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Gérald PRÉHER

Telling About Southern Fluctuations: Elizabeth Spencer at the Back Door

Southerners hear parts of stories with their ears, and the rest they know with their hearts.
Elizabeth Spencer, The Voice at the Back Door (256)[1]

1 Fluctuating memories are central to the American Southern experience; Southerners, more than any other Americans, have ceaselessly tried to tell about their region in order to define its singular place in the country's history. For Paul Ricoeur, narrative makes the world readable ("*lisible*") since it allows for a reorganization of the fluctuating forces that are stimulated by memory and stories.[2] Elizabeth Spencer expresses more or less the same idea when she writes, "every human being is deeply involved with at least one story—his own" (Spencer, "Storytelling" 13). Her goal in writing *The Voice at the Back Door* was to make sense of the past and organize the ebb and flow of her memories into a coherent narrative: "While I was working on that book, I would hear again in my mind whole conversations that had passed over me and that I had never analyzed. I began to listen to these inner voices, to people saying things that I had accepted all my life without question; and suddenly I found myself questioning" (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 62). The fact that Spencer wrote the novel while living in Italy is particularly interesting, since it brings to the fore the idea dear to Ricoeur that "forgetting can be so closely tied to memory that it can be considered one of the conditions for [memory]" (Ricoeur, *Memory, History* 426). Indeed, Spencer's strongest desire was to reunite with the South she had left by symbolically recreating it in her book.[3]

2 It is a well-known fact that story telling is part and parcel of the culture of the South, an inclination Eudora Welty has underlined: "Southerners do write—probably they *must* write. It is the way they are: born readers and reciters, great document holders, diary keepers, letter exchangers and savers, history tracers—and outstaying the rest, great talkers" (Welty 546). Typically southern narratives include a distinctive historical background, reflections on specifically southern views on race, gender and sex, as well as a careful depiction of place. But what matters more than anything else is for the writer to be "loyal to the South," as Elizabeth Spencer put it: "It [is] as if we were still in a war and if you weren't loyal to the South you were a traitor, a turn coat, and should be scorned and regarded as a pariah, if not actually shot" ("Emerging as a Writer" 126). Although there has been a change in mentalities since Spencer wrote these comments, the South that appears in print is greatly inspired from the various stereotypes to be found in works such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Exploring these aspects of southern life is not foreign to Thoreau's idea of "going into the woods," for looking into the past almost amounts to a journey into the wilderness, that of the "Savage South," a myth inspired by a mixture of danger, violence and compulsive attraction to the darkest recesses of the self (Hobson, "The Savage South"). Story telling old and new makes the South a region of the mind that keeps fighting old ghosts and goes on reading the present through the prism of the past in order to identify the nature of the southern experience—a nature that, in keeping with Emerson's precepts, can only be formulated by an artist.

3 Writers, especially in times of racial upheavals, have attempted to help the general public see the irrationality of their region's way of life. African-American writers have not spared their efforts to expose the unfair treatment their community has been subjected to, and so have some white writers, even though the risks were great. The publication of Elizabeth Spencer's third novel, *The Voice at the Back Door*, in 1956, is a good example of such dangers:

> Reviewers, because of the particular moment of racial tension in the U.S. during which the book appeared, concentrated on its subject matter. Some welcomed me as a 'liberal,' as though I had been born again; and some said I wouldn't have written such a book had I been living in the States—they were segregationists and thought I was lobbying for the Negroes. At the time, tempers were overheated about racial issues; and I guess people felt that I was mounting the platform to tell them what they were doing wrong. (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 61)

4 Spencer's loyalty to her native region was questioned when she returned from Italy, and her fellow Southerners' reaction to her novel somehow forced her out of the South; since her husband was working in Canada at the time, the neighboring country provided her with a way out. She found herself in a predicament similar to the one Harper Duncan experiences in the novel for, like him, she suddenly became an outcast. The situation is ironic since Spencer's goal was to be true to her region, something she thought she could achieve by writing from a distance.

