the conjunction of two aspects of the situation that blatantly defy people's preconceptions about the American Civil War: the tragedy that took place at Shelton Laurel involved Southerners that were Union sympathizers; this was an unimaginable political choice for their Confederate (ex-) neighbors and friends, who perceived it as a crime to be punished by death, without trial. The persistence of such misconceptions in the 21st-century confirms Paludan's contention that “the little pasts of otherwise unimportant people become crucial” (xiii) for later generations to grasp the full impact of events that are so traumatic that they

keep resisting understanding. Rash's urge to set things straight is, therefore, plural, as his novel somehow addresses the people then as much as his contemporary readership. Here is part of "The Story behind the book" as Rash himself formulated it¹⁴:

The day after the massacre members of the Shelton family brought an ox to the meadow and filled the sled with their dead. They planned to haul them back to the Shelton family cemetery, but a snowstorm prevented them from getting there. Rather than risk the bodies being devoured by wild animals, they buried all thirteen in a single grave. They still lie there now, almost one-hundred-and-forty-two years later. Over the grave is a single small stone marker, thirteen names etched into the granite. In the spring of 2002 I stood before this grave. It was a warm, cloudless day, but a stand of oak trees kept most of the sunlight from reaching the gravesite. It was so quiet and still that it seemed the world had taken a long, deep breath and held it. We live in an era that, much to its own peril, seems incapable of even acknowledging there is a past, much less that some resonance of that past might linger in a particular place, but I know that what I felt at that gravesite on that spring morning was a sense of being in a place where something of consequence was acknowledged, not just by the marker but also by the oak trees and the land and the very air itself. *The World Made Straight* is an attempt to render what I felt that morning into words. Perhaps I also believed that writing a novel, particularly one that addresses the possibility of past wrongs set straight, would dim a scene that has haunted me waking and sleeping for years.

- 9 Rash's memory of that particular moment—standing before the common grave at Shelton Laurel, acknowledging the paradoxical *presence* of the past and, probably, coming to terms with the urge to tell—encompasses most of his concerns as a writer: that stories are somehow always entangled with, if not engendered by, a violent history and that places bear the marks of time and the traces, however elusive, of the past¹⁵. Just as with the red sorghum fields that keep reappearing in Mo Yan's 1987 novel, places in Rash's fiction *are* memory: across generations, the red pastures will forever elicit the "sweet stench" (Mo Yan 236) of the blood once shed there; the centennial oak trees at Shelton Laurel still are the mute witnesses of a massacre, the violence of which people there still find too painful to face. In this evocation of the genesis of *The World Made Straight*, Rash also reaffirms one of the most crucial tenets of his poetics: a keen poetical sensitivity to place is the key to dealing with time. Meanwhile, the dreamlike quality of his reminiscence artfully demonstrates that the potential violence of man's dealings is not incompatible with the language of beauty, another characteristic he shares with the Chinese novelist. This is how Mo Yan concludes a chapter preceding an excruciating scene of torture, in the course of which, under Japanese command, the village's butcher literally skins Uncle Arhat alive: "The curved outline of a blood-red sun rose above the sorghum field to the east, its rays shining down on the black hole of Uncle Arhat's open mouth" (24)¹⁶; the interplay of forms and colors foreshadows the utmost horror while etching a moment of sheer beauty.

