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Other Voices, Other Rooms by Truman Capote

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Truman CAPOTE :
*Other Voices, Other Rooms**

(A Twofold Introduction)

Introduction I

The following notes do not purport to be a comprehensive study of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*; they are intended to give the prospective student an idea of what it is about and cannot substitute for a close reading of the novel. A variety of motives has entered into the choice of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (OVOR in subsequent references):

– it is a very original novel with a distinctive American quality and as such, it bears out my contention that understanding – and enjoying – American fiction calls for a radical change of attitudes on the part of the French or European reader, who must unlearn all previous knowledge and develop a new approach, a new mode of thinking and seeing ;

– secondly, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* raises the question of the distinction between two basic types of prose fiction, *viz*. the novel proper and the romance. We owe N Hawthorne the categorization of American fiction into romances and novels. The main difference between those two forms lies in the way in which they view reality: the novel renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail; it attaches great importance to character, psychology, and strives after verisimilitude. Romance is free from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude; it show a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness, and often expresses dark and complex truths unavailable to realism. In the "Introduction" to *The House of The Seven Gables* (1851), N. Hawthorne defined the field of action of romance as being the borderline of the human mind where the actual and the imaginary intermingle. The distinction is still valid and may account, as some critics have argued, notably, R. Chase in *The American Novel and its Tradition*, for the original and characteristic form of the American novel, which Chase calls "romance-novel" to highlight its hybrid nature. OVOR perfectly answers the description;

– thirdly, the epithet "neo-Gothic" has often been applied to OVOR and this is yet another important distinction in the field of American literature. The term "Gothic" originally applied to that type of fiction that made plentiful use of all the trappings of the medieval period: gloomy castles; ghosts; mysterious disappearances, and other sensational or supernatural occurrences. Later on, the term denoted a type of fiction that lacked the medieval setting but developed a brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror, and often dealt with aberrant psychological states. In his *Glossary of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams stresses the relationship between the prose romance and the Gothic novel:

> The prose romance has as its ancestors the chivalric romance of the Middle Ages and the Gothic novel of latter eighteenth century. It typically deploys simplified characters, larger than life, who are sharply discriminated as heroes and villains, masters and victims; the protagonist is often solitary, and isolated from a social context; the plot emphasizes adventure, and is often cast in the form of the quest for an ideal, or the pursuit of an enemy; and the nonrealistic and occasionally melodramatic events are sometimes claimed to project in symbolic form the primal desires, hopes, and terrors in the depths of the human mind, and to be therefore analogous to the materials of dream, myth, ritual, and folklore.

Besides the originality and Americanness of the novel in question, the choice of OVOR can also be accounted for by the personality of its author. Although the judgment of literary history is likely to rank him among the lesser writers of our age (despite Somerset Maugham's statement that Capote was the "hope of modern literature"), Truman Capote played an important role in contemporary American letters: that of the "genius-clown":

> "extravagant in physical appearance, exhibitionistic by design, flamboyant in action and word, and a superb artist in any medium when he wished to be, he constantly reminded the world that artists were different and that much of their worth stemmed from the fact that they behaved pretty much as they damned well pleased." (James A. Michener)

* Harmondsworth, Penguin Books,1978.

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The Author

Truman Capote[1] (1924-1984), American novelist, playwright, and short story writer, gave the following account of himself:

"I was born in New Orleans. My mother [an alcoholic who committed suicide] was from Alabama, I spent a great lot of my childhood in that state, though I lived in several other parts of the South. Later I spent winters in schools in the East, particularly the Trinity School in New York City and the high school in Greenwich, Conn. — where Miss Catherine Wood, who taught English there at the time, offered me great kindness and encouragement. But I believe I was a nuisance and a bother to most all my other teachers; certainly I was never a good student, and so intense was my relief when graduation finally came that I did not consider college.
Instead, I spent a winter in an apartment of my own in New Orleans—reading, writing short stories, working on a novel. I was 17. The novel came to nothing, indeed was never finished, but one of the stories written during that period was subsequently published by the magazine *Story*.
The following year I went to New York wanting a job, which was not easy to find, particularly because I looked too young, 13 or 14 at the most. One day, however, I went round to the New Yorker magazine—and left with a glorious-sounding job in their Art Department; in actuality, I turned out to be a kind of errand-boy; still I enjoyed the year I stayed there—though certain personages might have been surprised to hear it.
I spent the following winter on a farm in Alabama, and it was then that my stories began to appear with some regularity in a number of magazines—including 'Miriam,' 'Shut a Final Door,' which won the O. Henry prize of that year, a the title story from my first collection, *A Tree of Night*. It was then also that I began work on a novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, which was finished three years later on Nantucket Island.
I prefer travel to any other form of entertainment and do not know that I should ever care to be settled in any specific place. During the last six years, I've lived in the West Indies, Paris, New York, Tangiers, Venice, and for quite long stretches in Sicily. To live and work in this somewhat scattered manner is very agreeable to me—I think because I do not have much instinct for ownership, do not want in the least to be surrounded by personal possessions that can root one's life. I wish to have only those things that are transportable. Or so it would appear at the moment.
None of my work is autobiographical; except, in an obscure way, in a way that even I cannot define, my second novel, *The Grass Harp*. It was written to commemorate my affections for two beloved friends. The content of my work is 'literary'; as opposed, that is, to writing inspired by political or religious convictions, of which I have, in the very orthodox sense, none: so that my source, my point of view, is a matter of private imagination, personal moral beliefs. The 'message' of a story should be after all the story itself. Though I have always been conscious of style, I have not a 'fixed' style and hope that I never do, for each story requires a new setting of tone, a language that will contain the story as a glass contains water. Just generally, however, I work toward a certain sound, the rhythms of speech, and try to make each sentence read as though it could also, in a natural voice, be said."

In 1948, when T. Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* was published, he was hailed as a boy wonder. The publication of a stylized photograph of him draped over a couch, his eyes fixed in a stare of childlike wonder behind straggling bangs, only reinforced the popular impression that he was the "*enfant terrible*" of contemporary American letters. Probably more attention was given to the author than to the intrinsic qualities of the novel itself, a strange and gripping little book, peopled with grotesque characters who moved in a neo-Gothic world of decadence and degeneracy. In the years and the books that have followed, Capote has at last come to the place where he can be read and evaluated apart from the hullabaloo of publicity

1. Capote is pronounced [kəp'əuti:]. His true name is Truman Persons but he took his stepfather's last name.

campaigns. Traces of the precocious, slightly diabolical but charming child still exist in his works. The world in which his characters move is fundamentally a child's world—isolated, self-centered, richly and sometimes exotically imaginative (J.W. Aldridge speaks of "the purity" of Capote's world—a purity not of experience but "the sort that can be attained only in the isolation of a mind which life has never really violated, in which the image of art has developed to flowerlike perfection because it has developed alone."). But the eerie stories in *The Tree of Night* and the warm-hearted fantasy of *The Grass Harp* give evidence of a sound and considerable talent. There is similar evidence in Capote's non-fiction — *Local Color*, a collection of sketches about places Capote has visited—that he is a conscientious and thoughtful writer.

In 1952, Capote turned to another form, the drama, with an adaptation of *The Grass Harp*, which was favorably received by the New York critics. R. Hayes wrote in Commonwealth: "Mr. Capote excels as the dramatist of sensibility, of the small, the delicate and eccentric; he displays, moreover, the essential flintiness of mind from which a good scene may be struck." Capote has also done motion-picture writing, and in Italy in 1953 he wrote the script for the Humprey Bogart-John Huston production *Beat the Devil*. In 1954, he worte the book for the colorful and exotic musical comedy *House of Flowers*, which had a moderate Broadway run. Capote spends much time in Taormina, Sicily, where he has bought a villa once occupied by D. H. Lawrence.

In 1956, Capote published *The Muses Are Heard* and *A Christmas Memory*. *Beakfast at Tiffany's* saw print in 1958; this novella about a bad little good girl called Holly Golilightly has become a small classic. It was followed in 1965 by *In Cold Blood*, a novel about the gruesome slaying of a whiole family by two young murderers. Truman Capote spent six years composing what he called a ***nonfiction novel*** ("un roman-document") *i.e.* "a book that would read exactly like a novel except that every word of it would be absolutely true. It was a literary experiment…" Other works: *A Thanksgiving Visitor* (1967); *Music for Chameleons* (1980) and *One Christmas* in 1983.

Composition of OVOR

Truman Capote exploded on the American literary scene at the age of 24 with the publication of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* in 1948. In his interview with L. Grobel, Capote relates the circumstances of its composition; the story came to him on a frosty December afternoon during a walk in a forest, "along the bank of a mysterious, deep, very clear creek." As the story took shape, he got lost in the woods, "for his mind was reeling with the whole book." When he finally reached home, he went straight to his room, locked the door, got into bed fully clothed, "and with pathetic optimism, wrote: '*Other Voices, Other Rooms—a novel by Truman Capote.'* Then: 'Now a traveler must must make his way to Noon City by the best means he can…'" It was a sensational debut for Capote. The *New York Herald Tribune* called it "the most exciting first novel by a young American in many years."

In another interview, shortly after the publication of the novel, T. Capote said that:

> "*Other Voices, Other Rooms* was a prose poem in which I have taken my own emotional problems and transformed them into psychological symbols. Every one of the characters represented some aspect of myself. Do you remember the young boy who goes to a crumbling mansion in search of his father and finds an old man who is crippled and can't speak and can communicate only by bouncing red tennis balls down the stairs?...This represented my search for my own father, whom I seldom saw, and the fact that the old man is crippled and mute was my way of transferring my own inability to communicate with my father; I was not only the boy in the story but also the old man."