5 *The Voice at the Back Door* belongs to Spencer's Mississippi cycle and focuses on southern violence at a time when the Civil Rights Movement was building momentum. In her analysis of Spencer's two other books, *Fire in the Morning* (1948) and *This Crooked Way* (1952), Mary Ann Wimsatt shows that "it is in the past that the wrongs depicted in these novels originate, and it is the power of the past operating on men and women living in the present that enables them to set, or at least attempt to set, the wrongs right" (Wimsatt 7). Spencer continues to explore how the burden of the past affects the present, but, by offering no consistent solution to the racial issues, she succeeds in making a stronger statement in *The Voice at the Back Door*, which is probably the reason why the book was considered for a Pulitzer Prize.[4] Thematically reminiscent of William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), the novel stages the white community's attempt at restructuring itself after the sheriff's death: some people want things to be just the way they have always been (selling alcohol and living in a segregated world); others feel that it is time for a change. The narrative constitutes a valuable case for study as regards fluctuating memory, since Spencer offers insights into the community's history thanks to informative vignettes that clarify the characters' feelings and make it possible to understand how the past infiltrates the present. Spencer tackles interracial relationships as well as the vexed topic of lynching and, like Faulkner, she constantly blends sexual relations with violence.

1 - Fluctuating Memories and the "Negro Question": The Other Within

6 In her 1965 introduction to the novel, Elizabeth Spencer explained that the book is populated with African-Americans because she greatly missed having them around during her sojourn in Italy:

> I missed Negroes. If you have always lived where half the population is black (at least half, for I knew far more Negroes than white people until I got sent to school), then when you leave that, you feel the world is lacking something, and then you know you are wishing to see black skins around. Somehow one never imagines that there would come a time when they wouldn't be there. To write in this book about as many Negroes as I thought I could convincingly imagine was a way of being with them. I liked writing those parts. (*VBD* xviii)

7 The emphasis on the presence of African-Americans in the South is palpable right from the beginning of the novel and reinforced by comments such as "Negroes married the land. Its image is never complete without them; if they are out of the picture, they are only just around the corner, coming or going, or both" (*VBD* 235). The South would not be what it is without African-Americans and, conversely, African-Americans would not be who they are had the South not used them for labor. The opening scene reveals that black voices will run like a thread through the story. Not only is the landscape minutely described, especially the "Negro settlement" (*VBD* 3), but the first characters who are introduced and whose voices are reproduced in direct speech are black. This hints at the book's subject matter and echoes the title, just as it illustrates a later comment that "it is part of the consciousness of a Southern household that a Negro is calling at the back door at night" (*VBD* 90)—a statement suggesting secret dealings and a tacit agreement between the owner of the abode and the unexpected visitor. The voice at the back door is, as Peggy Whitman Prenshaw has demonstrated, "the voice of conscience that unrelentingly hails the Southern segregationist tradition" (*Elisabeth Spencer* 62). In the novel, the symbolism of the situation also paves the way for the introduction of interracial love.

8 In the opening chapter, Travis Brevard, the county sheriff, is seen by three black men and identified by one of them as he speeds towards Lacey, the town where most of the action takes place. Brevard's urgency is due to his wish to die there and not at his mistress's place, for, as he explains to Duncan Harper, the owner of the grocery store, "'Her house is a place I could go out quiet as a match. She's been my nigger woman for fifteen years, and everybody knows it, but it would likely embarrass her to have my corpse on her hands. You can't tell what they're liable to do to a nigger. She might have to leave town'" (*VBD* 8). Such concern for his mistress highlights the gap between Brevard and the white community, a distance that is emphasized by his use of the pronoun 'they' to refer to his fellows; it seems that he has accepted his singular position within the group. As Peggy Whitman Prenshaw has shown, "Brevard's public life and private life are radically split apart, and so at the moment when he most needs to go home, when he needs a place to die, he has no home to go to" (*Elizabeth Spencer* 53). Nevertheless, Brevard's decision to give his last breath at the grocer's is not made randomly; he has decided to die there because he has a message for Harper: "'I want you to take over when I'm gone'" (*VBD* 12). Brevard does not know about Harper's liberal ideas but, to a certain extent, it seems that his confession concerning his black mistress reinforces Harper's views on racial issues.