Young man "making [his] way alone in the world" (60): inescapable patterns

10 The novel's opening paragraph is a condensed summary of the main ingredients of an overwhelmingly loud and rather wild representation of masculinity, which is prone to flare up and indulge in violent behaviors at any moment. This opening paragraph hoards the complete paraphernalia of rough virility. There is, first of all, a teenaged boy, Travis, endowed with characteristically phallic objects, a fishing rod, a rifle—a "Marlin .22" (5)—and, of course, a "battered" (*Ibid.*) truck. What is thus immediately signaled is that fishing, hunting and, if need be, self-defense are part and parcel of the masculine get-up. It is, furthermore, quite tempting to interpret the nearby presence of "the French Broad"—the actual name of a broad river in Western North Carolina—as foreshadowing the loose-mannered girl that is still absent from the picture at this point, but that is, of course, indispensable to its completion. This opening seems to confirm Brian Carpenter's assumption in his introduction to *Grit Lit. A Rough South Reader* that "the Rough South genre remains by and large a boys club [...] with a taste for violence and the hypermasculine" (xxix)¹⁷. Travis's urge to claim his kinship with "the hypermasculine" is suggested by the music he would "have had [...] blasting," "windows down" (5), had the truck radio worked. Yet, this urge is ironically kept silent, a very suggestive detail that, while making it clear that Travis operates as the center of consciousness in the first chapter, instantly allows the reader to distinguish between two conflicting versions of him: the loud boy he wants people to believe he is and the frustrated boy whose radio is dead and who is fated to imagine he is loud and, for that matter, tough¹⁸.

11 The opening of *The World Made Straight* also establishes the wider context in which the novel takes place. As the reader is made to observe the way illicit marijuana plants impinge on the traditional culture of tobacco, the expansion of harmful addictive conducts is suggested, together with the programmed disappearance of the old agrarian lifestyle and the irresistible appeal of easy cash. The first chapter is, indeed, scattered with references to three inextricable motifs: dire economic straits, necessity and greed. The recurrence of verbs like "buy", "pay" (6) and phrases such as "enough money" (8, 9, 10), "how much" (31), etc., contributes to the delineation of a precarious world where most things are for sale, whereas money is blatantly scarce. As suggested by Doctor Candler's scrupulous registering of his fees, this is not quite new. What is still rather new though in Appalachia in the 1970s is how the pressures of the modern world have contributed to making paper money the only worthy currency. In Doctor Candler's world, fifty cents could be "[p]aid with twenty pounds flour" (3), while in Travis's world the only equivalent for money is either money or, as he will soon find out, blood. As his decrepit truck's monthly insurance payment is foremost in his mind, Travis is constantly preoccupied with selling things (such as fish he catches or plants he picks). The concomitance of need and lack is, logically enough, likely to stimulate criminal actions that are, in turn, prone to generate violent acts. As suggested by James Giles in *The Spaces of Violence*, "the pervasive injustice of contemporary American capitalism" (Giles 3)¹⁹ is a predictably favorable subsoil for violence to sprout. Characteristically, the fact that Travis, who has been fishing "eight trout" (8), should "dum[p] his catch into the ditch" (10) after discovering the pot plants is, in itself, a violent gesture through which he symbolically sheds his old, innocent, fishing self²⁰. Chapter one actually depicts Travis succumbing to a siren song: "He rubbed a pot leaf between his finger and thumb, and it felt like money, a lot more money than he'd ever make at a grocery store" (*Ibid.*). Since picking and selling another man's pot production is both easier and more

rewarding than any kind of regular effort, let alone work, why should he bother? It will actually take him most of the novel to understand that the price to pay for such transgressions²¹ cannot but be a violent one.

Quotidian violence: images of dereliction

¹² In *The World Made Straight* places and things are permeated with a strong sense of dereliction that insistently indicates how harsh life is, or has been, out there. At the same time, the slow deliquescence of traditional values, best encapsulated by the shift from tobacco to pot (then pills, and later meth) culture, is thus echoed. Fostering the overall impression that characters are trapped in a dead end, the numerous descriptions of rundown houses and shabby yards the novel is scattered with also point to the reason why characters may be tempted to turn to violence which, in one form or another, seems to obtrude upon their perspectives. In keeping with St. Matthew's notion that "all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword" (26:52), it therefore seems that the violence of ordinary life cannot but beget more violence. As places match people, the latter perversely seem to be encouraged to behave violently; violent causes and effects therefore tend to form an inextricable tangle, an amalgam that is best figured by the recurrent use of metonymy, with its tendency to replace direct expression with indirect expression (see Fontanier) and express "cause for effect or effect for cause" (Pier). The gist of Rash's plot (in this case and in many others) and the tensions that underlie it consist in finding out whether there is a way out of this infernal cycle, an opening—however small—toward a different fate. If the world depicted by Rash is not altogether bleak, it is because, however scorching its ordinary violence—it still holds, as though germinating, the vague hope that things can be set straight.

¹³ When Travis first meets Leonard, he is struck by the derelict interior of his trailer: "A dusty couch slouched against the back wall. In the corner Leonard sat in a fake-leather recliner patched with black electrician's tape" (16). A makeshift, rough-and-ready habitation by definition, Leonard's trailer is a sorry assortment of patched-up objects that have obviously known better days, in mock imitation of ordinary living conditions. It is easy to imagine that the quotidian contemplation of such objects operates as a constantly renewed source of aggression. A few chapters later, Leonard himself is described as wearing "a V-neck tee-shirt once white but now soiled to the gray of used dishwater" (70); the essence of this description is encapsulated by the adverb *once*, which indicates the inexorable deterioration of Leonard's living conditions, making it clear that a point of no return has been reached. Moreover, as in the case of Travis's reference to the local grocery store as the only place where he can picture himself making lawful money, the image of used dishwater is a further confirmation of how deeply the lives of characters are entrenched in the most sordid considerations and limitations. Yet, Leonard's trailer is also a place where Handel's *Messiah*²² can be heard, "the tenor voices resonat[ing] below the ethereal sopranos" (159). While he is made to contemplate scenes of desolation, the reader is also incidentally—in case he forgets—reminded of the plurivocity of reality and of the transcending power of art.

- 14 The first time he drives there, Leonard's perception of the place where Lori lives likewise bears innumerable marks of a particularly harsh environment:

"That's it," Travis said, and Leonard stopped where a rusty mailbox squatted on a cedar post. There was no driveway, just a bare spot by the house where a decade-old Mercury Comet was parked, no hubcaps and no radio antenna, a wadded rag in place of a gas cap. Leonard had known Lori's family was poor, but he was still surprised. If smoke had not been rising from the chimney, someone driving by could easily believe the place had long been ceded to whatever crawled or slithered through the cracks. The rust-rotted gutter had separated from the roof soffit, and blue plastic tarp replaced glass in a window. Out in the yard, a doll without arms, a tricycle with a missing back wheel. Nothing seemed whole. (198)

- 15 While the insistent presence of dismantled toys, which are described through syntactic fragments, suggests that poverty is part of an inherited legacy, the depiction of Lori's family's whereabouts intertwines the semantic fields of bareness, degradation, disuse and abandonment with a pervasively negative syntax emphasizing destitution and the urgency of improvising random solutions to mend and prolong the lives of objects. Meanwhile, nature's readiness to take its territory back is suggested by the unnamed but expectant creatures that "craw[l] or slithe[r] through the cracks" of the house, soon to expose the futility of man's efforts to domesticate the land and make it his own. Lori's world somehow epitomizes the whole region's forlorn condition; it doubtless accounts for her resolve to raise herself above her environment, beyond the bleakness of Travis's blunt assertion that "that's it," and that is all. Indeed, despite the bleak violence of her living conditions, Lori probably is the novel's most adamant figure of resilience and self-improvement²³.

- 16 In Rash's world things and places constantly betray the harshness of ordinary life. "When real human potential is stifled by social circumstance," novelist and short story writer Harry Crews argues, "the result is spilled blood and rent flesh." The cracks and gashes that characterize most objects in Rash's world thus operate as small-scale metaphors of an overall "pattern of self-destruction" engendered by "a vicious circle of poverty and isolation" (Carpenter xxi)²⁴. Above all, such small-scale fissures are indicative of a poetics of violence that is essentially couched in details, which both conceal and reveal the full irruption of violence.

The suggestiveness of details

- 17 It is probably Dena's characterization that best exemplifies the powerfully suggestive impact of the deliberate amalgam of violent causes and effects within details. Dena is Leonard's unchosen companion: one day, having no clue what to do with herself, she imposed herself on Leonard's life and somehow became his business partner: "she'd doubled his sales. [...] [F]or she seemed to know every dooper and pill freak in the county" (110). Unlike Leonard who sells drugs but keeps clean, Dena herself is, and has long been, a drug addict; at thirty-four, she is pretty much at the end of her tether. In the process, Dena also became Leonard's lover though it is clear enough that, in that respect, Leonard would rather do without her. Leonard's reluctance to have sex with Dena is often alluded to: he has either to be drunk and prey to "an alcohol-induced ardor" (69) or to "imagine another woman" (70) to be able to come

close to her and satisfy her insistent, unreciprocal desire for him. Though he is rather nice with her, Leonard does not come close to liking Dena and he does not put much effort in faking. Meanwhile, Dena's pathetic mock celebration of normalcy points out all she will probably never have a chance to experience: "It's our anniversary, sweetheart. This time last July's when we first met" (53). Her mawkish interpretation of the symbolism of the cheap bracelet Leonard won for her at the fairgrounds, and which the carny engraved with her name in Chapter 9, similarly operates as an ironic evocation of the kind of promises nobody will ever make her—a blunt truth she knows but keeps evading: "All the magazines say giving her jewelry means a man's got serious intentions about a woman. [...] So I reckon long as I'm wearing this we're honest to God sweethearts" (171). Her self-delusion is further emphasized by the traveling carnival employee's ominous reminder that, rather than celebrating some kind of bond, such chain bracelets are meant to "[k]eep you from forgetting who you are" (*Ibid.*).

18 At the same time, Dena's passive indifference to her own lot probably is the most striking aspect of her characterization. Whereas Leonard finally renounces to help her, it takes Travis considerable effort to eventually arouse her survival instinct because, more often than not, her perceptions are blurred by the effect of the black beauties she is dependent on. Ironically, despite her wearing a bridge—a makeshift replacement of her missing front teeth—that sits in a glass when she is asleep, despite her scarred body and flaking skin, Dena herself still is a beauty, though decrepit, likely to attract the attention of lewd male gazes. Most male characters actually agree that although she looks prematurely beaten-up there is still "some pretty left in her" (19, 51, 59)—a refrain that reoccurs till she is completely crushed. The quantifying adjective "some" cruelly points out that Dena's sexual appeal is a type of merchandise that is on the wane, suggesting that her would-be sexual exploiters know her body can still be taken advantage of, but not for much longer.

19 Dena's inexorable degeneration into some kind of mutant is confirmed by the picture Leonard remembers her showing him, the photograph of a younger, dazzling version of herself that, producing a terrible sense of waste and lost opportunities, allows the reader to take stock of her deterioration and to imagine the brutal circumstances that have led her to such a state of degradation (52). Dena's scarred body and bruised face indicate that she has let others mishandle and mistreat her in every possible way, commodifying her body and soul to allow the satisfaction of her craving for drugs: "Travis saw the purple scar on her back shoulder and knew, *as with him*, someone had taken a knife to her flesh" (137; my emphasis). When she comes back to the trailer after a weekend spent at the Toomeys, the condition of her "gaping suitcase [...], its contents littering the ground around her" (180) denotes how precarious Dena's grip on life has become. Carrying along "a battered yellow suitcase" (178)—a synecdoche of what she has become—she is mostly unwanted. Semantically associated with garbage, the few flimsy belongings that "[litter] the ground" show how very little she owns and, in the last analysis, how little is left of her self-respect: "Dena looked worse up close, bloodshot eyes, lower lip split and swollen. She smelled, a dank cloying smell, like newspaper rotted by water" (180). The abusive treatment she has exposed herself to remains unspoken; but the fetid effluvium of her rough nights already envelops her like a shroud.

20 The implicit parallel Travis draws between Dena and himself is quite meaningful: through the acknowledgment of their stigmata (both of them have

literally been cut), the victims of violence somehow end up forming a parallel, unspeaking community of their own. It is eventually through Travis and Dena that history, however circuitously, takes a belated symbolical revenge: today's victims, they are the only ones that are spared while the victimizers, both past and present²⁵, end up being sacrificed in a single tumble down the mountain. In Rash's world, though this is a detail that may practically remain unnoticed, "the violent" do not "bear it away." Though violent, the novel's ending suggests that there is a possible way out of the self-regenerating cycle of violence.

21 In *The World Made Straight* indirect representational strategies paradoxically contribute to the all-pervasiveness of violence. As violence roots itself in descriptive details that are made to elicit stories of their own, some of which remain untold, it is both intangible and represented in a very concrete way. Places, objects and faces bear the observable traces of its repetitive and ruthless blows: causes of violence are thus hinted at through the details of their violent consequences. But in Rash's writing, the revelation of the violent act behind the stigmata is not merely deferred, as is often the case with Faulkner for instance. Since it is time to conclude, let's try to determine what Rash's poetics of violence is *not* and in what respects it differs from the poetics of the writers he admires and often claims as his models. Faulkner is well known for eluding violent graphic descriptions and making use of ellipses that silence key moments in his plots; but he often does so to assault, much later, the unprepared reader with long-postponed revelations made even more unbearable by their adjournment. The readers of Faulkner's *Sanctuary* will probably all remember the tribunal scene and the brandished corn cob, still painted with blood—a phallic substitute become representational substitute that eventually satisfies the reader's blood thirst. Though Rash clearly shares O'Connor's conviction that the purpose of violence in fiction is to expose man to the very limits of his humanity and that "it is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially" (O'Connor 113), his treatment of violence is far from her daringly outrageous demonstrations of violence, where horror and humor often coalesce. Rash's poetics of violence is also to be distinguished from that of Cormac McCarthy whose writing, from his early Appalachian novels²⁶ until *Blood Meridian*, created "a narrative strategy in which violence represents a climax of tensions and stress with the literary text" (Brewton 122). Through the trajectory of outlaw Lester Ballard, *Child of God* offers a particularly striking instance of the escalation of cruelty in McCarthy's writing.

22 Rash clearly has developed a taste for circuitousness, which is not so surprising for a wanderer like him. The fact that the firearms owned by his characters should merely serve as decoration or entertainment²⁷ can be interpreted as metafictional indications of his aesthetic choices as far as representations of violence are concerned: they hint and somehow counter-hint at a sizzling violence, but the violent irruptions will take place elsewhere. Though we readers are made to understand that such events are pivotal, the Shelton Laurel massacre, Travis's torture or men's abuses of Dena are not plainly exhibited to us through forthright depictions of violence. Even the triple murder and sacrifice upon which the novel concludes—the only way, it seems, for the characters' world to be made straight again, however shakily—takes the unlikely form of a car accident. While violent acts are skirted or consigned in the silences of the text, the effects of such representational strategies are all the more effective, as we, readers, have to fill the cracks and the blanks in which violence lodges itself²⁸.

23

What we are shown is Rash's unflagging awareness of the natural world, whose most delicate beauties are minutely registered. The fact that the seminal image Rash eagerly associates with his third novel should be that of "a trout's back wavering in fast water" (Anderson 114) is particularly revealing. The oxymoronic quality of Rash's poetics of violence is contained in the association of natural splendor and aggressiveness as Travis kills a trout whose beauty he has just admiringly contemplated. After he has "gripped a fist-sized rock and struck the fish's head" (126), his murderous hands are described in a poetical succession of alliterations, assonances and sensory impressions as "sticky with scales that glistened like slivers of silver" (*Ibid.*). In Rash's writing, the precarious and necessarily ephemeral trajectories of characters stand out against immemorial nature, which constantly reminds man of his insignificance and finitude. The cradle of men's conflicts across ages, nature takes its own relatively quiet course: while the traces of men's feuds temporarily lacerate its surface, those very traces soon vanish under layers of time and snow, and lives ended violently in the mountains' gorges and meadows are soon engulfed and forgotten. It is for writing to dig them up and tell their stories.

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Notes

1 Originally read by the author at Wesleyan College for Women in Macon, Georgia, this paper later became O'Connor's famous "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction." In another paper compiled in *Mystery and Manners*, "The Fiction Writer & His Country," O'Connor elaborates on her perception of violence as an aesthetic necessity for the "novelist with Christian concerns" (33) in a South whose readership, she regrets, is often quite insensitive to the literature it inspires: "he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to his hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means 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" (33-34).

2 Fraught with a sense of longing and anticipating regret, the anaphoric repetition of the phrase “I hate” sounds like a discrete tribute to the chorus of W. C. Handy’s “Saint Louis Blues”: “I hate to see that evening sun go down.”

3 From the Latin *excedere*, which means to surpass, excess defines as an amount of something that is more than necessary, permitted or desirable; consequently, it also designates a lack of moderation.

4 “I think it’s a meditation on violence. I’ve always been horrified and fascinated over people, who live in close proximity to each other, turning on one another. During Pol Pot’s reign in Cambodia. In Bosnia. Rwanda. It’s unsettling to see people fall back into a tribal mentality” (Zacharias).

5 The Vietnam War and the Peace and Love movement are incidentally evoked through the character of Hubert Toomey: having escaped conscription, he is longhaired, wears love beads and has convinced his father that they should start growing pot to make ends meet.

6 The pages references correspond to the edition of the novel listed in the “Works Cited” section. A similar statement is to be found in the short story entitled “Waiting for the End of the World” (181-182). There are actually characters named Hubert in both texts: in the short story it is the name of the bouncer.

7 The notion of mimetic violence derives from René Girard’s key conception, which he notably developed in *Violence and the Sacred*, of human existence as characterized by mimetic interdividuality. “‘Inter-dividuality’ and not interindividuality—because one does not know what comes from oneself and what comes from the other. [...] The illusion of difference between the I and the Other on the psycho-social level [...] runs parallel with the denial and misconception of the collective violence against the scapegoat at the primal scene of civilization” (Van Coillie 82).

8 In the last ledger entry written by Doctor Candler at the end of Chapter 12, the last case listed on “June 17, 1863, Clinch River, Tennessee” (223) at the end of a several-year and several-volume-long inventory is his own: “Joshua Candler. Shot in lower bowel. Much pain as God is just. Refuse anodynes. Want mind clear to pray for my soul, ask forgiveness for what cannot be hidden from my Maker. In Articule Mortis” (*Ibid.*). As the doctor is, literally, at the point of death (the Latin form *articule* is actually ungrammatical—it should be *articulo*—a sure sign of the doctor’s failing?), it seems another doctor, whose good care he “refuse[s],” has already taken over. This last and only self-portrait actually shows him quite willing to accept his suffering as a form of penance for “what cannot be hidden,” but certainly caused him a great deal of guilt and sorrow—his involvement, however passive or indirect, in the Shelton Laurel Massacre.

9 Though quite solemn in tone, his note contains a few revealing misspellings (255).

10 Most verbs used in the ledger entries actually are subjectless—“Transcribed letter to take to her father” (119)—which further contributes to the telegraphic quality of the doctor’s syntax. The 1st-person pronoun *I* appears, as with a vengeance, in the last-but-one (209) and the last (223) ledger entries, in the midst of the Civil War, as Doctor Candler is finally overwhelmed by his sense of responsibility in the disaster to which he contributed.

11 As Leonard’s daughter, who lives with her mother in Australia, is estranged from him, he is symbolically deprived of descendants likely to care about the ledgers.

12 Thomas Bjerre included a photograph of the actual marker in his 2007 interview of Ron Rash—a place he says he visited with the author (218)—as to bridge the gap between facts and fiction and proclaim the porosity between the two.

13 In his 2007 review of the novel, Danny Miller mistakes the victims of the Shelton Laurel massacre with its perpetrators: “Central to the story is the massacre at Shelton Laurel in Madison County during the Civil War wherein Union soldiers murdered local civilians” (171). The same mistake was made when Rash was interviewed on France Culture in December 2012 at “La grande table” when the French translation of *The World Made Straight* was released (see <http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-la-grande-table-2eme-partie-entretien-avec-ron-rash-2012-12-06>).

14 The full text can be found on Rash’s agent’s website at:
http://www.rusoffagency.com/authors/rash_r/theworld/behind_theworld_made.htm

15 In his review of the novel, Randall Wilhelm remarks how the novel is “thick with the past and the imprint of history on the land, especially how its grip tangles and complicates the present world like snags on a trout line” (95).

16 This parallel was encouraged by Rash himself, who told me in the course of a phone conversation that he was much impressed by what Mo Yan had done with landscape in *Red Sorghum*, which he had just finished reading.