He went on to say that much of his earlier work was written in a fantastic vein because he was attempting to escape "from the realities of my own troubled life, which wasn't easy. My underlying motivation was a quest for some sense of serenity, some particular kind of affection that I needed and wanted…I never felt I belonged anywhere." Thus, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* describes a very private world – T. Capote also stated that: "The content of my work is literary, as opposed, that is, to writing inspired by political or religious convictions, of which I have, in the very orthodox sens, none." – and this is why it is so difficult to gain access to it. A many-faceted novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* has been puzzling the critics ever since it saw print; because of its poetic and highly idiosyncratic nature, it is open to a variety of interpretations as witness the two following excerpts from I. Hassan's and P. Dommergues's studies (but the quest for the father certainly is the most important motif).

Extract from I. Hassan's *Radical Innocence*:

The peculiar mixture of fantasy and reality in Capote's first novel begs for allegorical interpretation. Carvel Collins has suggested the quest of the Holy Grail as a possible framework for the action, pointing out numerous parallels between the details of Joel Knox's story and those to be found in Jessie Weston's account of the Grail myth. John Aldridge, on the other hand, has seen Joel's story essentially as an archetype of the Boy in search of a Father. Both views correspond to genuine analogues of the narrative. But Joel Knox is not only a miniature Dedalus-Telemachus in Dublin-Ithaca, or Parsifal-Galahad at the Chapel Perilous. He is also a smaller model of Castorp-Tannhäuser at Davos-Venusberg, and Narcissus sitting by his pool. Above all, he is simply Joel Knox who, no matter how much or little he may resemble Capote, is still a character in a work of fiction.

Joel is in search of an image which reflects darkly his own identity, his inner reality, which becomes available to him, ironically, only when reality is dispelled in the palace of pleasure, the secret house of dreams. (To call *Other Voices, Other Rooms* a story of initiation is to recall how shrunken the range of initiation has become since Huck Finn bounced down the Mississippi on his raft.) What Joel elects is what the enchanted world of Skully's Landing forces upon him, and what he finally accepts is beyond good and evil, as dreams are, which alone are real. Love, which used to be an anchor of reality, is set adrift in the darkness of the human heart—"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?" is the epigraph of the novel, taken from Jeremiah. Love returns upon itself as the mirror image turns to the beholder and absents itself with his absence. The search for the Other, who may be god, sweetheart, or father, ends in the discovery of the Self, and initiation to the world amounts to regression to the world of infantile fantasy in which the father is also a lover. Such is the apotheosis of the love between Joel and Randolph at the spectral Cloud Hotel towards the end of the novel.

The novel begins with Joel's arrival at Noon city, an oasis in the busy world, less pre-Civil War than legendary, near which is the even more legendary mansion of Skully's Landing, where he expects to meet his father for the first time. He is glad to leave Aunt Ellen's house behind: "It was as if he lived those months wearing a pair of spectacles with green, cracked lenses, and had wax-plugging in his ears, for everything seemed to be something it wasn't, and the days melted into a constant dream." But Joel does not see his father, Mr. Samson, for a long time. He roams the wild, incredible garden of the Landing which, like some lost ruin, is haunted by the enfabled past; and, true to Capote's vision, he perceives in an "instant of petrified violence," the apparition of a strange lady in a window. This is his first glimpse of Randolph, of his own fate. Randolph, prototype of the Evil Magician, of the artist, the teacher, and the criminal, whose eloquence and learning are like echoes of a spectral chorus, is the genius who dominates the Landing. Exquisite in his cultivation and irrelevance, at once languid and sinister, lucid and depraved, Randolph has all the unpredictability and perverted innocence which qualify him for becoming the mentor and lover of Joel. Whether he is exposed to the half-pagan Sabbath ceremonies of Jesus Fever and his daughter Zoo, or the primitive magic of Little Sunshine, the wizened Negro hermit who haunts the Cloud Hotel, or the talcumed world of invalids, lunatics, and perverts who inhabit the Landing, Joel's sense of reality is constantly subverted by his environment. Like Little Sunshine, who acts, together with Randolph, as father-substitute, Joel is drawn to the terrible Cloud Hotel: "For if he [Little Sunshine] went away, as he had once upon a time, other voices, other rooms, voices lost and clouded, strummed his dreams." The progressive attenuation of external reality is evident as Joel moves from Aunt Ellen's to Skully's Landing to the Cloud Hotel; the movement is indeed a descent into Hades, a journey, in various stages, toward the darkest unconscious, or perhaps toward the womb of death. Dreaming of the Cloud Hotel, Joel realizes that it was not and never had been a real hotel: "This was the place folks came when they went off the face of the earth, when they died but were not dead." And dreaming of his journey through its rooms, he sees himself "in the dust of thorns listening for a name, his own, but even here no father claimed him."

The second part of the novel, of the "journey," opens with a climactic incident. Joel finally meets his father, and finds him a paralytic with two glinting eyes, who can only communicate with the world by dropping red tennis balls. Meanwhile, we are apprised in a grotesque tale of love and violence that Randolph is responsible for Samson's condition. Joel's resistance to Randolph, and to all that he stands for, receives its first

check when Joel discovers that his real father is nearly a zombie. His resistance is further weakened when his relation to Idabel Tompkins fails to confirm his groping manhood. When Joel attempts to kiss Idabel on a fishing trip, she fights him off viciously and overpowers him; and on their excursion to a decayed mill, it is she who kills the water moccasin with Jesus Fever's old Civil War sword. The snake has the eyes of Joel's father, and the boy fails equally in asserting his manhood with Idabel as in conquering the phantom of his father with the ceremonial symbol of the past. Thus, it is in failing the traditional ordeals, in overcoming which he might have earned his manhood, that Joel makes himself eligible to the insidious knowledge of the Cloud Hotel. Three further incidents clinch Joel's failure, and therefore clinch his regression, the form that his initiation takes. An appeal he sends to Aunt Ellen in the form of a letter is intercepted by Randolph. When Idabel and Joel decide to run away, they encounter in the woods two Negroes making passionate love. The scene reawakens Idabel's hostility toward Joel; it is a firm intimation that between them no stable relation can obtain. A little later, both find themselves at a fair, and they strike up an excited companionship with a wistful midget, Miss Wisteria. They all ride a ferris wheel. Then Miss Wisteria begins to take a special interest in Joel:

She placed her hand on his thigh, and then, as though she had no control over them whatsoever, her fingers crept up inside his legs . . . and Joel, disturbed but knowing now he wanted never to hurt anyone, not Miss Wisteria, nor Idabel . . . wished so much he could say: it doesn't matter. I love you, I love your hand. The world was a frightening place, yes, he knew: unlasting, what could be forever? or only what it seemed? rock corrodes, rivers freeze, fruit rots; stabbed, blood of black and white bleeds alike; trained parrots tell more truth than most, and who is lonelier: the hawk or the worm?

On the ferris wheel the vision of love, loneliness, and mutability is suddenly illuminated in Joel's mind, and it is in the name of love that he renounces the willfulness of sexual possession. At the same instant, he glimpses Randolph staring fixedly at him from the ground underneath.

The discovery of reality and the search for fulfillment in heterosexual terms fail. Zoo, who dreams all her life of journeying to Washington after her father dies, does not get very far. She is raped by three white men and a Negro driving a truck and returns to the Landing crushed, her dream desecrated. Even Idabel, who makes good her escape, winds up with Miss Wisteria as companion. With Idabel away—she and Randolph, like images of day and night, are never seen together in the novel—Joel can only turn to Randolph.

Part Three opens with the return of Joel to the Landing. He returns in a coma, his world contracted, appearance and reality altogether fused, and when he recovers from his illness, he is finally at peace, fully attuned to the enchantments which await him: "Lo, he was where he's never imagined to find himself again: the secret hideaway room in which, on hot New Orleans afternoons, he'd sat watching snow sift through scorched August trees. . . ." It is with Randolph, not Idabel, that he finally visits the Cloud Hotel, while Aunt Ellen looks for him in vain. But for Joel there is no going back to the old realities; like Randolph, like Little Sunshine, he finds at last his Other Room in the Hotel—with a hanged mule in it for effect. And strangely enough, the last acts of Joel indicate not surrender but liberation. Faithful to the Jungian archetype of the Descent into Hades, Joel reemerges somewhat healed, possessed of a dangerous and ambiguous knowledge. "'I am me,' Joel whooped. 'I am Joel, we are the same people,'" he shouts exuberantly on his way back from the Cloud Hotel. And he is suddenly wise enough to see "how helpless Randolph was: more paralyzed than Mr. Samson, more childlike than Miss Wisteria, what else could he do, once outside and alone, but describe a circle, the zero of his nothingness?" At the end of the novel, when Zoo overturns the cracked, moss-covered bell with which the old plantation owners used to summon their slaves, ancient symbol of a vanished order, and when Randolph appears in a window, beckoning in his female attire to Joel, we are not sure whether it is in triumph or defeat that Joel responds to this mute appeal. We can only sense that the traditional modes of behavior are no longer in command of life.

Mr. Aldridge has objected to the self-contained quality of evil and guilt in the novel, to the failure of the book to "stand in some meaningful relation to recognizable life," and to the feeling that Capote's world "seems to be a concoction rather than a synthesis," its purity "not the purity of experience forced under pressure into shape" but rather the "sort that can be attained only in the isolation of a mind which life has never really violated. . . ." The objections appear serious; but as usual, the impatience of Mr. Aldridge is not entirely justified. We need to remember that Capote's work is, in its intentions, at least, a novel-romance, and that it attempts to engage reality without being realistic. Evil and guilt in it are self-contained only in the sense that they are defined by the individual consciousness without reference to an accepted social or moral order. Evil,

in other words, is mainly poetic and archetypal; its moral issue is confined to the predicament of the victim without visible oppressor, and of the beloved almost without a lover. The result is a sharp focus, a reflexive vision seeking constantly to penetrate the arcana of personality. As Randolph puts it to Joel:

They can romanticize us so, mirrors, and that is their secret: what a subtle torture it would be to destroy all the mirrors in the world: where then could we look for reassurance of our identities? I tell you my dear, Narcissus was no egotist . . . he was merely another of us who, in our unshatterable isolation, recognized, on seeing his reflection, the one beautiful comrade the only inseparable love…

Experience is limited to what a mirror reveals of the beholder, and if the novel sometimes appears to be a "concoction" rather than a "synthesis," it is perhaps because the job of dramatic resolution is surrendered to ambience and verbal magic. Here is the context of Joel's final revelation at the Cloud Hotel:

(He looked into the fire, longing to see their faces as well, and the flames erupted an embryo; a veined, vacillating shape, its features formed slowly, and even when complete stayed veiled in dazzle; his eyes burned tar-hot as he brought them nearer: tell me, tell me, who are you? Are you someone I know? are you dead? are you my friend? do you love me? But the painted disembodied head remained unborn beyond its mask, and gave no clue. Are you someone I am looking for? he asked, not knowing whom he meant, but certain that for him there must be such a person, just as there was for everybody else: Randolph with his almanac, Miss Wisteria and her search by flashlight, Little Sunshine remembering other voices, other rooms, all of them remembering, or never having known. And Joel drew back. If he recognized the figure in the fire, then what ever would he find to take its place? It was to easier not to know, better holding heaven in your hand like a butterfly that is not there at all.)