9 Brevard's death is not the only outstanding feature of that night, especially for Harper. Indeed, as he is locking up his store after the day's work, he hears a voice which turns out to be that of one of the three African-Americans. The man follows Harper to the courthouse, "a beautiful proud old building [that] had been built before the Civil War" (*VBD* 17), introduces himself as Beckwith Dozer (his name is abbreviated to 'Beck' throughout the novel), and explains to him how his personal story is tied to the place: "When I was a small child, my father was shot to death upstairs in this courthouse. I never been inside here before tonight" (*VBD* 19). The situation makes it clear that a new day has come, and Harper seems to be the link between the past and the present: as the recipient of Beck's confidence, he stands as an intermediary between the government and the people, regardless of their skin color. The narrator's comments stress the significance of the scene: "Their eyes met and though they were alone in an empty building, and no one knew they were there, it seemed that the world listened, that a new way of speaking was about to form in an old place" (*VBD* 19). The association of novelty and tradition highlights the possibility of a dialogue between past and present and suggests, as Derrida's discussion of Heidegger's *Identity and Difference* points out, that the fluctuation between the objective and the subjective is necessary to get to the nature of the self.[5] Meaning emerges thanks to eye-contact and a realm of possibilities is suddenly available for two men of different races to come to an understanding. This episode seals the unspoken pact between Harper and Beck and foreshadows Harper's growing concern for the black man.

10 One night, Beck comes to Harper's back door to ask for protection—thus literally becoming "the voice at the back door." He says he has injured a white man who refused to sell him alcohol on account of his color. Harper initially appears skeptical of Beck's desire to be held in custody; he suggests that Beck leave town instead in order to avoid being lynched—thus reproducing Brevard's worries about his mistress. In the end, Beck manages to convince Harper to use the law to make things change because "'If a Negro never takes advantage of what legal rights are open to him, he can't hope to enjoy those that ought to be open and ain't'" (*VBD* 93). Such arguments convince Harper that he should not falter and that justice should prevail. However, as the plot unfolds, the reader learns that Beck has been told by opponents to Harper's views to beg the sheriff to take him to jail; they think that such a strategy will expose Harper's ideas on racial equality to the people in the county and thus prevent him from being elected sheriff. This unexpected twist reveals the powerful corruption that pervades the region and the community's desperate attempt at keeping things just the way they are.

2 - Southern Injustice *vs.* Southern Masquerade

11 The lynching scene is parodic and illustrates "the literary tendency known as the postsouthern" which is "categorized in part by the replacement of symbolic depth with simulacra" (Haddox 566). A subtle reference to William Faulkner's "Dry September" (*VBD* 101) is even used to

justify the reason why a lynching cannot take place on that winter day. In *The Mind of the South*, W.J. Cash presents lynching as a means of entertaining the crowds; Spencer uses it as a signifier, a point of reference, but no actual lynching takes place, even though all the ingredients for one are gathered:

> The night that Duncan Harper felt duty-bound to go sit in the jail and protect that nigger […], naturally nobody wanted to get mixed up in it. Still, along about eleven-thirty with the town as quiet as snow, a good many people got restless and drove up to the jail. They stopped in the street where they could watch from a distance, and sat in their cars […]. Probably nobody thought that there would be any trouble, else they would not have brought their children with them. (*VBD* 116-117)

12 The point of the whole *mise en scène* is to put Harper's ideals to the test, denounce his un-southern attitude (and thereby discredit him), and prevent his liberal ideas from spreading in the county. Harper turns out to have been a mere puppet in this carefully organized masquerade. Indeed, once he is at the jail, his opponents take pictures of him standing in front of Beck to protect him in order to publish them in "a Chicago paper for Negroes" (*VBD* 132) – the irony being of course that such a technique is generally used by African-Americans to expose southern violence. From an outside point of view, Harper's action is heroic; but seen from the perspective of his community, it is condemnable. As one of the characters puts it: "'You are a champion of civil rights, you are a defender of the black race. In Chicago, friend, you are solid. In Winfield County you'll probably be everybody's least favorite grocer till the day you die'" (*VBD* 132). The opponents to Harper's views have won the first battle—but the election has not taken place yet.

