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**“THE ISLAND AND THE MOUND :
AN ESSAY IN LITERARY TYPOLOGY”**

Paul CARMIGNANI
Université P. Valéry-Montpellier III (France)

“...but I preferred reading the American landscape as we went along”. (J. Kerouac)

THIS ESSAY ON TWO PARTICULAR LOCI of the cultural and literary topography of the New World is based on two observations that were put forward by D. H. Lawrence and L. Fiedler respectively and have become commonplaces of literary criticism ever since. In his *Studies in Classical American Literature*, the former posits that the “spirit of place” accounts for the original voice that reverberates throughout the American novel ; the latter, in *The Return of the Vanishing American*, stresses the fact that American literature as a whole has defined itself in terms of and in relation to space, as witness the creation of a fictional genre typical of the West – the Western – and the emergence of the “tall tale” whose extravagance is commensurate with “the spaciousness of the Republic”.

Such generalizations call for qualification, but they pave the way for some kind of topo-analysis bringing into relief the fundamental importance of places – actual not fictitious – in which the imagination is stimulated and fiction rooted. In one of his studies, G. Bachelard, the French philosopher, maintains that there are “story-telling” images i.e. images inducing a tale almost automatically because they lead one to imagine what happened before and what came next. My contention is that there also exist “story-telling” places giving rise to myths and images (cf. Shirley Ann Grau, *The Keepers of the House* [New York : A. Knopf, 1969], p. 14 : “Every place, every person has a ring of stories around them, like a halo almost”). Many literary works bear witness to the fact that fiction is rooted in a particular place so that, on the map of literary America, we find such places (i.e. “*topoi*” on which “*logos*” gets grafted) as the Prairie, the Forest, the River, but also the Road, beloved of J. Kerouac, the Plantation, the Mine or the Town. I propose to explore two particular places in this material yet symbolic space – the Island and the Mound – which, as the rest of this essay will show, are both complementary and symmetrical.

The island is a key place in American literature and from “Sullivan's Island”, the treasure island where “The Golden Bug” is set, to “Tsalal”, the antartic island where Arthur

Gordon Pym's journey through the heart of darkness culminates, or Melville's exotic islands such as "Typee", the erotic but unfortunately cannibalistic Paradise in the South Seas, famous examples are legion. For this very reason, I shall confine myself to the type of island that is unquestionably the most authentically American i.e. not the ocean island but the river island in the midst of the Mississippi which represents, even more than the Ocean, the natural and mythical divide between the East and the West, the Old World and the New. The classic example is "Jackson's Island", where Huckleberry Finn and Jim, the runaway slave take refuge. It provides the setting for one of the most fundamental myths of American literature : withdrawal from society and civilization, the attempted return to an edenic space where the white boy and the childlike Blackman can realize, however briefly, the twofold ideal of pastoral life and human brotherhood. But, as every reader knows, Huck and Jim are forced to leave this haven of peace ; they drift downstream on a raft, an obvious substitute for the island (a floating island as it were) and from that point onwards, the narrative unfolds to the characteristic rhythm of a symbolic alternation between idyllic moments on the raft, drifting along the river, and dangerous forays ashore where Huck is confronted with the brutal and cynical society of the grown-up.

With M. Twain's novel, the main characteristics of the myth of the edenic river island are defined once and for all ; subsequent writers will simply ring the changes on the archetype or write a parody of it, which is evidence of the existence of a canonical model, as is the case with E. Caldwell's short-story, "Maud Island". On this particular island, bounded on the West by the Mississippi and on the East by a swamp that is just like a slough of perdition adjacent to Paradise, three characters have set up camp. But the harmony prevailing between Uncle Marvin, half-preacher, half-farmer, and two boys, Jim and Milton, is disrupted by the unexpected arrival, in a place that was until then innocent of women, of three strangers, one man and two "shantyboat wenches" of prepossessing appearance. In spite of Uncle Marvin's objections, the intruders set foot on the island ; the devil, or more appropriately, the she-devil is on the inside and the servant of God succumbs to temptation. He feverishly strikes camp, packs the dumbfounded boys off to the shore, and to the annoyance of his righteous wife rows frenetically past the swamp and back to the island to taste greedily and selfishly of the forbidden fruit.

Both these examples form a background against which Shelby Foote's treatment of the theme of the island in his novel *Follow Me Down* (New York : A. Knopf, 1964) stands out in sharp relief. Seldom have the potentialities of the island motif been so thoroughly explored and exploited. The plot can be summarized as follows : Luther Eustis, a fifty-year-old Puritan share-cropper leaves his family to have an affair with Beulah Ross, an eighteen-year-old girl of

the streets. The idyll unfolding on a small island that Luther had visited as a child, tragically climaxes after a couple of weeks : Luther drowns Beulah and returns home as though nothing had happened there to live, were it not for the prompt working out of divine and human Nemesis, in blessed contentment for the rest of his life. This Redneck's Progress highlights the allegorical, mythical and mystical dimensions of the island that is explicitly likened to "the Garden of Eden before the Snake sneaked in to corrupt it" (p. 116) ; in the same way, the two protagonists experience the odd feeling of re-enacting a well-known script : "Old Adam and Eve" (*Ibid.*).