The recognition of Joel is, to a large extent, the event upon which the dramatic unity of the novel depends. It is characteristic of Capote's nocturnal mode that the event should be presented in the guise of a trance or hallucination, a verbal *tour de force*, and that its moral effect should be muffled by "atmosphere." Though other novels seem to us greater, it is otiose to take their more realistic mode as a judgment of Capote's fiction.

Extract from P. Dommergues's Essay:

Les métaphores de l'absence

Que l'image du père soit associée à la puissance, comme dans le roman juif de Bellow, ou à l'impuissance, comme dans le roman le plus traditionnellement américain de Capote, les métaphores fondamentales de l'absence du père sont identiques : l'attente, la quête et le non-lieu.

La recherche d'un père spirituel

La forme la plus spécifiquement américaine de substitut à l'autorité n'est ni la religion, ni l'organisation, mais la recherche systématique d'un père spirituel. Cette enquête angoissée est déjà centrale chez Sherwood Anderson : dans Winesberg, Ohio, le véritable père est un vieux beau, irresponsable, bien vêtu, maniéré, désinvolte à l'égard de son épouse et d'un fils qui cherche dans la personne d'un vieux Docteur pauvre, laid, mais humain, ou dans la folie d'un grand-père fanatique, le père qu'il aurait aime avoir.

Parfois le géniteur existe réellement, et l'enfant part à sa recherche. C'est la situations des *Domaines hantés* de Truman Capote : mystérieusement invité, le petit Joël Harrison Knox, qui n'a pas l'air d'un "vrai" petit garçon parce qu'il est trop joli, que sa peau est trop blanche et que tous ses traits respirent une sensibilité féminine, quitte le véritable monde des voitures, du coca-cola et sa tante, à la suite d'une lettre de son père qui se déclare prêt à "assumer à nouveau ses obligations paternelles délaissées hélas! Au cours de ces dernières années". Il arrive dans les domaines mystérieux de Scully Land où il rencontre une femme, sans doute l'épouse de son père, un homme, sans doute son cousin, quelques domestiques noirs, seuls personnages encore doués d'une certaine réalité. Personne ne répond jamais à ses questions. La seule certitude c'est que la maison s'enfonce chaque année de quatre pouces dans le sol. Mais du père, pas la moindre trace. L'enfant a l'impression de vivre parmi des sourds jusqu'au jour où il est admis dans une pièce étrange, en présence du visage figé d'Amy, l'épouse de son cousin Randolph qui se cure les ongles avec une plume d'oie.

« *Sur la table, près du lit, il y avait deux objets assez extraordinaires : un globe illuminé en verre dépoli rose décoré de scènes de Venise : gondoles dorées, gondoliers inquiétants, couples amoureux voguant, le long de palais aux gloires défuntes, sur un canal d'un bleu écœurant ; et un nu en biscuit porteur d'un petit*

miroir d'argent. Dans ce miroir, deux yeux se reflétaient, à peine Joël les eut-il remarqués qu'il ne vit plus rien d'autre. Les yeux étaient d'un gris de larmes, et de leur éclat mort, ils observaient Joël. Bientôt, comme pour marquer qu'ils l'avaient distingué, ils se fermèrent d'un double clignement, tournèrent. Et il ne les vit plus que comme les éléments d'une tête ; une tête rasée posée avec une mollesse invalide sur des oreillers malsains. "Il voudrait l'eau", dit Randolph, grattant du pouce le couvre-pieds. "Il faut que tu le fasses boire : pauvre Eddie, il ne peut plus faire un mouvement." Et Joël dit : — « Est-ce que c'est lui ? (17) »

Le constat de la paralysie de son père isole définitivement Joël. Si celui en qui il pensait trouver la réalité et la virilité n'est qu'une masse informe, incapable de parler et de communiquer — sauf en faisant rebondir sur le sol une balle de tennis rouge, alors le monde réel doit être celui du rêve et de la féminité. Joël est maintenant prêt à accepter les substituts de son père : en l'occurrence Amy et Randolph, deux êtres asexués. L'acceptation de Randolph, personnage "androgyne" et animal monstrueux aux yeux de Joël, s'accompagne d'un renoncement à la masculinité : le père réel est remplacé par un homosexuel auquel l'enfant finit par obéir. Parallèlement, ses tentatives d'exploration sexuelle avec une petite fille se soldent par un échec dû en partie à la vitalité dévorante de cette dernière, en partie à la vision d'un couple faisant l'amour dans un bosquet. Joël se laisse engluer dans son enfance, il renonce à franchir l'étape de l'adolescence, jusqu'au moment où il découvre la faiblesse de Randolph : son père spirituel est en fin de compte aussi peu vivant que son père véritable et, dans un sursaut de lucidité, il quitte la maison :

« *A une de ces fenêtres, quelqu'un le surveillait. Tout son corps se pétrifia, sauf les yeux. Eux savaient. Et c'était la fenêtre de Randolph. Peu à peu, le soleil aveuglant s'assombrit et on eût dît que la neige s'était mise à tomber. Les flocons dessinèrent des yeux de neige, des cheveux. Un visage trembla comme une belle planète blanche, sourit. Elle lui fit signe, dans sa lumière d'argent, et il comprit qu'il lui fallait partir. Sans peur, sans hésiter, il marcha jusqu'à la haie du jardin où, comme s'il eût oublié quelque chose, il s'arrêta et se retourna pour voir l'azur sans fleurs qui descendait, et le petit garçon qu'il laissait derrière lui* (18). »

Introduction II

TRUMAN CAPOTE : A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

The author of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* was born in New Orleans in 1924, an only child. His l7-year-old mother was to divorce her husband four years later (it was in Capote's own words "a complicated divorce with much bitterness on either side") to marry a rich man whose last name was adopted by her son. Thus, Truman Streckfus Persons became Truman Capote. Truman Capote was very early separated from his mother and spent most of his childhood wandering among the homes of relatives in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. He seldom saw his father and complained later that "there was a great absence of love in his childhood." An atmosphere of tension reigned in the home: Capote's stepfather was a chronic gambler and a womanizer; he ruined the life of his wife who took to drinking and eventually committed suicide. The novelist-to be was deeply affected by this tragedy.

T. Capote had very little formal schooling; he attended various schools but did not shine at any academic discipline except English; his high-school English teacher proudly said: "I always recognized Truman's genius and felt we should make allowances for it. Writing was the only subject he was interested in. Other subjects simply did not exist." Capote claimed that he started to write when he was eight years old: "I used to come home from school and other kids did whatever they did, but I would write for three or four hours every day, just like some kids would practice the piano. It was an obsession." No wonder, then, that the young Capote was considered a little eccentric and sent to special schools. As he himself acknowledged: "I believe I was a nuisance and a bother to most of my teachers; certainly I was never a good student, and so intense was my relief when graduation finally came that I did not consider college." So he left school when he was 17 and spent a winter in an apartment of his own in New Orleans reading, writing short-stories, working on a novel. The novel came to nothing, indeed was never finished. The following year he went to New York, looking for a job and was hired by *The New Yorker* magazine as an errand-boy. However, he did not stay long and went back to Alabama where he composed several stories, which began to appear with some regularity in a number of magazines. At 19, he won the first of three O. Henry awards (O. Henry is the pen name of William Sydney Porter, one of the most successful American short-story writers. His name was given to a literary prize for the best short-story published in the States every year). The short story in question, "Miriam", is the strange macabre tale of a young girl who enters the mind and life of a middle-aged woman and destroys her. It was

then also that he began work, on another novel, OVOR, which was finished three years later on Nantucket Island. The novel received wide acclaim and Capote became famous almost overnight. The publication at the back of the book of a photograph of him in a suggestive attitude created a stir and reinforced the popular impression that he was the *enfant terrible* of contemporary American letters. Probably more attention was given to the author than to the intrinsic qualities of the novel itself, a strange and gripping little book, peopled with grotesque characters who moved in a neo-Gothic world of decadence and degeneracy. Be that as it may, OVOR was the first of a series of best-sellers which made Capote a rich man and enabled him to indulge his urge to travel. Capote lived at one time or another in the West Indies, Paris, New York, Tangiers, and Venice and for quite long stretches in Sicily. Capote declared: “I do not have much instinct for ownership, I do not want in the least to be surrounded by personal possessions that can root one's life.”

A book of stories (*A Tree of Night*, 1949) and another of travel pieces (*Local Color*), 1950) preceded his second novel, *The Grass Harp*, 1951. His next book was a journalistic *tour de force* called *The Muses are Heard*, satiric reportage about a Russian tour by an all-black American theatre company. His now classic novella *Breakfast at Tiffany's* appeared two years later (1958).