13 The role played by Beck remains unclear until Harper discovers he is the author of the article that goes with the picture published in the Chicago paper (*VBD* 135). When he confronts Beck, Harper finds out that if one of his motives was money (*VBD* 136), the most intriguing one was that he wanted to please Jimmy Tallant, an influential man known for his bootlegging, because they "are tied together on account of what his daddy did to [his]" (*VBD* 136). Both Beck and Tallant behave paradoxically: Beck wants to help the white community in their crusade against equal rights; as for Tallant, he is willing to protect a colored man (in atonement for his father's actions) but at the same time he encourages segregationists by fighting Harper's efforts. As Terry Roberts explains, such behaviors are "partly the result of […] inherited guilt, an Old Testament case of the sins of the father being visited on the son" (Roberts 47); in other words, the fluctuations of sin stress the confluence of time and thus re-enact the sealing of the pact every time the two characters come into contact.

14 The story of Beck's father is rendered in a woolfian moment of being (*VBD* 239-256), triggered by a portrait Harper sees at Beck's place. The 1919 massacre at the courthouse appears to be a pivotal episode—it is presented at length and culminates in Tallant's father's blunt formula: "I'm white and you're black, that's all that you need to know" (*VBD* 254). Racial equality is obviously out of the question. However, what matters is not so much the facts themselves as the conclusion Beck's mother drew from the event: "It's this they taken him up for, so's they could cast him down. Say Yes suh and No ma'am and You sho' is right, and don't ever say nothing else. What face you got keep for the black. Yo' daddy never learned it. You see what done happened to him" (*VBD* 256). Beck was just a child when his mother uttered those words, yet at the time of the narrative they are still meaningful for him; indeed, he tells Harper: "I prefer the status quo. You can climb the status quo like a step ladder with two feet on the floor, but trying to trail along behind a white man of good will is like following along behind somebody on a tightrope. As he gets along towards the middle his problems are likely to increase, and soon he gots to turn loose of me to help himself" (*VBD* 137). Beck's mother was aware that the people of her race should play by the white southerners' rule in order to survive and she transmitted her belief to her son for better or worse. In point of fact, when Harper encounters Beck for the first time, he tells him to watch his language: "It would help you to say Sir" (*VBD* 19), something Beck does not seem ready to comply with. No matter the reasons for Beck's betrayal of Harper's trust, his defiant attitude toward white people makes it clear that he aspires to racial equality.

15 Before the jail episode, Beck understands the nature of the African-Americans' predicament in the South when he overhears W.B., his son, say, "I'se a little bitty old black nigger" (*VBD* 89): he then realizes that the South might never change. W.B.'s observation leads Beck to consider his "Negro sorrow": "he saw that everything most clear to him was sorrowful. […] He included himself in his sorrows, for he always suspected that, like his father, he was going out to deal with white people someday and never come home again" (*VBD* 89). Beck is fully aware that taking part in Tallant's game might lead to his demise and so he starts reflecting on his own life. This epiphany is one of many in a book where the characters, like Spencer herself when she was writing it, discover who they are and who they want to be. In Beck's case, the most important recognition scene occurs when he is thought to have attempted murder on Tallant and his life is truly at stake.

3 - The Impossible Dream of Racial Equality

16 From the beginning of the novel, Harper is presented as a victim of the events that unfold before his eyes: first he witnesses the death of the sheriff, and then he has no choice but to accept to fill in for Brevard. As opposed to those who feel that "the last thing we need to discuss is the Negro question" (*VBD* 42), Harper, according to one of the townsmen, would like to "enforce the liquor law and apply equal justice for black and white" (*VBD* 44). Harper's political ideas are based on his desire to do the right thing, for he places law above order. Spencer has commented on these traits, saying, "he pushes everything forward to the breaking point. I think that a man who sees things in such simplistic terms—who says for example, 'this is good and therefore I will do it'—a man like this has a flaw in character. It's a failure in his character that he could never perceive evil" (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 62). Harper is a romantic, he believes that man is perfectible and he fails to see that everything he does for Beck is harmful for his own reputation. Instead of learning his lesson after the jail episode and Beck's betrayal, Harper insists on trying to prove him innocent when he is suspected of firing at Tallant.