To reach the island, it is necessary to cross part of the Mississippi and such a crossing assumes the function of a regular rite of passage ; the river is indeed a borderline and the island lies at the heart of a triple opposition of a spatial, temporal, and spiritual nature.

An oasis of peace and greenery, the island is a place off the map and represents the anti-thesis to society : on the island, one can strip off (cf. M. Twain : "What is civilization? Clothes") and break with daily routine. As such, it is quite the opposite of home, the world of toil and quotidianness, of restraint and normality.

The island is not only outside quotidien space, it is also outside present time. The virgin island symbolizes a prelapsarian world, the golden age of humanity. By returning to the island, Luther Eustis embarks upon a journey back in time that should ideally lead him to original purity and primal innocence. As a place of renewal where one can wipe the slate clean, the island bridges the gap between a prosaic *hic et nunc* and a mythical *illud tempus*. Finally, the island symbolizes a fundamental opposition between two universes represented in the narrative by the antithesis between "this world and that world", i.e. the profane and the sacred. As a mystical locus, the island holds out a promise of ecstasy ; it is to supply the setting for the espousals of Beulah, whose biblical name means "married" (cf. Isaiah 62 :4 : "Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken ; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate : but thou shalt be called Hephzi-bah, and thy land Beulah : for the Lord delighted in thee, and thy land shall be married") and stands for the Promised Land, and Eustis, etymologically *eu + stakhus* i.e. "good + ear (of corn)" or "rich in ears of corn". There actually takes place a subversion of profane order, but access to the religious or the sacred can only be achieved through violence ; the island becomes the scene of a double transgression of regular and ordered life in society : orgasm and crime, love and death. But as a consequence of Luther's crime, the Land is soiled, Paradise lost and the Covenant broken. Eden is corrupted, turned into a waste land ; magic vanishes into thin air and the island loses all its charms : it looks smaller, its sand is dirty, its trees withered and stunted ; whereas it was thought to be a virgin territory, it turns out to be occupied by two grotesques (Miss Pitts, a mannish, mustachioed woman and Dummy, her

deaf-and-dumb son) ; it has also been invested by evil powers in the person of a Voodoo priest with “the evil eye”. Thus the positive connotations with which the island had been endowed at first are in the end turned into their very opposites : far from representing an insular *Arcadia*, the island, where one breaks the Law and cannot abide permanently, is a stage upon which Luther Eustis, the would-be Chosen one, and Beulah Ross, the pitiful Lilith, re-enact the most tragic episode of the biblical script underlying this story, namely the Fall and the loss of Eden. Such examples show that there exists a strange affinity between the American landscape and the pastoral ideal but also that the green island is the most propitious place to fantasize about a bucolic ideal life. The island symbolizes America as conceived of by the European imagination ; moreover, in the very chronicle of the discovery and settlement of the New World, the island comes first, not the continent. The genesis of America started from the island, whether it be San Salvador where C. Columbus set foot on October 12th, or Roanoke Island, the first outpost of progress. Even literature testifies to the same anteriority ; in *The Great Gatsby* (Penguin Books, 1974), Nick Carraway conjures up the image of :

“the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailorsteyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the lest and greatest of all human dreams ; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the lest time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder” (pp. 18788).

It is also from Long Island, the “fish-shaped” island with the forgotten anciens Indian name of Paumanok, that W. Whitman, the “first white aboriginal”, sets out on his journey to “make a song for these States”, and lastly, it is from Jackson 's Island that there rises the first authentically American voice (Huck Finn's).

Thus the continent and the island partake neither of the same desire nor of the same “imaginary” : the continent, making for extroversion, dynamism and dreams of power, gave rise to the myth of the West and the Frontier ; the river island, as a place of refuge and intimacy, stands for just the opposite – introversion and psychic regression ; it is linked with the fantasies of “rest in the lap of Nature” (G. Bachelard) and the myth of regress to the origins.

The second topos of this spatial diptych is the mound, *i.e.* the elevation of earth that some Indian tribes in the Mississippi drainage basin and southeastern U.S. erected over the remains of the dead.

The burial mound is not unlike an island rising from the land ; like a wreck marooned in space by the ebb of all time, it dominates a Prairie that is often assimilated to an ocean. Pioneers used to ride across it on their schooners (originally a sailing vessel) and the followers of Jack Kerouac, the land-roving Beat, zoom through it at the wheel of cars that can “hold the

road like a boat holds on water” (*On the Road*, Penguin Books, 1972, p. 216). As a vestige of genuine America, archaic and aboriginal, the mound is a reminder of the most important moment in the history of the New World : the confrontation between the Indian and the white invader. In all the narratives where the mound crops up as a passing reference or an obsessive image, whether it be W. Faulkner 's *Requiem for a Nun* and *The Wild Palms*, Shirley Ann Grau's *The Keepers of the House*, W. Humphrey 's *A Time and a Place* or S. Foote's *September September*, the mound, an islet of memory emerging out the “great White swamp” (L. Fiedler), evokes the unappeased ghost of the Aboriginal haunting an American landscape that was never at one with the white man. An outcrop of the past, the mound is both the material record of the passage of time and a register where the founding crimes of the American Republic are inscribed as liabilities. The vantage point it affords over the history of the community is that of the native and as such it represents an exceptional site on the map of American fiction. To explore this topos (both in the sense of topic and place) I shall make reference to two short-stories drawn from W. Humphrey 's above-mentioned work (New York : A. Knopf, 1968) and S. Foote's fifth novel, *Jordan County* (New York : A. Knopf, 1964), which is both an exploration of a particular territory (the Delta) and a journey back in time.

Jordan County is the tale of a place and a tell-tale place through which there unfolds a quest for primal truth. “The Sacred Mound” marks the end of the pilgrimage in reverse traced by the novel. Paradoxically enough, with this seventh narrative the reader reaches the outermost limit and the heart of this inquiry into the past which, “not unlike all Southern investigations into history almost presupposes a metaphysical premiss : why is the South labouring under a curse?”. The answer is to be found in a legal document where Andrew Benito Courbiere, the scrivener, notes clown the confession of a Choctaw Indian, Chisahahoma, who was a party to the sacrifice of two white trappers on the moonlit sacred mound. The Indian's statement covers a wide span of time, from 1797 back to 1540, and chronicles, from the point of view of the casualty of civilization, the history of the South from H. de Soto's exploration of the longer Mississippi to the annexation of this Spanish province by the United States. These two events supply the prologue and the epilogue to a four-act tragedy – military conquest, Christianization, economic exploitation and the legal sanction of the spoliation of the conquered – and turned primitive Eldorado into a Helldorado.

“The Sacred Mound” evokes both a sacrifice and a sacrilege, i.e. the intrusion of a foreign and disturbing element into a milieu whose peace and harmony depended upon that element's remaining on the other side of the Atlantic. The balance between the native and the American continent is destroyed when the European enters upon the stage and brings evil in his wake.

Between the Indian and the European there is no possible communion ; trade takes its place and thus is organized an unfair exchange : the Red-Skin swaps his God, “Nanah Waiya” for the “Man on the Cross”, his gold for trash, his land for money ; he is given civilization and smallpox into the bargain. The two victims are affected and the contaminated tribe is soon decimated by this terrible curse. To allay the Gods, the chief sends Chisahahoma, the singer, as an expiatory victim to the Spanish authorities, but this envoy, after being converted to the faith of the occupier, is cleared of all suspicion and sent back to his tribe to spread the Word of God. The Red-Skin is absolved of his crime, “whitewashed” ; this is the crowning irony! What the Indian's statement makes perfectly clear is that spoliation of their lands constituted the main sin of the Whites :

-- Then, lo, they began to ask a strange thing of us, seeking to buy the land. Sell us the land, they said : Sell us the land. And we told them, disguising our horror : No man owns the land ; take it and live on it ; it is lent you for your lifetime ; are we not brothers? (p. 287).

This is the most outrageous sacrilege for the Indians ; the land is a sacred trust, a communal good, indivisible and inalienable, but the white man is going to carve up and parcel out the land ; the tellurian matrix is turned into a cadastre/cadaver. Evil sets in : the Indian and the white man have become warring brothers ; Cain, the European, the tiller of the soil, gets the better of Abel, the indigenous nomad. Thus America enters or rather falls into history ; out goes pristine innocence and sweet pastoral.

The mound reminds one of the fact that for America to become Paradise regained, the old European Adam should have celebrated espousals not with a woman, whether it be Beulah, the “Bride”, or Columbia, the neo-classic goddess of liberty, but with the one figure embodying the new Adam and the authentic American *i.e.* the Indian, the Red-Skin.

The island in *Follow Me Down* and the mound in Jordan County are two antithetic versions of the myth of Paradise on earth ; the river island is a Christian, biblical Eden where Luther Eustis, under the delusion that Woman who caused our fall can also work out our salvation, tries paradoxically to regain Paradise through the agency of the one who caused Man to be sent forth from it.

The mound, a symbol of a different promise, stands for a wild, pagan Eden that vanishes for ever with the advent of woman and black-gowned missionaries in a virgin land. It is associated with what L. Fiedler calls “the Myth of the Good Companions in the Wilderness, the story of a White Man and a Red who find solace and sustenance in each other's love, identified for most Americans with the encounter of Fenimore Cooper 's Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook over the embers of a dying fire” (*op. cit.*, p. 51).

The second narrative, W. Humphrey 's “The Last of the Caddoes”, bears out such an interpretation and moreover provides evidence that there exist, as L. Fiedler claims, two versions of original sin :

There are, finally, two archetypal versions of the Fall in the Garden : one inherited from the Old World, one created in the New. In the first, Man and Woman are portrayed living at peace in an Earthly Paradise until the Serpent enters ; in the second, Man and the Serpent are presented as cohabiting amicably until Woman comes on the scene (p. 116).

In this narrative, Jimmy Hawkins, an adolescent happens to learn, in the course of an argument with his mother, that a little Indian blood flows through his veins. This is a shattering revelation that changes his life and, in order to come into the heritage that all his family have turned down, he sets about digging up the burial mound rising in the middle of the cotton patch of his paternal grandfather, a renegade half-breed :

Commanded by the voice of his people to know himself through knowing them, Jimmy had bared the buried history of the caddoes, delving backwards in time from their end to their beginning (p. 193).

On the occasion of his thirteenth anniversary, Jimmy has another row with his mother who, after visiting the mound, calls him “A-snake-in-your-mother's-bosom” (p. 201). The adolescent, realizing that his forebears are speaking to him through his mother's words, adopts the insult as a kind of secret nickname. This symbolical dubbing heals the break in tribal ties ; the adolescent can take up his rightful place in the lineage from which he had been excluded. The conflict between mother and son comes to a head ; Jimmy leaves home to take refuge in the mound where a remarkable epiphany takes place : an ancient black snake sloughs its skin before the adolescent's very eyes and leaves it to him as a token of a new covenant. But this portentous confrontation, akin to a rite of passage and initiation, is interrupted by the unexpected arrival of the mother coming to reclaim her rebellious son who, she claims, “will be the death of her”. The end of the short-story merits being quoted in full :

In obedience to his victim's nod, Snake-in-His-Mother's-Bosom took up his suitcase and followed her down the steps and across the barren field to the car. In its rearview mirror he watched the mound diminish and finally disappear. The snakeskin rode on his lap. Now he must wait. Must wait for their next, their final command. It would not come soon ; they sipped their pleasures slowly. Many times yet he would have to hear his mother say that he would be the death of her. So many times that when the final order came it would be almost welcome, a release. Distant and ghostly, it sounded already in the echoing silence of his mind. Over and over, like a phonograph record when the needle cannot find the starting groove. “Kill me at once then and be done with it!” his mother's voice was saying. One day the needle would find the groove. Then out would come the command loud and clear and with the sudden shock of long-expectedness. Then Snake-in-His-Mother's-Bosom would strike, accomplish his mission and fulfill the prophecy ; and then at last the ghost of the Caddoes could lie down at peace in their many-tiered mound and haunt the land and him no more.

The adolescent's daydreaming stands in contrast to the Christian representation of the Virgin Mother trampling underfoot the accursed serpent's head. Now the serpent will take his revenge and dispose of the rival vying with it for Jimmy's affections.

What conclusions can one infer from this brief exploration of what is both a landscape and a "mindscape"? Two essential observations ; firstly, that the fiction of the New World bears witness to the presence of a mythology and a symbolism based on space ; secondly, it reveals the existence of "a moral geography of the American imagination". A landscape can thus become the pretext for a moral fable. Whether in *Follow Me Down* or "The Last of the caddoes", topology develops into metaphysics (the problem of Evil and Guilt) and archeology into teleology : in what direction is the history of the New World moving? Is it materializing the entrancing vision of a Thomas Paine declaring at the dawn of the American Revolution :

We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand, and a new race of aryen, perhaps as numerous as all Europe contains, are to receive their portion of freedom from the events of a few months.

The Mississippi island and the mound are the scene of both a celebration and a debunking of the American pastoral ; they reveal that at the heart of the American past there lurks not an original innocence but a primal guilt and show how the New World, a Promised Land, a geographical Paradise, was turned into hell by history.

If space is, in the words of a French historian, "the unconscious of civilizations" then the river island – the locus of desire and fantasy (return to Eden, transgressions) – and the mound – the locus of the repressed of collective history (the spoliation and rejection of the aboriginal) – are two essential *topoi* of American literature because they display the fundamental dialectic of innocence and guilt, and reveal that the pastoral ideal has left the inhospitable, ephemeral world of facts to take refuge in the permanent world of fable.