Capote's ability to accurately hear and report was dramatically illustrated when *In Cold Blood* appeared in 1965. It is a novel about the gruesome slaying of a whole family by two young murderers. Truman Capote spent six years composing what he called a nonfiction novel (*un roman-document*) i.e. "a book that would read exactly like a novel except that every word of it would be absolutely true. It was a literary experiment...". *Life* hailed it as a masterpiece. The *New York Review of Books* called it “the best documentary account of an American crime ever written.” Other journalistic pieces followed, collected in *The Dogs Bark* and *Music for Chameleons* (1981). And then came the chapters from *Answered Prayers*, published in four installments in *Esquire* in the mid-seventies. The title came from a quote from Saint Thérèse, who said: "More tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones." The French translation of this book has just appeared (posthumously since Capote died in 1984) under the title *Prières exaucées*. It contains vitriolic portraits of his high society friends and some of our most famous contemporaries (the Kennedys, N. Mailer, M. Monroe, E. Taylor, T. Williams, Sartre and so on). Needless to say, such iconoclastic prose created a storm of controversy. But it is another illustration of Capote's contention that "all literature is ultimately gossip." T. Capote certainly is one of the most controversial figures of American letters; as a writer, he is in a class of his own, a chameleon-like artist who successfully tried his hand at various forms and tremendously influenced American writing. Whatever judgment History may pass on his merits as a novelist, there is little doubt that Capote broke new ground in nonfiction-writing and particularly in journalism "the last great unexplored literary frontier."

The Quest for the father

As in most simple narratives such as fairy tales or folk tales, the motif of the quest plays a fundamental role in OVOR and the novel is amenable to analysis in terms of Greimas's actantial model, which is based on the assumption that many narrative plots reduce to arrangements of stock elements/actions, or draw from a common pool of basic schemes. Such schemes in the deep structure of fiction can be classified into roles (or more appropriately functions) such as *Sender/Object/Receiver* and/or *Helper/Subject/Opponent*. (Cf. An Introduction to semiotic analysis).

According to T. Capote, "the central theme of the book was my search for my father--a father who, in the deepest sense, was nonexistent." This is one of the stock elements of American literature where countless novels ring the changes on this motif. In OVOR, Joel Harrison Knox, a motherless boy living with his aunt Ellen near New Orleans receives on his thirteenth birthday a letter from Skully's Landing (= Placquemine, Capote's family plantation) to the effect that his neglectful father is prepared "to assume his paternal duties again". No sooner has Joel reached the Landing than the mystery deepens; nobody seems to know his father and everyone, from Miss Amy, his stepmother, and Randolph, his queer cousin, to Zoo, the colored maid, answers evasively whenever the adolescent inquires after his father. Joel begins to suspect that Mr. Sansom (a pun on "sans homme,' as a critic suggested?) is “A nothing, a nobody. A name that did not appear even to have particular significance for anybody” (p. 26). The place itself is mysterious and ominous; it stands in a primitive garden rank with “grass and bush and vine and flower” (p. 40); it is full of complex sounds (“sounds on the edge of silence, settting sighs of stone and board, as though the old rooms inhaled-exhaled constant wind.” p. 91) and is slowly “drowning in the earth” (91), but, above all, it has many doors (a recurrent motif in the novel)

and Joel wonders “which of them, if opened, might lead to his father” (p. 41). Joel believes at first that his father denies him because he does not come up to his expectations: "that runt is an impostor; my son would be taller and stronger and handsomer and smarter-looking" (p. 42), a suspicion that will strengthen Joel's own sense of inadequacy, then the boy comes to the conclusion that his father has just gone, left for ever (p. 91). When the confrontation does take place, Joel faces an invalid who can only communicate with the world by dropping red tennis balls (an obvious sexual symbol connoting loss of manhood). The father with whom Joel should identify himself has literally been destroyed by Randolph who shot him in a sordid misunderstanding (cf. p. 108). Joel is thus left with no one to rely on except Randolph, a dubious character to say the least cf. Joel's wish that his father were more like his ideal image: "If only he had never seen Mr. Sansom! Then he could have gone on picturing him as looking this and that wonderful way, as talking in a kind strong voice, as being really his father. Certainly this Mr. Sansom was not his father,” (p. 130). The adolescent, in his turn, denies this piteous father; Joel will not acknowledge their kindred until he is about to make his escape to the world lying outside Skully's Landing (" ‘I’m leaving, Father,' he said, and it was, in a sense, the first time he'd acknowledged their blood" (141). If the quest for the father does not exactly fail, it comes nonetheless to a disappointing end with far-reaching consequences.

The Visual Metaphor or the Sun and the Eye in OVOR

There is also a voyeuristic tradition in American literature and a characteristic obsession among its best representatives (Poe, Hawthorne, and Faulkner, to mention just a few names) about escaping the gaze of another, be it God, a human being or some unknown power. *The Great Gatsby* is a case in point: Nick Caraway’s world is dominated, haunted by the short-sighted eyes of Doctor Eckleburg, and one of the characters (Wilson) claims that “God sees everything,” (p. 166). Visuality in OVOR organizes almost all narrative relationships and being in the world for Joel always means being held immobile in the gaze of someone else's sight. The world is a sort of visual prison and the Sun, a big eye in the sky ensnaring people and things. The town where Joel reaches the end of his quest is appropriately called Noon City *i.e.* the time when the sun is at its brightest and hottest, and the landscape is scorched by “the sun's stinging glaze” (16). As for voyeurism, there are several instances of it in OVOR; Joel and the members of his gang indulge in what they call "Blackmail" (p. 52), “a kind of peeping-tom game […] the idea being to approach a strange house and peer invisibly through its windows”; the scenes they witness are mainly of an erotic nature: “a young girl waltzing stark naked to victrola music" (*Ibid*.), "two grown men... kissing each other” or later, when he is running away with Idabel, two Negroes making love in the moonlight (p. 143). This voyeurism is naturally linked with initiation into the mysteries of sex. This seer/seen dialectics stresses the fact "if [the] eyes could not escape you, neither could you avoid them" (p. 130). Mr. Sansom is an embodiment of the baleful power of the Evil Eye: "This Mr Sansom was nobody but a pair of crazy eyes" (130) and nothing can escape his notice: "in some trick way his eyes traveled the whole world over'" (132). Joel stands naked and defenseless under the scrutiny of his father's eyes and the man evolves into the figure of a huge eye and – like the malevolent glare of the mythical basilisk (a fabulous reptile, alleged to be hatched by a serpent from a cock's egg; its breath, and even its look, was said to be fatal) – Mr. Sansom's glance paralyzes anyone who dares to return it. When Joel is on his way to the Cloud Hotel, he comes across a poisonous snake whose eyes remind him of his father’s: "How did Mr Sansom's eyes come to be in a moccasin’s head?” (137). Joel is unable to kill it and thus cannot break the spell he is under; Mr Sansom's eyes, like the sun, are everywhere (cf. p. 161). Even when Joel manages to escape from the Landing, he is recaptured by the gaze of Randolph, an obvious father-substitute cf. the scene at the fun fair where Joel, on the Ferris Wheel, glimpses Randolph (who is said to be "faceted as a fly's eye", p. 159) staring fixedly at him from the ground underneath: “the fact that he'd found him proved he was only a messenger for a pair of telescopic eyes,” (p. 150). Joel’s hope of ever escaping the power of the evil eye is lost and at the close of the novel, he will take the final decision not to endure the discomfort of the world's eyes and to vanish into Randolph's narcissistic retreat.

The motif of vision also accounts for the recurrence of images dealing with mirrors, reflections, distortions of reality and optical illusions; all those references to vision culminate in an evocation of the myth of Narcissus. The world of Skully’s Landing strikes one as being unreal, slightly blurred, out of focus; everything is perceived as in a distorting mirror – see, for instance, Joel's reaction when he sees his image in a full-length mirror: “it was like the comedy mirrors in carnival houses; he swayed shapelessly in its distorted depth,” (42). Another noteworthy fact is that his first glimpse of his father is similarly conveyed by a mirror: “Reflected in this

mirror were a pair of eyes [...] the eyes were a teary grey; they watched Joel with a kind of dumb glitter" (p. 93). As we already know, Mr. Sansom can only communicate with his eyes.

Thus the mirror not only reflects reality, however distortedly, it is also endowed with mysterious powers: it duplicates whatever stands in front of it and surrounds its image with a halo of glamour and romance:

> "Randolph studied himself in a mirror; while duplicating him in all essentials, the mirror. . . seemed to absorb his color, to pare and change his features: the man in the mirror was not Randolph, but whatever personality imagination desired him to resemble..." (p. 107).

A mirror provides one with both reassurance of one's identity and a sense of completeness, for it conjures up the image of an ideal alter ego one can identify with. Hence, the reference to Narcissus, the beautiful youth who fell in love with his own reflection, pined away and was turned into the flower that bears its name:

> "'They can romanticize us so, mirrors, and that is their secret: what a subtle torture it would be to destroy all the mirrors in the world: where then could we look for reassurance of our identities? I tell you, my dear, Narcissus was no egotist...he was merely another of us who, in our unshatterable isolation, recognized on seeing his reflection, the one beautiful comrade, the only inseparable love...poor Narcissus, possibly the only human who was ever honest on this point'" (p. 107-108).

Randolph's speculations run counter to the popular assumption that Narcissism stands for a morbid self-love or self-admiration; on the contrary, the essence of Narcissism, as some psychoanalysts maintain, "lies in seeing oneself with the loving eyes of another. The phenomenon does not mean the expression of self-love but the desire of the self to be loved." This leads me naturally to another important motif: the quest for love and identity.