17 Harper's feelings for Beck mirror those expressed by Senator John in the section devoted to Beck's father. Indeed, like the Senator during the Reconstruction era, Harper "[feels] compassion for [the] black innocents" (*VBD* 240). As opposed to the Senator, though, Harper never realizes that "he [is] engaged in a dangerous thing" (*VBD* 244). He wholeheartedly believes that Beck's color should not designate him as the perfect scapegoat and succeeds in tracing the real culprit. Brevard's widow becomes aware that, should he be elected, his ideas on the Negro question would sign the system's death warrant: "'It's the basis of our Southern way of life that the black should not mingle with the white.' Our forefathers fought and died…" (*VBD* 291). Harper's unconventional behavior scares the community, and stories about his disloyalty start spreading throughout the county—stories that his political opponents use to their own advantage in their speeches. A close friend of Harper's, Kerney, delivers an unexpectedly laudatory speech in favor of the southern way of life:

> I say that I speak with reluctance, for there are friends among you to whom my words may give pain. I would ask them to remember that a public servant cannot speak, cannot act, cannot even wish in a private way. […] I, Kerney Woolbright, will defend our Southern viewpoint, our Southern traditions, and the will of our Southern people, as long as God gives me breath. (*VBD* 300)

18 Kerney is a fine rhetorician and his words make it clear that he embraces the South and its customs. There is no room in his speech for questioning things, he means to efface himself and become the arms of the people, who certainly appreciate it as they "[greet] him with relief […], they were glad to get back to something they could understand without question" (*VBD* 306). Yet instead of making Harper see what really matters to the community, Kerney's declaration reinforces the other man's conviction that something should be done to help Beck: "I just have to go along with it the way it's always looked to me. I have to follow it through the way I started it. I can't care too much any more what they want" (*VBD* 302). The emphasis on the "I" and the use of "have to" show how concerned Harper is; the isolated "they," referring to his community, is clearly outnumbered by the pronouns in the first person which point at the

strength Harper has gained while listening to ideas he does not share and will never share, no matter how people might interpret his actions. Still, he confesses that he longs for an ordinary life: "I only wanted to be groceryman like Daddy. […] I wanted to walk in the woods on Sunday with my family. I never imagined my name in all the papers, I never dreamed Travis Brevard would walk in my store and die" (*VBD* 303). "Going into the woods," as Thoreau explains, springs from a desire to "live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life" (Thoreau 61). The sheriff's death has plunged Harper into the wilderness of southern violence and it is not surprising that he should decide to find transcendence by holding on to his ideals, by finding Beck and protecting him. Then, after experiencing the wild side of life, he certainly will not, like Thoreau, "discover that [he] had not lived" (Thoreau 61).

19 After his speech, once he has dropped the mask, Kerney's face is said to "[reveal] nothing of him except his identity; it was as if he had carried his own portrait by" (*VBD* 315). The fluctuations of his self have eventually found a stable location in Lacey and, just like the courthouse, he has come to stand for the fatal destiny of a region that refuses to move on. Unlike him, Harper is ready for change: when he reunites with Beck, he invites him to sit on the front seat of his car—what is more, beside his wife—even if it displeases the onlookers. He has come to a simple conclusion: "*Soit comes down to this […]. To the tiniest decision you can make. To the slightest action. In front of people daring you to do what you believe and they don't*" (*VBD* 335, italics in the original). Harper's exasperation in the face of the events is emphasized by the paratactic style, but what really matters is that he has made a decision he thought was right. The fact that Spencer chose to have him die in a car wreck as he was dashing back to Lacey implies that he was going too fast, that the South was not ready to share his dream of a better world. Nevertheless, Harper's crusade has helped Tallant see the worthiness of the fight since he eventually declares: "I favor equal rights" (*VBD* 343, 344).