17 Published in 2012, this anthology, which is the first of its kind entirely devoted to contemporary fiction about the so-called "Rough South," includes a Ron Rash story, "Speckled Trout," which won an O. Henry Prize in 2005 and served as groundwork for the composition of *The World Made Straight*. With quite a few notable differences, "Speckled Trout" corresponds to the novel's first chapter.

18 As he leaves the scene of his initial crime, Travis contemplates his reflection in the side mirror and realizes his face has been cut: "The cut made him look tougher, more dangerous, and he wished it had slashed deep, enough to leave a scar" (10). This romantic self-depiction as a tough boy confirms how fragile and inexperienced Travis still actually is.

19 Influenced by Foucault, French sociologist Henri Lefebvre similarly argues that violence is "an integral aspect of the 'abstract space' of capitalist domination" (Giles 11).

20 Later, the fishing metaphor is taken up by Travis's friend Shank, who jokes about missing the good fishing spots: "Reckon I better start doing my fishing with you," Shank said. "It's for sure I been going to the wrong places" (11). References to "speckled trout" (7, 287) in both the initial and the final chapters actually contribute to making the whole story come full circle. Travis's ultimate remembrance of the speckled trout epitomizes the chain of events that led him to his departure.

21 Travis will indeed "pas[s] the NO TRESPASSING sign nailed aslant a pin oak tree" (8) a few times before the full price is paid.

22 The title of the novel is borrowed from Handel's *Messiah*, more precisely a line that says: "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight, and the rough places plain" ("Every Valley," Isaiah, 40:4). Leonard sets the record on the turntable in Chapter 8 and comments: "Even the words proclaimed an order, *the crookedness of the world made straight*" (159).

23 In an interview conducted by Mikaël Demets, Rash makes it clear that Lori represents one of the most efficient survival strategies in forlorn Appalachia—education: "I've met young women like Lori [...] who came from underprivileged social backgrounds and had understood that the only way for them to escape their destiny was education. They focused on their goal: to go to college, not to fall pregnant, to remain free, not to end like their mothers. But beyond their determination, there was also a great deal of bitterness" (my translation).

24 Brian Carpenter's reflections on the essence of grit lit are deeply marked by author Harry Crews, especially his article entitled "The Violence That Finds Us," originally published in the April 1, 1984 issue of *Playboy*: "Why, then, was it their habit to come home, sometimes twice a week, busted up and bloodied? I understand it imperfectly, but I have come to believe the reasons are centered in the fact that they were locked into social circumstances that resulted in a kind of raging frustration that found its outlet in rank violence. They were men of great native intelligence but no education. They were natural leaders with nobody to lead. And, perhaps worst of all, they were sensitive and perceptive enough to see that they were in a cul-de-sac from which there could never be an escape" (Crews 16).

25 The Toomeys, father and son, stand for today's torturers, essentially motivated by economic reasons; as Joshua Candler's great-grandson, Leonard represents yesterday's executioners, the family, friends and neighbors that, for political reasons, ended up wiping out their own kind. Through his self-sacrifice, Leonard also figures the possibility of redemption.

26 McCarthy's Appalachian novels correspond to his first four novels: *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), *Outer Dark* (1968), *Child of God* (1973) and *Suttree* (1979). My reflection is indebted to Steven Frye's article on "*Blood Meridian* and the Poetics of Violence."

27 Leonard's Model 70 Winchester lies "on a cherrywood gun rack above the couch" (16); Travis uses his rifle to hunt, Leonard to take part in shooting contests.

28 This is probably why adapting a Rash novel to the screen is a particularly difficult venture, motion pictures displaying quite straightforwardly what the writer tries hard *not* to reveal too bluntly. In that respect, though it manages to convey a recognizable Rash-Appalachian atmosphere, David Burris' 2015 screen adaptation of *The World Made Straight* fails to render the subtleties of the novel's dealing with time and

violence: for instance, the ledgers either lead to represented scenes that damagingly explicit contents or involve a somewhat mawkish and counterproductive voice-over.

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