The quest for love and identity

Capote has devoted his fiction to an examination of the human capacity or, more often, incapacity to love and what we know of Capote's life confirms that his concern was not just literary since he declared: "Except for my cousins and relatives, there was a great absence of Love in my childhood." We find echoes of this state of lovelessness in the words of both Joel ("God, let me be loved," 59) and Randolph ("Try a little to like me, will you?", 68). Both characters are actuated by their need for affection whose absence they feel all the more acutely as man is essentially alone: "But we are alone, darling child, terribly, isolated each from the other; so fierce is world's ridicule we cannot speak or show our tenderness" p. 113) cf. also Capote's statement: "I had the most insecure childhood I know of. I felt isolated from all people". The world, in the words of Randolph, is littered with "the garbage of loneliness" (p. 113) and full of "emotional illiterates", *i.e*. people who suppress their own emotions for fear of ridicule." The inert, static and sterile existence of Skufly's Landing itself connotes the emotional vacuum of life in modern society. Joel, who "wishes he had a brother, a sister, somebody" (p. 92) embarks upon a search for the Other but he only encounters queer or abnormal people who cannot fulfill his expectations. His father is a zombie, Idabel fights him off viciously when he tries to kiss her (cf. scene p. 102-3), Zoo, "almost a freak" (45), is slightly deranged, as to Miss Wisteria, the midget, she takes unfair advantage of Joel's naivety (cf. 149). Thus, the adolescent, realizing the impossibility of reciprocal love and the sadness of a world in which growing up means learning that isolation is the lot of everyone, can only turn to Randolph, his homosexual cousin ("he so wanted to put himself in the hands of his friend, be, as here, in the sickbed, dependent upon him for his very life," p. 157) whose whole personality connotes sterility ("Inasmuch as I was born dead, how ironic that I should die at all," p. 107). Joel's surrender is actually foreshadowed by his failure to assert himself in heterosexual terms. The adolescent vacillates between the polarities of femininity and masculinity; his physical portrait stresses a certain ambiguity: "He was too pretty, too delicate and fair-skinned; each of his features was shaped with a sensitive accuracy, and a girlish tenderness softened his eyes, which were brown and very large." (p. 8). Idabel calls him "Sissy britches" (p. 84) and Zoo, while cutting his long hair compares him to "some ol gal" (p. 89). The text likewise insists upon duality and bisexuality. So the adolescent's itinerary can be described as "a journey of initiation into manhood and adulthood". Joel, in his own words, feels ,"separated, without identity" (p. 57), all the more so as his sense of reality is constantly subverted by his environment, a topsy-turvy world dominated by ambiguity and ambivalence and peopled by

freaks: Randolph's face seems "composed of nothing but circles: though not fat, it was round as a coin, smooth and hairless . . . womanly eyes like sky-blue marbles" (p. 62); Randolph's mother, Angela Lee, "grew a beard" (p. 96) and Idabel is a "tomboy" (24) with a "boy-husky" voice (24). Joel finds a composite version of his own potential but arrested sexual identity in the twin sisters, Florabel and Idabel, in whom extremes of active and passive behaviour are severed from each other and expressed in comic and grotesque possibilities. His relationship with Idabel is particularly important, for it fails to confirm his groping manhood; we have already seen how violently Joel is repulsed when he tries to kiss her but another crucial episode will have more far-reaching consequences. I am referring to the encounter with the moccasin; before delving into it I'd like to point out that the pattern of this episode is perfectly amenable to the kind of semiotic analysis I have alluded to earlier in the course *i.e.* the hero, who has to pass various tests in order to prove his manhood, is given a weapon (a sword) by a helper; he then sets out on a journey during which he will come across several "opponents"; he has to overcome all obstacles in order to be acknowledged as a man. Zoo, for instance, makes him a present of the sword that belonged to his grandfather Major Knox., a Civil War hero, and recommends him not to disgrace it (pp. 126-127). But Joel fails in conquering the phantom of his father (*i.e.* the moccasin with father's eyes) with the ceremonial symbol of the past (cf. p. 137: "Spinning him around, and pushing him safely behind her, she pulled the sword out of his hand. 'Big granddaddy bastard,' she jeered, thrusting at the snake.") Traditional roles are reversed; the daring female comes to the rescue of the feckless male. Idabel, just like Joel, is struggling to define herself (cf., p. 101: "I never think like I'm a girl") but her refusal to adopt a feminine rôle becomes part of Joel's failure to trust his masculinity.

However, even if Joel does not pass the test, one may wonder whether his initiation is a complete failure. Actually, he seems to have come to a new awareness as far as sex and death are concerned. The sight of Idabel's body, then of a series of suggestive etchings in Randolph's bedroom and lastly, of two Negroes making love are "an education for Joel" (p. 105): "he knew now...it was as though a tide had receded leaving him dry on a beach white as a bone, and it was good at last to have come from so grey so cold a sea" (p. 143).

Joel also experiences a crucial revelation: "Now at 13 Joel was nearer a knowledge of death than in any year to come: a flower was blooming inside him, and soon, when all tight leaves unfurled, when the noon of youth burned whitest, he would and look, as others had, for the opening of another door" (p. 98). But in spite of all the glimpses afforded by those "half opened doors", Joel is unable to come to terms with the harsh realities of life and the outside world. His escapade with Idabel is a sobering experience; Miss Wisteria convinces him that "the world is a frightening and a lonesome place" (p. 148) and her words of warning are borne out by Zoo's frightful experience. After dreaming for years of going "up North", to Washington, Zoo eventually manages to leave Skully's Landing only to be raped and tortured by four trucksters. This is the penalty she has to pay for "taking the wrong road, coming the wrong way and eating of the apple" (162). She returns to the Landing crushed, her dream desecrated; as to Idabel, she winds up with Miss Wisteria as companion. No wonder that with such precedents, Joel retreats into Randolph's narcissistic sanctuary. The visit to the Cloud Hotel is the last climactic stage in his initiatory journey; the episode is very puzzling for it is fraught with symbolic connotations
baffling analysis. Joel emerges from the Cloud Hotel with apparently a new awareness of his own identity (cf. 'I'm me,' Joel whooped. 'I am Joel and we are the same people' " [p. 170] and also "he knew who he was, he knew that he was strong" [p. 171]) and of Randolph's: "And Joel realized then the truth; he saw how hopeless Randolph was: more paralyzed than Mr Sansom, more childlike than Miss Wisteria, what else could he do, once outside and alone, but describe a circle, the zero of his nothingness?" (170-71). Yet, the end of the novel is as ambiguous as the rest; although the final description strikes an optimistic note (cf. "The morning was like a slate clean for any future, and it was as though an end had come, as if all that had been before had turned into a bird, and flown there to the island tree: a crazy elation caught hold Joel…" (170), we are not sure whether it is in triumph or defeat that Joel responds to Randolph's mute appeal:

> And it was Randolph's window. [...] A face trembled like a white beautiful moth, smiled. She beckoned to him, shining and silver, and he knew he must go: . . . he stopped and looked back at the bloomless, descending blue, at the boy he had left behind.

Readers are nearly evenly divided in their understanding of the last page of the novel. Some see Joel as leaving the Landing, going out into the world as in the conclusion of a typical initiation novel. Others insist

that he goes into the house, joining Randolph and accepting the identity fashioned for him by the structure of narration. One can maintain with some critics that Capote fully exploits the possibilities for distortion and violence inherent in adolescence in order to portray the obverse of a transition to normal adulthood; I. Hassan rightly claims that: “the search for the Other, who may be God, sweetheart, or father, ends in the discovery of the Self, and initiation to the world amounts to regression to the world of infantile fantasy in which the father is also a lover." So, the question whether OVOR is a story of thwarted or successful fulfillment must go unanswered.

The allegorical dimension

As several critics pointed out, the peculiar mixture of fantasy and reality in OVOR begs for allegorical interpretation. What is allegory? Etymologically, the expression means “speaking otherwise than one seems to speak”; it refers to “a narrative in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well", are contrived
not only to make sense in themselves, but also to signify a second correlated order of persons, things, concepts, or events” (Abrams, p. 14). *Gulliver’s Travels* or *The Pilgrim’s Progress* are well-known allegories. As far as OVOR is concerned, the quest of the Holy Grail has often been suggested as a possible framework for the action. Let me remind you that the Holy Grail refers to the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper. According to medieval legend, Joseph of Arimathea collected Christ's blood in the Grail when he was crucified, and later brought the cup to Britain. The legend inspired the quest of the Holy Grail in Arthurian legend, symbolizing spiritual regeneration. Actually, there is no exact equivalent of the Holy Grail in OVOR, but the novel evinces all the trappings of chivalric romance: Skully's Landing and the Cloud Hotel evoke otherworld castles; Randolph is the prototype of the evil magician, Little Sunshine embodies the Hermit (p. 74) and the Wizard (he can make charms, p. 761); Jesus Fever “a gnomish little Negro” (25) also represents a traditional character in that type of narrative. The inhabitants of Skully's Landing embody fragmentary aspects of the threat that Joel has to face on his journey of initiation. However, the most characteristic episodes of the Grail Romance are the "death-rebirth” ritual and the initiation test of the hero. Both are present in OVOR. The first motif is represented by the fact that Joel is, so to speak, in eclipse after his attempted escape to the outer world (cf. the fun-fair episode); "he returns in a coma, his world contracted, appearance and reality altogether fused, and when he recovers from his illness, he is finally at peace, fully attuned to the enchantments which await him" (Hassan, 243). The excursion to the Cloud Hotel can also be interpreted in terms of a death and rebirth ritual; as one critic pointed out "the movement is indeed a descent into Hades, a journey, in various stages, toward the darkest unconscious, or perhaps toward the womb of death" (Hassan, 241). Joel reemerges with a dangerous and ambiguous knowledge: "I am me". The most striking parallel between OVOR and the Holy Grail legend is to be found in the initiation test. In legend, the hero must prove his worth by confronting several obstacles the most important of which being the crossing of a water barrier protecting the shrine of the Grail. This is the well-known Sword Bridge episode; the bridge is narrow and all the more dangerous as midway across, it is common to be confronted with a dragon. If we substitute a snake for the dragon, it is possible to read the encounter with the moccasin in OVOR as a reenactment in a minor key of this initiation test. But Joel is a sorry knight-errant since Idabel takes the initiative and kills the snake in his stead. So, OVOR is only reminiscent of the Holy Grail legend; the novel is a consistent reworking of the whole legend even if there are obvious allegorical dimensions.

Symbolical dimensions

Before dealing with the elements pertaining to symbolism, it is necessary to define the meaning of the term. By symbol is usually meant anything that signifies something else. It is an association either personal or conventional between a word or a set of words and an object, an idea, a value, etc. A symbol stands for something else not by exact resemblance, but by vague suggestion, or by some accidental or conventional relation. Originally, the word referred to a mark or token *i.e.* an object that was divided between two families or friends anxious to form an alliance or a covenant. The two parties could thus keep track of their agreement and ascertain it by simply checking if the two halves fitted exactly.