20 *The Voice at the Back Door* is a synthesis of Elizabeth Spencer's fluctuating memories about the South: not only is the title of the book inspired from an episode of her childhood when "a voice called to [her family] at the back door, out of the dark," (Spencer, *Landscapes* 146) a voice that belonged to a colored woman who had come to ask for help, but the courthouse shooting in which Beck's father is murdered is a fictional rendition of the Carrolton massacre that took place in Spencer's native town in 1886. Spencer's book stems from her own experience and constitutes a good example of what Fred Hobson calls "conversion narratives," that is to say "works in which the authors, all products and willing participants in a harsh segregated society, confess racial wrongdoings and are 'converted,' in various degrees, from racism to something approaching racial enlightenment" (Hobson, *But Now I* see 2). Indeed, Spencer describes the writing of *The Voice at the Back Door* as "a healing experience" (Prenshaw, *Conversations* 62) that allowed her to liberate herself from the constraints of her community: "I was under some sort of pressure within myself to clarify my own thinking about racial matters; many of my attitudes had been inherited, taken on good faith from those of good faith whom I loved. It seemed like blasphemy to question *them*, so I had to question myself" (Phillips 123). By questioning herself and by entering the South through the back door, Spencer makes it possible for the reader to grasp the fluctuating ideas that paved the way for the Civil Rights Movement.

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Notes

1 All the references are to the 1965 Time edition. The novel will be abbreviated to *VBD*.

2 In *Soi-même comme un autre*, Ricœur writes: “Ne tenons-nous pas les vies humaines pour plus lisibles lorsqu’elles sont interprétées en fonction des histoires que les gens racontent à leur sujet ? Et ces histoires de vie ne sont-elles pas à leur tour rendues plus intelligibles lorsque leur sont appliqués des modèles narratifs—des intrigues—empruntés à l’histoire proprement dite ou à la fiction (drame ou roman) ?” *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990 ; Paris : Éditions du Seuil, coll. “Points essais”, 1996): 138 n.

3 Such an attitude is reminiscent of what Thomas Wolfe describes when he writes, “I think I may say that I discovered America during these years abroad out of my need of her. I found her because I had left her.” *The Autobiography of an American Novelist*, ed. Leslie Field (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983) 29.

4 On Spencer’s official website, one can read the following: “The Pulitzer Prize jury voted this novel as winner of the 1957 Pulitzer Prize, but the award was refused by the board” (http://www.elizabethspencerwriter.com/works/voiceatthebackdoor.htm, retrieved 15 April 2011). In her memoirs, Spencer notes that the book was “a strong contender for the Pulitzer Prize. The fact is that none was given in 1957.” *Landscapes of the Heart*: 312.

5 See Derrida’s presentation of his essay on Freud in *L’Écriture et la différence* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1967).

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Résumé / Abstract

Le troisième roman d'Elizabeth Spencer, *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956), appartient à son cycle du Mississippi. Il traite des relations raciales et de la violence sudiste, deux thèmes qui n'avaient pas bonne presse à cette époque puisque le mouvement pour les droits civiques débutait. Le roman rappelle *L'intrus* (1948) de Faulkner en ce qu'il met en scène la recherche du coupable du meurtre d'un homme blanc. Cet article analyse la façon dont Spencer dépeint les manières du Sud en s'interrogeant sur les relations raciales. Le roman est également lu dans le contexte de sa publication puisque Spencer fut perçue comme une traîtresse par les Sudistes. Spencer utilise des sujets impopulaires pour révéler le paradoxe au cœur de la manière de vivre sudiste et montre combien le passé se rejoue constamment dans le présent.

Mots clés : représentation, Le Sud, mémoire, relations interraciales

Elizabeth Spencer's third novel, *The Voice at the Back Door* (1956), is part of her Mississippi cycle. It deals with race relations and southern violence, two highly controversial issues at the time since the Civil Rights Movements were beginning. The novel, reminiscent of William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), stages the search for a culprit after the murder of a white man. This paper focuses on Spencer's portrait of southern manners and interracial relationships and analyzes the novel in the context of its publication. It will show that Spencer uses unpopular topics to expose the paradox at the core of the southern way of life and show that the past is constantly reenacted in the present.

Keywords : representation, The South, memory, interracial relationships