As befits a novel entitled OVOR (the phrase occurs/is embedded twice in the text on pages 79 and 168, rooms pray an important role in this narrative, so much so that they are almost endowed with human qualities (cf. p. 91: "as though the old rooms inhaled-exhaled constant wind»). The motif of the room serves as

one of the fundamental metaphors for man's situation and loneliness in existence. People are described as being "isolated each from the other […] and they go screaming round the world, dying in [their] rented rooms, nightmare hotels, eternal homes of the transient heart" (113). Life, as is the case for Miss Wisteria, is "a journey through dying rooms" (152) and it is at times so disappointing that some characters like Randolph wish they could "rent another room in another life" (p. 114). Randolph lives a secluded existence, pent-up in his room because he fears life and refuses to come to grips with the outside world.

In order to grow up, to achieve manhood, Joel must also break out of what he calls "the far-away room" *i.e.* the imaginary place where, as a child, he used to take refuge and which he peopled with fantastic creatures born of his fertile imagination (cf. p. 66-67). Joel's evolution is suggested by the fact that he is no longer able to control his imaginary realm: cf. p. 153: "When lo!...forest of flames." In Joel's journey of initiation into adulthood, doors also assume a symbolic function as they can open onto an unsuspected reality or give access to some new knowledge. Skully's Landing is so to speak a sort of maze (cf. "the four impressive oak doors" which might lead to his father p. 41) and Joel hopes that some day "he [will] turn and look, as others had, for the opening of another door" (p. 98), *i.e.* find a way out of his predicament and fulfill himself.

One of the fundamental binary oppositions underlying the narrative is that of the sun vs. the snow. It is quite paradoxical that the main protagonists of a story set in the sunny South should be characterized by a profound yearning for snow. We have already stressed the association of the sun vrith vision, debilitating heat and a sort of malevolent power holding sway over the microcosm of Noon City and Skully's Landing. The conjunction of such antagonistic elements as snow and the sun, ice and fire, can only take place in an imaginary world as when Joel, secluded in his secret hide-away room, sits watching the snow sift through scorched August tregs (p. 153). The motif of snow/ice runs throughout the novel: cf. p. 27 ("A vine-like...snowflakes") and p. 37-74 in the song "When the north wind doth blow...?" or again p. 117 Randolph's evocation of the tragic end of Joel's father ("those weeks were the winter of our lives. . ") ; Joel associates snow/ice/cold with the memory of his mother who died of exposure to an icy January rain (p. 12...; thus as is stated later in the novel: "the good die cold, the wicked in flames", p. 153) and with the memory of his guardian Ellen "[who] liked to read sir Walter Scott...no one." (p. 13). This quotation points up once more the twin motifs of distorted vision and loneliness.

Both Zoo and Joel are very anxious to see "bona fide snow" (4 7); Zoo dreams of going "to some swell city up north [...] where they got snow and not all this sunshine" (46- 47). As to Joel, his ultimate secret wish is also to see snow; meanwhile he must content himself with seeing it in his mind's eye (p. 47). Similarly, Zoo yields to the same delusion/illusion cf. p. 101: "What a fine snow…"

According to the French translator of OVOR (M.-E. Coindreau):

> « En remède à l'angoisse, la neige apporte sa pureté, la transfiguration d'un monde hostile dont elle estompe les arêtes trop aiguës et les hideurs brutales. Mais surtout, par ses enveloppements immaculés, dispensateurs du silence, elle offre au solitaire blessé l'asile sûr auquel il aspire. » (p. 18)

Zoo's failure to find snow seals Joel's fate and adumbrates the failure of his quest (p. 160: "Did you see snow?...that sun! it's everyvrhere" 161). There's no escaping the omnipresent eye in the sky; the sun defeats Zoo, strikes her across the eyes: "The sun poked down my eyes till I'm near-bout blind...".

The sun actually seems to get the better of his rival, Snow, but there is no conclusive evidence, for, characteristically enough, the end of the novel brings about a recurrence of the two conflicting symbols cf. p. 173: "Gradually the blinding sunset...the boy he had left behind".

Flowers

Vegetation with its fluctuations of growth and decay has always been one of the basic metaphors for human life; trees and plants figure prominently in OVOR. Most of the action depicted in the novel takes place in a luxuriant garden that is half-jungle, half-Garden of Eden (cf. "Below...middle column", p. 39-40). It is sometimes compared to the Ocean, that other source of life: cf. p. 30: "the lake of weeds/the island of dogwood/seashore and black beach". Similarly, in this universe where people and things constantly exchange attributes, some characters bear the names of flowers or are described in terms of plants. Miss Wisteria ("*glycine*") is a case in point and so is Florabel named after *Flora* the goddess of Spring and Vegetation (Ida[bel] is the name of a nymph who suckled Zeus); as for Joel, he is also bound up with the vegetable world through his identification with Narcissus and possibly with Adonis (cf. J. Frazer). The physical description of

the main characters also makes plentiful use of vegetable imagery: Dolores is compared to “some brainless plant” (114) of a deadly kind, Randolph fancies he can see "a sunflower transformed into a man’s face [P. Alvarez's]" (60) and Joel himself sometimes wishes "he were a leaf-boy floating and fading into the world's great flood” (102). His fingers “unfurl like the leaves of an opening flower” (70) and so on...but, as Miss Wisteria warns him, fruits rot and flowers wither: “every flowering heart shrivels dry and pitted as the herb from which it bloomed, and while the old man grows spinsterish, his wife assumes a moustache” (149). So, some day too, the flowers in [Joel’s] eyes” will wither, *i.e*. his youth will vanish, be gone for ever. Randolph, who describes himself as an individual without an interior life, feeding on the energy of others, also resorts to a metaphor from the vegetable world: “There was almost…no painting at all” (109-110). Cf. also, in the same vein, p. 107: “There is…born dead”. Thus, the various metaphors drawn from the world of flowers and plants seem to fulfill a traditional function *i.e*. stressing the opposition between fertility and sterility, life and death, which is the issue at stake in Joel,’s set of adventures.

Animal Imagery

OVOR is set in a bizarre universe in which human beings and animals share each other's characteristics and are sometimes hard to tell apart; there are numerous animal similes to describe people: Idabel is "mostly legs like a crane" (102), Zoo is a "human giraffe" (45), Florabel “talks in a flighty birdlike manner,' (28) etc., conversely, the moccasin Joel has to confront has "Mr. Sansom's eyes”. However, I shall confine myself to the study of one animal: the bluejay appearing on p. 34 (Chapter 2).

Joel's capture is adumbrated by that of the bird; the similarity is stressed by the color of the shirt Joel puts on after witnessing the gruesome killing of the bluejay by Amy. To the bluejay, a defenseless bird, one might oppose the hawk, the bird of prey (cf. p. 58); Randolph with his morbid love of dead birds represents a threat to Joel/the bluejay cf. 51: “Mister Randolph likes the dead birds...". Randolph's occupation (128-129): “Randolph was propped up...alive") – creating simulacrums, inferior and deceptive likenesses –, is a metaphor for the petrified quality of Skully's Landing, a place suspended/transfixed between life and death, cut off from the springs of life, doomed to sterility and barrenness despite the luxuriance of the vegetation. The fate of the bluejay is a foreshadowing of what is in store for Joel if he yields to Randolph’s inducements.

Colors

OVOR is a symphony in blue, a narrative suffused with blue, a hue rich in symbolical connotations. Cf. *Dict. des symboles*. References: bluely (42); blue fire (52); blue flower of forgetfulness (61); sky-blue marbles (62); blue face (67); sky-blue eyes (70), etc. All these elements are instrumental in the creation of a dreamlike atmosphere in which people and things are sometimes divested of their materiality and characteristics cf. p. 12-13: “It was as if...constant dream.” Such emphasis on mystery, imagination and unreality is quite in keeping with the novel’s underlying thesis *i.e.* the affirmation of the counter-reality of fantasy; hence as I. Hassan remarked, the omnipresence of dreams in Capote's fiction, p. 232: "Dreams in the earlier stories do not only constitute a private and self-sufficient world, and do not only contain the destructive element of our psyche (“'It is easy to escape daylight,' Randolph says in OVOR, 'but night is inevitable, and dreams are the giant cage'”); dreams also reveal, in the later stories, the creative element of the unconscious, and permit that release of the imagination which, as Capote implies, is the prerequisite of love. “But a man who doesn't dream is like a man who doesn't sweat: he stores up a lot of poison,” (*The Grass Harp*)

The same ambiguity and ambivalence prevail in the daylight world of Skully's Landing: “Amy…woman" p. 93. Randolph himself is neither man nor woman (159), Amy has a double personality (p. 38) and even the "Lord always sends something bad with the good" (30). However, even if in the words of the narrator of OVOR "the feeble-minded, the neurotic, the criminal, perhaps, also, the artist, have unpredictability and perverted innocence in common", let us beware of taking for granted, at face-value what Joel reports; we are twice warned that he is a terrible liar (pp. 48/65). To conclude this introduction, I will quote once more I. Hassan's perceptive study (p. 235):

> The bulk of Capote's work persuades us, in same way, that both humor and the supernatural are acts of the imagination intended to question our surface evaluations of reality, and indeed to affirm the counterreality of fantasy. The prevalence of dreams, the interest in childhood, the negative conception of adolescent initiation, the concern with self-discovery, the emphasis on homoeroticism, and the general stasis of the mythic world of Truman Capote—all these, though they are often presented in ironic terms, must confirm the central narcissistic

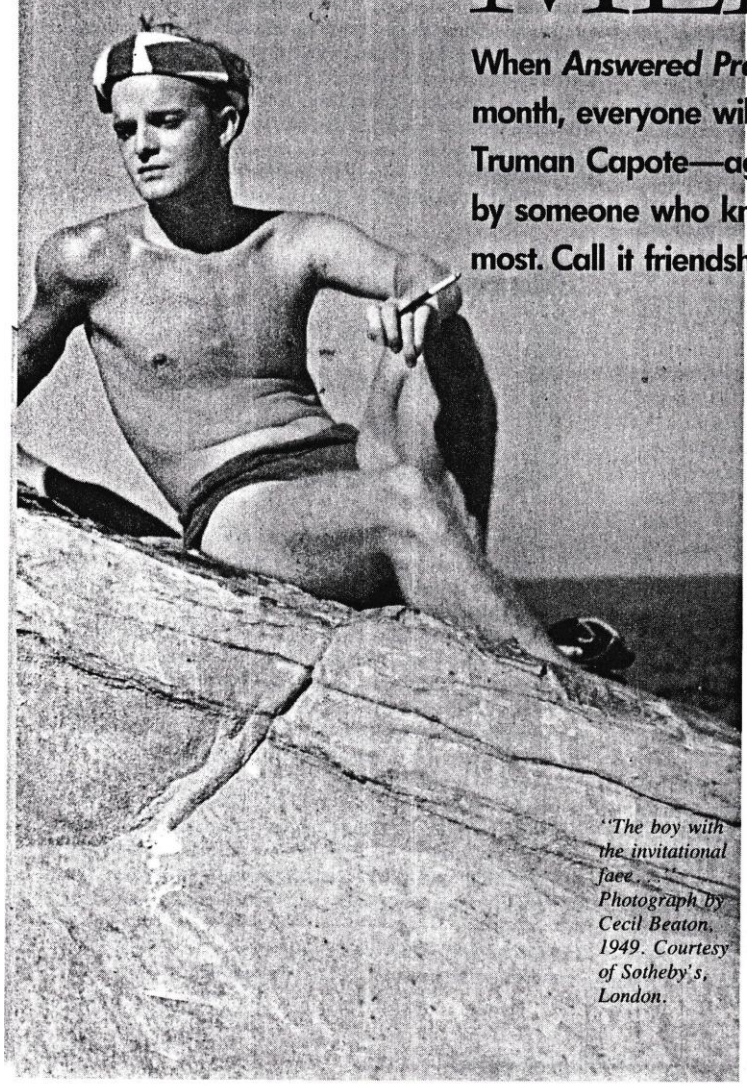
impulse of his fiction, an impulse which serves both as a critique and a crooked image of American reality. Ancient paradigm of the Artist, the Lover, and the Dreamer, Narcissus must also reconcile appearance and reality within the scope of romance, that "neutral territory" as Hawthorne said, "somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other." This is the aesthetic burden of Narcissus. His moral burden in the contemporary world, which Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" presaged some decades ago, is still self-transcendence in the moment of action or love. The former seems to us now irrecoverable, the latter, it appears, our only hope. But there is always Holly Golightly to reckon with, and the peculiar image of freedom she invokes.

I'll conclude that "twice-told" introduction to *Other Voices, Other Rooms* with "A Capote Memory", a remininiscence by Leo Leman:

the tiny terror

A CAPOTE MEMORY

When *Answered Prayers* is finally published this month, everyone will be talking about Truman Capote—again. Here, a candid reminiscence by someone who knew him better than most. Call it friendship, call it love. By Leo Lerman



"The boy with the invitational face." Photograph by Cecil Beaton, 1949. Courtesy of Sotheby's, London.

We are sitting in the all-night cafeteria on the west side of Madison Avenue, between 85th and 86th Streets. The time? That sere autumn of 1947, those cliff-hanger months before *Other Voices, Other Rooms* was published, when Little T racketed up my five flights of stairs, his six-foot-long blue scarf flying behind him. "I'm famous! I told you I would be!" And I murmured, "Notorious!" as he flung himself on my bed, where I spent much of my time. "Notorious! But nothing compared to what you will be." He jumped up, did a little dance, very song-and-dance man, patted his bangs firmly into place and. . . . But that all came later, after our long autumn of cafeteria nights.

A life I had had for some fifteen years was breaking up, and Little T, who listened patiently to my plaints, was, he said, in love with the Prof up in Northampton. So we sat in the vacant, skim-milk, unfluctuating light, facing one another over a gouged, splotched tabletop, and I got through quite a few soggy grapefruits and T sipped chipped cups of tepid coffee, and we talked the nights away. So much was in the future, and I had ten years more than he did of the past.

"Myrt!" he squeaked, "Myrt!" (We had both been addicted to a radio serial about two Follies girls whose theme song was "Poor Butterfly," so I became Myrt, the older, and the mother of Marge—Truman. [Neither of us gave a thought to

the Freudian implications of that make-believe.])"Myrt! I had that dream again! Remember the one I had at Yaddo when I saw the perfect-shaped tree all covered in glittering jewels, and there were jeweled birds on every branch, and if glass sang, that's how its song would sound?"

Yaddo, then as now an artists' refuge, where, in adjoining rooms in a vast Edwardian mansion, we had spent two months. . . . Here, a dozen of us labored all day at our writing, painting, or music-making, and at night gathered in the kitchen-sitting room to talk, or play Murder. I was the Murderer one scudding, full-moon night, and T was my unsuspecting Victim. We flew arm in protective arm from eerie room to eerie room until I did him in while he screamed, "Traitor! Traitor! I'll get you for this!" Then he muttered, "If only I'd known when I jumped on your back that night when we met! I trusted you!" (He had leapt, as we were leaving a friend's apartment, from a dark landing on the stairs, mewing, "Gimme a piggyback ride!" And I had, all the way up—was it East 50th Street? Then, when I got home, I said, "I just met the little boy from *The Turn of the Screw*.") Years later, T and I were lunching in The Russian Tea Room, where on this Saturday afternoon there were many children, all of the nearby ones glancing covertly at T. Finally, one brave boy sidled up to our table, stood peering over the top at T, and pronounced, "You're not a real little boy!" T laughed in that uneasy, abashed way he did when he had been found out. . . .

But back to Yaddo. The weekend Katherine Anne Porter came up, we were all very tidy-paws. Even Carson McCullers tricked herself up a bit for dinner and dancing to old cracked records in the kitchen. Carson and T were jiggling up and down together a lot, both leading, when Katherine Anne raised her best lady-voice to ask Elizabeth Ames, who headed Yaddo, "Where does that little man come from?" And Elizabeth, who was, at chosen times, more deaf than usual, replied, "*Harper's Bazaar*."

So, back in the all-night cafeteria on Madison Avenue, we talked about Yaddo and about how T had fallen abruptly in love with Professor Newton Arvin of Smith College. (Hawthorne, Melville, and Henry Adams were among his special interests.) I think that Truman was less physically enamored of Newton than he was overwhelmed by his prodigious intellectualism, his sensitivity to all things esthetic, and his position in academe.

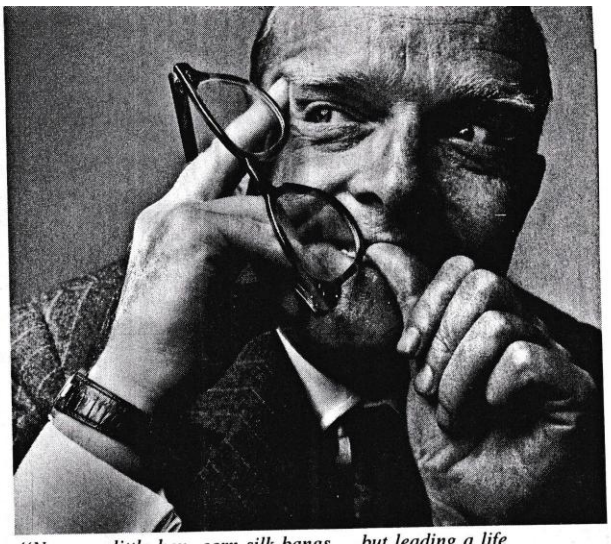
"What do you do up there?" I asked one very early cafeteria morning when T had been on campus for at least two weeks.

He hunched back in his chair, gave me his tortoise grin, crunched himself into his corncob-pipe-smoking, little-old-man self: "Weeellll. . . I sit in this little rocking chair, which I love, and I drink hot chocolate and he reads to me, every day, *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad* in Greek, the original Greek. And I don't understand a word, but I love it. . . . I love the sound of it. Then he plays records for me. . . beautiful. . . . Do you know the more recent quartets of Beethoven?"

"More recent than what?"

"Oh, you!" he yelped. "I'll never tell you anything again!"

The next morning, he rushed into the all-night cafeteria sobbing, crying out my name. Clutched tightly to him, the way a child clutches a teddy bear that someone has tried to take away, was a big bundle of white envelopes. He flung them on the table. "Take them," he cried. "Keep them for me. Don't ever let anybody see them. She went crazy. She's been drinking all day, and she went crazy, and she chased me all over the apartment and got into the drawer, and grabbed all of Newton's letters and threw them out of the window into Park Avenue. She acted like she was going to kill me. I ran out into the street and gathered up every one I could find and here they are. You must keep them." He was



"No more little-boy, corn-silk bangs. . . but leading a life like a Cole Porter lyric." Photograph by Penn, 1965.

very quiet, just shaking now and then the way a dog trembles when having a frightening dream. I sat looking at this little creature, his winter coat flung on over his little-boy flannel pajamas. I could see Nina, his Southern-belle mother, rampaging about that tacky Park Avenue apartment. I saw T, sitting in his bed in that tiny back bedroom, sitting there, a little old shawl around his shoulders, writing, in his microscopic, squinch-eyed hand, filling page after page of his notebooks. He was a serious storywriter. A storyteller, in the American tradition, a yarn teller.

He sipped his awful coffee. Then he said with a stillness I had

Truman and Carson McCullers danced together, jiggling up and down, both leading

never heard before, "I love Nina, but as soon as my book is published and I can get some money, I'm getting out of there. I am going to have a place of my own, a darling little nest of my own." Suddenly he snapped his fingers, hummed "Putting on the Ritz," gave me his best Follies-girl look, and pealed, "Don't look so gloomy, Myrt! I'll come to your place and sleep on the couch and read *Madame Bovary* again. I just love Flaubert!"

I filled a small trunk with T's letters from Newton. Then, one day years later, I got them out. Dozens and dozens of them. Long white envelopes, and not a single letter in any of them.

About two weeks after Nina's outburst, T and I were at our usual. The time? Maybe 3:00 A.M.–ish. The cafeteria door was thrust open. A pair of glaring eyes stood there, for eyes were all we could see. Out came a hand. In that hand was a gun. BANG! Myrt and Marge hit the dust under their table immediately. After the shouting was over and the only *(Continued on page 820)*

Leo Lerman, *editorial advisor to The Condé Nast Publications, is at work on his memoirs, "Call It Friendship, Call It Love."*

damage was to a grapefruit (why hadn't I thought to shoot it?), and maybe there was a hole in the ceiling above the grapefruit, we were up and away and we never went back. "Gosh," T said, "I am well-known for making up things, but I know that I did not make up that one. Anyway, you were there, and you are my witness. " Then he grinned his wise-man grin. "But am I sure that I can trust you?"

II

Truman said, "Oh, you're back. In this heat! Well, come on up and we'll talk about the party. It's going to be the greatest party this city's ever seen!" So I left my ramshackle brownstone on upper Lexington Avenue, where for

the last eighteen years my life had all come wonderfully together again, and I leapt into a taxi and sped down through that 1966 summer afternoon to the U.N. Plaza, where, high up, T had one of his residences. "Bless your little heart!" His voice seemed both deeper and higher than when I had last seen him earlier that year. No more little-boy, corn-silk bangs…Truman's hair was thinning. But behind his heavy, horn-rimmed glasses, his blue eyes sparkled. Everything in that reddish room sparkled-the heap of color-suffused glass paperweights ("Colette gave me those!...Well, she gave me one of them."); the Tiffany glass lamp with its shade patterned in cascades of blossoming wisteria ("Fabulous, *n'est-ce pas?* You and Gray have wonderful ones, but isn't this the most beautiful you have ever seen?")…He grabbed my arm, swung me around—a wall of shimmering afternoon light, a vastness of light and sky and city and river. "Yes," I said, "you have it all. You're leading a life like a Cole Porter lyric."

"Champagne?" he asked, as I settled into a deeply comfortable, flowery sofa. "*Non?*" He now sprinkled his talk with a bric-a-brac of fractured French. He raised his glittery goblet.

"*Toujour gai*, always a lady!" (We all loved *archy and mehitabel*.)Then he downed the bubbly, perched himself in a sort of yoga position on a black papier mâché chair, intricately inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and pulled a pile of his dime-store notebooks to him, the kind in which he had always written.

"Is this a new story?"

"Yes. Except this one is not written. It will, my dear, be written about. Oh, will it be written about and talked about! It will be photographed and on television and…But that is not why I'm giving it. That's only part of the fun of it. You know how hard I've worked all these years, how many books and stories and those movies—how I shivered those nights the *statione* in Rome that winter we were all there— and that musical and the play and…six ball-breaking years, six years working on *In Cold Blood*, and I would not exchange one of the days for anything. And now I want a reward, a great, big, all-time spectacular present. I want to get all my lives together, all of the people I really love and some I just respect and then some I want to show off to. . . all in a big, gorgeous, classy room, and I want to give the most wonderful party New York has ever seen. Oh, Myrt, can you believe it?"

“Yes,” I said, “even what you made up.”

He poured himself another goblet of wine, hugged his notebooks to him, peered at me through the golden light. "No, I'm not going to show you the list—that's my secret—but I'm here to tell you, it's to be a black-and-white ball at the Plaza...yes, THE Plaza, and every one of you will wear masks, and I'm giving it for Kay Graham. Do you know Kay? No? You will just love her, and she will love you! And I just know that know that even Garbo will come, and Tallulah, and my old schoolteacher from Greenwich, and Marianne Moore and the Agnellis and the Princess of this and the Maharanee of that, and the Trillings and the Mailers and Paleys—I love her, I just love her—and Lee Radziwill, she's wonderful, and Phoebe and Mary Lou and. . . I've worked as hard on party as I've ever worked on anything, and it is going to be a work of reaaaaalllll art."

He stood at the door, with that rich Manhattan late-summer evening light pouring into his throwaway-rich room, with its throng of play-pretties, his Redon oil painting, his portrait by Jim Fosburgh. He put his arms around me. “You know, Myrt…I’m… weeeeeeeellllll…” "*The Turn of the Screw* little boy was back, the boy with the corn-silk bangs so artfully arranged, the boy with the invitational face, lolling in his carefree waistcoat on the Victorian sofa those years ago on the dust jacket of his *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. "You …know,” he drawled, "I got this i-de-aah, to use everything I know in this one book…all the people… Weeeeeeeellllll. . . - "He stepped back into his glittering nest, did his little tap dance—he was Baby Peggy, Shirley Temple, Fred Astaire. He was Truman Capote. "Honey," he crooned, his voice unwinding like a silken thread of strength sufficient to strangle, "Honey, maybe I'll invite you to my party, and maybe I won't. But I’ll surely invite that beautiful Gray.” Then he blew me a kiss and slowly shut his door. When I was down the hall, at the elevator, I heard his Little T voice.

“Myrt, my dear, don’t forget: it’s a masked ball, a *bal masqué*.”

III

This was an old man who shuffled into my office at *Vogue*, where, in the autumn of 1979, I was features editor. His good clothes had gone bad on him. But his huge straw hat sat blithely on his head, a remembrance of Southern big-house life he, as a small unwanted boy, had never known. His blue eyes darted this way, that way: they never came to rest. His was a face seen by the light of a flickering candle in an airless room where a door creaks in a still night, a window-pane shivers unaccountably, and the dog’s hair stands straight up while he stares—at what? An after-midnight face. Life had had this man. He had also had life. And the fight wasn’t finished—not yet.

“Little darling. . .my own little darling. . . . ” His voice came from some far and arid place. “I want Irving Penn to photograph me, and I want you to publish the picture in *Vogue*. I want this veeeeeerrrry, veeeeeerrry much.” This was Truman in a frenzy, his voice high and squeaking with anxiety. “And I’ll write a piece to go with, and, yes, little dear, I’ll be interviewed.” The hysterical old man vanished. Little T materialized. “Yes, Myrt, Marge always knows what’s going on in your little ole connivin’ head. Now, if you will please excuse me, I will just have to leave the room for a minute. Which way is it?” Exit Little T doing a time-step. During the hour he was with me, he exited some twelve times.

So Irving Penn took his picture, Cathleen Medwick interviewed him, and his piece came in. He called. “Love, little dear, it’s a wonderful piece, and you cannot cut a word of it.”

I read it. I called T. “It’s the best thing you've written in years. You made me cry. And you made me feel hopelessly full of hope.”

“I know. The end. That sure enough made you cry. Wham! I wrote in the beginning of your piece “When God hands you a gift, he also hands you a whip; and the whip is intended solely for self-flagellation.” Then that end…, yes, sir-ree: ‘I’m here alone in my dark madness, with my deck of cards—and, of course, the whip God gave me.’” No one, absolutely no one, ever read Truman’s prose better than he did himself, excepting Geraldine Page, and she was acting in *A Christmas Memory*.

"How much do you want for this marvelous piece?" "Nothing. Not one penny. It's a present to you I will not take a penny."

So, I sat there, feeling guilty, hearing that flirty-skirty voice in the all-night cafeteria so many fraught years ago: "But am I sure that Ican trust you?"

No, Marge, not to like everything you ever wrote and most certainly not to like everything you did—like destroying yourself. I did not like *Breakfast at Tiffany' s*. I thought that it was too easy for you, an entertainment that could, perhaps, have been written by someone else. But I told you that one night and you had a shouting fit: "Get off my back!" “Wrong!" I mildly observed. "You were the one who got on my back...remember?" Then you laughed. "An', Myrt, I'll never, ever get off!"

And I do not like any part of *Answered prayers*, although I recognize that some future social historian or compiler of scandal could find it invaluable. Now realize, darling T, that I am not criticizing: I am just making remarks. What did it matter that they turned against you?

But to you it did matter. I think that is why, when I found you in that hospital, far from the U.N. Plaza or any Plaza of your glory, sick in heart, in body, in mind, and told you I was desperate for just a few words about Lee Radziwill

to add to a feature we were doing about her, you screamed, "I can't! I can't!" Then, you did…a perfectly proportioned miniature straight from your tormented, grieving heart. And that is one of your qualities that I always

loved, that I love. Your dedication to your dreams, to the people you saw clearly and then reinvented. Pinchbeck into gold and, even, vice versa. It was when you tried to give them to us as they really were, "to remove disguises,

not to manufacture them," as you wrote in the piece you gave me, later your preface to *Music for Chameleons*, that you failed.

You triumphed with *In Cold Blood*. And I love your stories, the real stories, the ones you made up. The ones that link you to Hawthorne and Poe...great American stories. I love those. I see you sitting in your bed in Nina's

back bedroom, or in your baby-size rocking chair in that first, microscopic flat you had—was it on Second Avenue?—or in your throne chair in your white tower at Yaddo, jabbing away in your greasy little notebooks. I think that somewhere you must still be doing that, because, silly question, how could you stop?
Last night I took off the shelf my copy of your *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. The dustjacket, with the photograph of the boy with the invitational face, has vanished, but the yarn inside is intact. And here, on the flyleaf, is what you wrote, in your best hand:

> For Leo—and what does the following bring to mind?: piggy-back, snakes, a white tower, The Cow, grapefruit, the all-night cafe, a bunch of love letters, Nantucket, Poor Butterfly. Ah Hilary [I am Hilary in Truman's *Local Color*: I am not I Turner Boatwright in *Answered Prayers*, although his office and his brownstone do house some of my tatty furniture and a gaggle of my chums], when the time comes to go, shall we simply laugh? Mille tenderesses (which is after all another landmark)—T.

IV

Truman Capote died on August 25, 1984, in a house in Holmby Hills, which is way out on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles.