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Dawn Raffel–A Family Portrait

Monica Manolescu-Oancea

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Introduction. A structuring metaphor : “carrying the body”

- 1 This article attempts to examine some of Dawn Raffel’s texts from a genealogical and intertextual perspective and to unravel some of the meanings implicit in the act of “carrying the body”, which appears in the title of the writer’s only novel (*Carrying the Body*, Scribner, 2002). A family portrait will thus emerge through an exploration of Dawn Raffel’s literary background, of possible literary ancestors and kindred spirits, a family portrait that will lead me to consider the features of Dawn Raffel’s style and, more generally, the nature, uses and abuses of the term intertextuality itself. Although the central metaphor of this paper, that of “carrying the body”, is borrowed from the title of the novel, I will focus mainly on the short stories that form the collection *In the Year of Long Division* (Knopf, 1994).¹ The first two parts of the article are meant to create a conceptual basis for the rest of the paper, which focuses on the style of the texts themselves.
- 2 Dawn Raffel’s *Carrying the Body* offers a specific visual and material metaphor of the writer’s relationship with literary tradition : that of a heavy body that is being constantly dragged along in a dark house, from room to room, a Sisyphean load encoding a related family of ideas. This body is first of all a palpable heritage that is

experienced in a direct way, weighing down on the unfortunate carrier. Harold Bloom's theory of influence as *agon*, as struggle between a writer and his precursors, is particularly appropriate in this context. However, from a radically different perspective, this heavy body is also the vehicle of genetic transmission, carrying over the precious DNA of ancestors. In Dawn Raffel, the dead still haunt the living, transmitting an inheritance of names and, perhaps, practices: "The names of the child were the names of the dead" (IYLD 108).

- 3 In terms of mobility and rigidity, the bodies staged by Dawn Raffel are dead or inert, reminding one of Nell and Nagg in Beckett's *Endgame*, but they are also the privileged source of genetic vitality—origin and *locus* of (literary) fatherhood and authorship. In this context one can refer to an antithetic couple of characters, the immobile old Father in *Carrying the Body* on the one hand, and the character of the young boy, James, who is learning to speak and distorts language in an innocent way. The act of carrying the body entails therefore a confrontation with inertia, paralysis, the *rigor mortis* of the dead, but also with a special germinating force which springs forth from the body of the ancestors, from the fertility of the father.
- 4 The body that is carried along and the relationship father-son or mother-daughter lying at the heart of Dawn Raffel's work can of course be seen in archetypal terms—Oedipus killing his father, Prometheus defying the gods, Cronos devouring his children (with Medea as the feminine counterpart), Hamlet conversing with his father's ghost... Dawn Raffel's work could thus be seen as a series of variations on the myths of fatherhood and motherhood. The archetypal character of the situations that are staged by the novel and the stories could thus explain the "ancestral" quality of Dawn Raffel's intertextuality (gnomic, wisely reserved and uncommunicative from an intertextual point of view).
- 5 The carried body offers a metaphoric framework for both the writer's relationship with literary memory and for Dawn Raffel's own vision of the use of language as substance, as organic matter, as creation of a new body of words that breathes, pulsates and displays its own gravity, its own verbal weight. The carried body keeps the balance between the pole of the leaden deadly weight of tradition and the gravity of a malleable linguistic substance, which is itself inspired by tradition. When speaking of bodies and ancestors, it is worth remarking that Dawn Raffel is largely a "family author", a keen observer of family domesticity, a subject that pervades her novel and many of her stories. Most of her texts display a strong emphasis on the family as social structure and as linguistic milieu: "Blood was their relation" (IYLD 109). The family can arguably be seen as both a physical and a literary reality, inviting genealogic explorations, indiscreet inquiries into literary filiation and paternity. Bodies of words (palpable, dense, meticulously arranged or deranged), bodies of old people (idiotic Pap in *Carrying the Body*, sprawled silently in his armchair) and bodies of children (innocent, dirty and diseased, but miraculously regenerative and regenerating) form the raw material of Dawn Raffel's world, a world that is both stunted by decrepitude and brimming with the vitality of a young creature that longs to live and grow. In Dawn Raffel's novel, the young carry the old (Pap, the old father in the novel is a disincarnated puppet), but also the young carry their younger offspring (as in the final image of the text, in which the Aunt is holding her nephew and falling ecstatically with him, in an endless, joyful descent through the air). In the short story "Somewhere Near Sea Level", the embrace

between father and daughter is metamorphosed into a bridal embrace, that of the bridegroom carrying the bride, who is telling him :“carry me” (IYLD 72).

- 6 The archetypal metaphor of tradition as an act involving bodies and carriers was first used by Bernard of Chartres in the 12th century : the moderns are dwarfs perched on the shoulders of the ancients, the ancients being cast in the role of giants. The metaphor later underwent significant metamorphoses, which bore witness to the epistemological transformations characteristic of the passage from one worldview to another, from medieval and Renaissance quasi stability to the unsettling interrogations of modernity (Calinescu, 15-18, Compagnon, 19). Newton and Montesquieu, among others, played with the phrase and distorted it in the bold spirit of self-assertion characteristic of the moderns, stressing the height of the point of view belonging to the dwarfs rather than their smallness or insignificance.
- 7 While the original metaphor of Bernard de Chartres insisted on the ideas of size and altitude, Dawn Raffel operates a shift of semantic emphasis towards the idea of weight (not just any kind of weight, but the weight of a human body). Perspective and growth are replaced by heaviness and material/bodily density. The relationship between tradition and modernity is therefore no longer couched in the language of progress and advancement, but in the language of direct experience, of bodily contact, of brutal or painful handling, of organic development and decay. Carrying a body no longer makes one see better, as in Conrad’s famous phrase, “My task is [...] to make you see” (Conrad 3), but rather carrying a body makes one feel better or feel further. “Love” is the last word of *Carrying the Body*, which opens up the bleak world of the book onto new vistas of generosity, affection and eloquence as well.

An effaced intertextuality

- 8 If we transpose the image of Bernard of Chartres in an intertextual context, we come across a major difficulty. Dawn Raffel’s intertextual practices are extremely difficult to highlight since hers is a subdued, twilight intertextuality, with dim shapes and blurred contours. She does not display any sign of intertextual exuberance, the self-conscious kind that flaunts its debts and allegiances. In her classical study of parody, Linda Hutcheon describes the practice of parody at work in John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* as “didactic and overt” (Hutcheon, 88). *Carrying the Body* and *In the Year of Long Division* are anything but didactic and overt, since they belong to a distinct literary family of understatement, conciseness and muted filiations. In the short story “Migration”, we are told that the sky was uniformly covered with flying geese and that “there were no formations” (IYLD 107). Indeed, there are no intertextual formations in the sky of the short stories, no intelligible patterns, no intertextual information whatsoever.
- 9 One is hard put to find any identifiable quotations, quotation marks, manifest or stealthy borrowings, tokens of literary indebtedness. Dawn Raffel does not wink at the reader, but rather keeps a straight face, one on which the features of the ancestors have been quietly effaced. Her texts do not openly signal the road to be taken by way of prompts and cues. The reader needs to find a way of his own in an uncharted territory of implied references and affinities. In this smooth intertextual space, devoid of visible lines and lineages, one needs to ask an elementary, yet essential question : what is intertextuality in a seemingly a-intertextual work ? How can one consider origins,

mentors, influences in a text that undermines the validity of these terms and seems to function according to a logic of concealment or erasure? However, if one wishes to understand where Dawn Raffel comes from and where she stands in the American literary space, one needs to establish interactions between her texts and others, to insert her texts within a larger framework. Perhaps one simply needs to reconsider intertextuality and especially intertextual analysis. Tiphaine Samoyault retraces the critical history of the notion and distinguishes between the analysis of precise intertextual practices, as catalogued by Gérard Genette in *Palimpsestes* for instance, and a more diffuse approach which encourages the reader's blindfolded and intuitive exploration of the literary memory of the text, of the imponderable concept of influence (Samoyault, 30-31). This could be described as an attempt to connect texts not because of specific, clearly identifiable cases of relatedness, but because texts function, sound, feel the same, because they share a certain imagery, texture, "grain of voice", a certain "rustle of language" (terms that Roland Barthes introduced in *Le Grain de la voix* and *Le Bruissement de la langue*). This is an essentially intuitive enterprise that allows one to establish links between texts and to form clusters of texts in the dreamy no man's land of literature which is situated beyond the boundaries of certainty.

- 10 Genette defines intertextuality as the co-presence of texts : text A is present in text B, whereas he defines hypertextuality as derivation (text B is derived from text A, but A is not explicitly present in B). Neither of these notions is relevant in the case of Dawn Raffel's texts, since both rely on shared features identified beyond any doubt. It is therefore preferable to speak of the tentative identification of an echoic type of relationship between texts. The word "tentative" should definitely be emphasized, since it points to the idea of speculation, of kinships projected by the reader, of elective affinities suggested by the imaginative commentator (whose imagination should never be underestimated). It also points to the idea of a risky enterprise, since what Eco calls the limits of interpretation are sometimes hard to set. My adventure in the jungle of Dawn Raffel's origins and genealogies may look like a reckless reverie with shaky textual foundations—however it seems to me there is no other way to deal with the influence that does not speak its name.²
- 11 In a provocative article entitled "Against Intertextuality" (2004), William Irwin takes issue with the notion of "intertextuality" as it was defined by Julia Kristeva, mainly because of the misrepresentation of intentionality it implies, but also because the loose meaning the term has come to have ("almost as many meanings as users" Irwin 2004 227) and because it has become "fashionable jargon for traditional notions such as allusion and source study" (229). The death of the author, proclaimed by Barthes, led to the resurrection of the reader—a powerful agent in the reading of the text, somebody who enjoys the text while also tracing the free play of signifiers (Barthes' "pleasure of the text"). However, according to Irwin, it is quite dangerous for the reader to indulge in such pleasurable intertextual activities, because a text may sometimes not foreground its allusions *qua* allusions intended by the author (after all, what is an allusion?³), and therefore the reader may simply drift away while formulating hypotheses and gathering reminiscences about this or that literary connection that he or she may deem relevant. The reader has supplanted the author at the top of the textual hierarchy of power. The very understanding of the act of reading is dramatically modified, since texts are all related and therefore reading is endless : "The central element of intertextual interpretation is to note and make connections between and among texts. Every text is potentially the intertext of every other text, and so

reading becomes an infinite process” (Irwin, 2004 235-36). Moreover, this infinite process tends to be heterogeneous and impressionistic: “Intertextual speculations quickly degenerate into the *déjà lu*, pseudo-intellectual cocktail talk of the type, ‘This reminds me of that and so on’. We can hear voices as ‘in the room women come and go talking of Michelangelo’” (236). The quality of this type of literary criticism based on the uncovering of intertextual connections by the reader depends on the quality of the critic’s mind, on the individual’s talent and ability to convince: “This theory makes for a criticism more stimulating than informative, providing of course that the critic has a stimulating mind” (Clayton and Rothstein quoted by Irwin 2004 236). Irwin argues that unintended connections between texts are better called “accidental associations” and, more radically, that the term intertextuality should be banned from the discourse of honest intellectuals.

- 12 Honest intellectuals, however, do need tools for analysis, and intertextuality, despite its many faults, is the only pertinent term we have, although it obviously is vague and unsatisfactory from many points of view. While I agree with Irwin’s cogent arguments, it seems to me that intertextuality needs to be redefined to accommodate criticism, but that it should not be entirely discarded. Throughout this article I will therefore use the notion of intertextuality and specify from the very beginning that I will deal with “accidental associations” rather than allusions. The fact that Dawn Raffel recognizes some of my “accidental associations” as genuine influences or sources further complicates the situation because it is the author who sanctions the reader’s interpretation. My only hope is that the critic’s mind will prove stimulating enough to make this paper stimulating.⁴
- 13 This family portrait is an attempt to read Dawn Raffel along with other authors through echoic connections with other texts. Such an attitude is commonplace in the process of reading: the reader’s literary memory is stimulated by a given text, which is thus related to others, placed in a web of references, images, settings, similar atmospheres or characters. Subjectivity undoubtedly plays a role in this process of building families of authors and texts. Benedict Anderson created the concept of “imagined communities” to refer to nations, nationhood and discourses about nationhood. By borrowing this phrase, one could talk about “subjective communities of reading and writing”, in which the reader engages in an active dialogue with the text and with the whole of the literary heritage. This family portrait is therefore a community projected by a particular reader in order to make sense of a certain practice of writing and of the dialogue established by a text with a larger body of texts.

A sense of place

- 14 A major tension lies at the heart of Dawn Raffel’s texts, represented by the twofold drive towards transitivity and intransitivity. Her texts move clearly in the direction of referentiality (the Midwestern background of some of the stories, for instance), but the lack of semantic clarity places the narrative very quickly in the autotelic position of a self-sufficient artifact. Dawn Raffel is not a linguistic inventor, in the sense that she does not invent (new) words. Dawn Raffel’s artistic creativity does not manifest itself at the level of the word as a unit, but rather at the level of the sentence as a combination of words, in the larger structures of semantic and morphological associations. She seems to invent a new literary language not by forging individual words, but in several

other distinct ways, having to do with the art of constructing sentences and with the art of story-telling, by disregarding the rules of grammar, by pairing unexpected terms or by concealing information that the reader is expecting.

- 15 As far as the transitive dimension is concerned, the Midwestern presence in Dawn Raffel's texts (especially *In the Year of Long Division*) is not an affair of local color and mimetic vividness, but rather a sketchy framework constructed mostly by toponyms of Wisconsin (the Peshtigo, City of Portage, Eau Claire, Oconto County). As Vladimir Nabokov used to say, local color is not a fast color (Nabokov, 31) and Dawn Raffel's local colors are extremely diluted, although diffusely present as an undercurrent. The Midwest constitutes such a constant presence in Dawn Raffel's work that even *Carrying the Body*, which does not refer to any specific place name or even country, appears to tacitly belong to the same Midwestern universe that is constructed in the short stories. The principle of effacement at work in Dawn Raffel's intertextual mechanisms is also valid in the case of the sense of place that her texts rely on or, more appropriately, suggest.
- 16 Dawn Raffel's Midwest has a slight Joycean flavour that comes from certain stories from *Dubliners*. There are traces of Joyce's sluggishness and eavesdropping in the stifling microcosm of Dawn Raffel's Midwestern neighborhoods. The Midwest of the collection *In the Year of Long Division* is not exclusively urban, however. Characters move around and talk about fields, lakes, farmland, geese ("Migration") or rivers covered with ice ("Two If by Sea"). The second story in *In the Year of Long Division*, entitled "The Other R's", is a consummate replay of Joycean themes of regret, contemplation, loss and expectation. The story insists on houses and their veiled fronts, on windows and their drawn curtains, inviting repeated acts of eavesdropping, spying, snooping, prying: "Their house was draped. Tight. Tucked in on the block. We were made to snoop" (IYLD 10). The neighbors' lives, protected by closed doors and opaque walls, are necessarily exciting because enigmatic, vaguely and imprecisely reconstituted from visual fragments and guilty hearsay: "We would hang back to watch—quiet, drawn. We had heard the priest had come. We had heard it was supposed to be a boy..." (IYLD 10). A sense of indirectness is transmitted through the insistence on the senses that cannot, actually, perceive anything specific—there is only the desire to see, know, understand what is going on. Dawn Raffel's Midwest is a place where knowledge is only formulated in terms of rumors, second-hand information, echoes or hypotheses, in a mental act of circling around or hovering about the event. Joyce's "Araby" comes to mind, with its intense progression in desire and regret, with the actual contact with the coveted object (the fair called "Araby") described as a *post factum* phenomenon, tinged with the desolation of an imminent ending.
- 17 The story that opens Joyce's *Dubliners*, "The Sisters", is pervaded with images of house fronts and marked by the contemplation of drawn blinds, of closed windows in order to detect the vibrations of life and death among the inhabitants :
Night after night I had passed the house (it was vacation time) and studied the lighted square of the window : and night after night I had found it lighted in the same way, faintly and evenly. If he was dead, I thought, I would see the reflection of candles on the darkened blind for I knew that two candles must be set at the head of the corpse. (*Dubliners*, 1)
- 18 Hypothesis is the main mental operation that allows one to have access to the life behind "the lighted square of the window". Plato's myth of the cave, with its fire and shadows, is a relevant intertext, not only for the passage itself, but also, more

generally, for the type of perception it describes (and that the stories describe), which is essentially a perception of the shadows of things, not of the things themselves.

- 19 In “The Other R’s”, second-hand knowledge and perception slowly change into a negation (possibly a refusal) of knowledge and perception :

I did not see the candles. I did not see the gown. I did not see the priest. I did not see the long black car in the light of the morning. I did not see Mother. I did not see the fingers of my sister, digging-nails in the heat of my flesh. I did not see the earth. I did not see the marks. I was playing, blind, eyes covered with linen, the day they buried Peggy. (IYLD 14)

- 20 This rhythmic and incantatory litany of negations that talks about knowing without knowing (about knowing through negation) reminds one of the ancient definitions of God based on negation, of the *via negativa* theorized by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in his famous *Mystical Theology* of the 6th century. Arguably, Joyce’s epiphanies, inherited from Saint Thomas Aquinas, find their religious counterpart in the Dawn Raffel’s negative epistemology, reminiscent of the negative (or “apophatic”) theology of the primitive Church. What the fragment describes is paradoxical, because acts are named and described from a negative perspective, through a negative perception. The negation “not” becomes an agent of knowing, a filter of knowledge. Knowledge and past narrative are therefore closely connected to negation, to knowing without knowing directly, to knowing today, although knowledge had been impossible the day before.

- 21 Once the reader has caught the Joycean echo (spying at the dark windows of Dawn Raffel’s houses), other echoes follow. The word “paralysis” looms large on the very first page of Joyce’s “The Sisters”, which encapsulates a young boy’s meditation on the word “paralysis” itself, on its sound pattern more than on its meaning (a type of poetic meditation on words that one encounters in *A Portrait of the Artist* as well). Small town life in Raffel’s Midwest and big town life in Joyce’s Dublin are similarly characterized by paralysis and inertia. Perhaps there is no need to resort to the authority of Joyce in order to evoke urban paralysis, which is after all a universal dimension of any provincial environment. The family of authors of provincial life is much larger, encompassing Anton Chekhov, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis and, why not, George Eliot (*Middlemarch* is subtitled *A Study of Provincial Life*), the great masters of wrecked lives, impossible dreams of evasion, country life and small town lethargy. The archetype of provincialism emerges within this family of “provincial” authors. Again, just like in the case of father-son or mother-daughter relationship, Dawn Raffel seems to refer to archetypal models, universes, relationships previously defined in myth and literature. However, in this context, the reference to James Joyce appears to be more pertinent than others when one thinks of the “heaps of dead language” (*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* 138) that Stephen Dedalus stumbles across in the streets of Dublin.

“Heaps of dead language” versus lyrical impetus

- 22 Indeed, Dawn Raffel’s dialogues are “heaps of dead language”, mechanical exchanges, brief and vacuous, or, perhaps, meaningful in a convoluted or inscrutable way. In Dawn Raffel’s texts, secrecy and opacity trigger acts of intrusion and lead to an obsessive interrogative mood :

“Who shut the windows ?” Mother said.

“What did she see ?” I said to my sister.

Night leaked into night.

“Not healthy”, Mother said.

“Who ?” my sister said.

“Someone has entered the cupboards” Mother said.

“Then speak for yourself” C said. (IYLD 16)

- 23 In an interview, Dawn Raffel explains that the disconnectedness that characterizes her dialogues is not at all the jumbled output of idiotic or absurd verbal *personae* reminding one of Eugène Ionesco’s Mr and Mrs Smith, but rather an intrinsic feature of all verbal exchanges, which display a natural tendency to disregard semantic coherence and to favor free, and therefore strange, associations.⁵ From this point of view, the above quoted dialogue is not at all a potential excerpt from *La Cantatrice chauve*, but a normal conversation, which is perfectly intelligible for the various interlocutors taking part in it, although it remains utterly opaque and even comically deranged for the chance outsider (the amazed reader). The strange effect produced by such minimalist and off-track conversations is due to the fact that they have been ripped from their context and we are offered the words without their original situation, in some sort of a-pragmatic use of language, in which the text survives without its context.
- 24 When defining the notion of “poeticity”, Roman Jakobson argues that poeticity manifests itself in the fact that words possess their own weight: “la poéticité se manifeste en ceci que les mots possèdent leur propre poids” (Jakobson, 46). Similarly, when discussing one of Gertrude Stein’s sentences (“It looked like a garden, but he had hurt himself by accident”), William H. Gass admires the fact that it was composed “with a fine feel for the true *weight* and full use of the word” (Gass, 224). Dawn Raffel’s texts ultimately carry their own load—they carry the buried bodies of the ancestors, certainly, but above all they carry themselves, in a reflexive act of self-support and self-propulsion. This is where Dawn Raffel’s essential lyricism needs to be mentioned. Within the dominant syntactic environment of brittleness, recurrent lyrical passages tend to appear—still interrupted by numberless commas, but without preventing the text from reading fluidly :
- In the night, our street, our houses vanished. Whole, lost. One by one, two and three ; and three of us, there would be three of us, nightly moving, shut of our houses, out of our tents—nights, nights, nights. A lone seam, milky, rising, coming as if from an unseen flue—we would see it rise. We would let it lead us, two abreast and one behind, and one night, one of us forcibly piggied at a window. One shriek. Four arms, four legs, two heads—nights, nights—unable to look in the face of the other. That was us. All there was this : the noise of our nights—a whimper in a torn-through garden, snores, a moan—love, I think—of a woman or a man, a father, anyone’s father ; our rent breath, a crying, pallid and rising, almost a keening, rising, the falling and the falling of our feet. (IYLD 16-17)
- 25 The text is propelled by an inner rhythm, by alliterations, by the music of its own sounds, postponing the need to reach meaning. The euphoria of lyrical euphony suspends the individual meaning of words and tolerates the breaches of grammatical decency. The lyrical flow offers another version of the act of carrying—music and rhythm carrying the reader along.
- 26 In spite of these lyrical passages, elsewhere Dawn Raffel is fiercely reserved and gives the impression that every one of her words has been extracted under torture, like a painful tooth still bearing a blood-stained root : “Fell in. Likely. Urge and rage, a boy

and girl, and once in, over and over, rage and urge, diving for the thing that would not save us”(IYLD 8). No wonder she favors the short form—her only novel gives the impression of an assemblage of short pieces that share the same thematic space. As a counterpart to the lyrical impetus of certain passages, one finds the opposite tendency as well. Conciseness, density, obscurity and meticulousness seem to be the keywords of her style: “Men were in pursuit. The men had boots and firstborn sons. The sons had dogs to point. Meat was scarce. Skins cracked. Every kettle sang” (IYLD 107). When reading such sentences, one is reminded of Ernest Hemingway’s blunt style in some of his short stories, for instance when Nick Adams’ return to Michigan is described in “Big Two-Hearted River”:

Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it. Now he was hungry. (Hemingway 122)

- 27 This premeditated bluntness is accompanied, in Dawn Raffel’s texts, by the unsettling use of zeugma (“The men had boots and firstborn sons”) and by prolific alliterations (scarce, skins, cracked, kettle)—which, very interestingly, induce a sense of never-ending possibilities of association, of never-ending series of phonetically-related sentences (consonantic, musical families of sentences).
- 28 *Carrying the Body*, but also a certain number of stories from *In the Year of Long Division*, dilute the regional element in favor of the claustrophobia of a cluttered house—a confined universe that could be located anywhere, anytime, in an indeterminate space-time where one cannot help sensing, however, an undercurrent of Midwestern life. In the case of the novel, *Dubliners* no longer seems an appropriate landmark, as it is for some openly Midwestern stories in *In the Year of Long Division*. We are in a distinct realm, one of inner and outer vibrations, stealthy displacements, apathetic movements, heavy footsteps moving from room to room. Movement and gestures referring to movement are decomposed, slowed down dreamily or nightmarishly, so that the text can be read as the anatomy of a body moving in space, occupying space, inserting itself in space, united to its space as a turtle to its shell. Nathalie Sarraute’s *Tropismes* necessarily comes to mind, with its concentrated energy of movement and displacement, with its flickering and ruthless lucidity summarizing and scanning a life, a gesture, a habit. The first paragraph of Dawn Raffel’s story “Table Talk” is a disguised Sarrautian “tropisme”, bringing together a sense of place and a sense of obsessive presence:

She is every place there is inside my house. She is here inside the cases with the books and files and records; she is rattling in the cupboards with the saucers and the cups. She is in the window sashes. She is dripping from the faucets; she is creaking in the hinges; she is matted in the brushes, tooth and fingernail and hair. She is in the dresser drawer with the bras and socks and underpants, the panty hose, the pills. She is blowing through the radiators, waiting in the hamper, frosting up the Frigidaire. She is in my husband’s closet with the ties and the trousers. She is in between the sheets and on the pillows, breathing breath.(IYLD 48)

- 29 A trope (hence a “tropisme”) is a bent line, a bent space, a curve or a curvature, a physical or mental landscape melting like metal under the heat of intense scrutiny. Sarraute extracts and compresses, in dense paragraphs, the essence of a habit, of a

verbal tic, of a repeated gesture, literally and ruthlessly transforming whole lives into small hard balls :

Et elles parlaient, parlaient toujours, répétant les mêmes choses, les retournant, puis les retournant encore, d'un côté puis de l'autre, les pétrissant, les pétrissant, roulant sans cesse entre leurs doigts cette matière ingrate et pauvre qu'elles avaient extraite de leur vie (ce qu'elles appelaient « la vie » leur domaine), la pétrissant, l'étirant, la roulant jusqu'à ce qu'elle ne forme plus entre leurs doigts qu'un petit tas, une petite boulette grise. (Sarraute 65)

- 30 This ashen alchemy of greyness and of discarded life matter is at the very center of Dawn Raffel's work, which relies on condensation, brevity, on a sort of rhythmic thumping that constructs, in waves or gushes, the essence of a situation. Here is a fragment from the story "Somewhere Near Sea Level", about a girl learning to skate under her father's guidance ; she falls on the ice all the time and keeps looking at the sky :

Habit. Fearborne. Sleeves, snaps, cuffs. I am speaking to a bead, to a fearful pearlish glinting in myself. [...] There is a ceiling, of course. It burns, the ice, rebukes my back. Flat flung limbs. Nothing is broken, my father says. Birds, I say. It is terribly high, even given style, even given flights, even given tricks. A person could stand on a person's shoulders, given even balance, a bent for stunt, feint—a lady fluttering, swooning, waft and lily and pale, light, sweet perfume, airily, deftly arcing off a balcony—taken down, removed. (IYLD 69)

- 31 The reader moves in a segmented universe of brittle sentences, with commas disseminated all over the place, stemming the flow of syntax. In the story entitled "The Seer", a character talks about a "hiccup of the mind" and the same character is described as "verbosely limping" (IYLD 63). Both the hiccup and the limping are bodily metaphors describing style or expression in terms of pauses, rhythm, rhythmic patterning and hammering reiteration. Just as movement and speech, especially in the dialogues, are decomposed, the sentences themselves are hashed, shredded, reminding one of beads on a syntactic string.

The literary history of indeterminacy : "something is happening to me"

- 32 Some of these beads are transparent, translucent, devoid of semantic load : there is a proliferation of indefinite pronouns like "something" and "anything", which are transparent words in a certain sense ; one sees through them because of their fluid and transferable referentiality. However, they become utterly opaque and bothersome when the reader's primitive need for semantic coherence is at stake. One is struck by the abundance of *someone, something, anything, somewhere* : "Someone is listening" (IYLD 13). Dawn Raffel favors curious mixtures of indeterminacy and tautology : "The nurses knew. They were openly privy to the what was what" (IYLD 13). The characters are haunted by a sense of being always elsewhere instead of here and now : "But we are somewhere else. We are always somewhere else" (IYLD 106). These recurrent *something* and *anything*-pronouns of evasiveness and restraint-suggest a sense of mystery, of secrecy, of hidden causes, sources, objects, reasons. Dawn Raffel's repeated *something* and *anything* construct what could arguably be called a linguistic gothic genre : one constantly expects, especially in the novel but not only there, the disclosure of a dark secret which keeps the characters going and dictates their actions. However, there is no

revelation, no lifted veil showing some hidden face of the diegesis. It would be interesting to retrace the literary history of the word *something* and I am sure Dawn Raffel would deserve a chapter in it. The word *something* and its literary history is to my mind closely linked to a particular novel, namely William Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, with its emblematic sentence, uttered by Temple Drake just before Popeye's rape : "Something will happen to me" and its variants "Something is happening to me", the rape itself not being openly named, let alone described, but only suggested and slowly reconstructed through scattered episodes and clues (Faulkner, 102). However, Temple Drake's ominous *something* is given semantic substance in the end, it does not remain an indeterminate void, whereas Dawn Raffel methodically injects a stubborn indeterminacy into her texts without ever intending to move on to a stage of clarification. The word *something* recovers, with Dawn Raffel, a paradoxical independence through a grammatical revolution, since no contextual or situational props are used to define or circumscribe it (again an a-pragmatic type of usage). This indeterminate pronoun becomes in a way an indicator of literary continuities and ruptures from the 30s to the present. "Something" ceases to be an empty word inscribed in a necessary web of reference and needing additional information to stand on its own—it gains weight and prominence.

- 33 Dawn Raffel's "family portrait" would not be complete without the outline of some of her contemporaries featuring alongside her grandparents (Joyce, Sarraute) and uncles (Faulkner). Unfortunately, this is where the picture grows dim. This effect is certainly paradoxical, because the blurred areas (reminding one of the wear and tear of time) appear precisely in the spots dedicated to her most immediate contemporaries, not to her remote literary ancestors.
- 34 Dawn Raffel is frequently associated with Gordon Lish, known as the mentor of a whole generation of writers, whom she thanks at the beginning of her books. Lish however is extremely remote from Dawn Raffel's style, that is why I will add him to the picture only to draw a question mark above his silhouette. Lish's impressively large output is often characterized by a conversational quality that stems from his ability to take up any subject whatsoever and develop it at length, creating casual and repetitive monologues while also winking at the reader from time to time. Lish, famous as Raymond Carver's minimalist aesthetic advisor, looks like the inventor of narcissistic talkers, of narrators in love with their own narrative power :

She was burning up. She was always burning up. She kept saying she was always burning up. But there was not any reason for it. We could not figure out any reason for it. She did not have a fever. She did not have a temperature. But she kept saying to me that she was always burning up. She kept saying to me that this was how she felt. She said she felt that she was always burning up. We tried getting air-conditioners in. (Lish, 23)

- 35 Dawn Raffel seems, on the contrary, to explore the possibilities of silence and minimalist expression, although her lyrical outbursts also prove an interest in the lavish discursive modes of flowing speech. Her minimalism is not Carver's however : arguably, Dawn Raffel makes Raymond Carver look like a hyper maximalist. John Gardner and Gordon Lish both encouraged Carver to favor brevity, to use ten words out of twenty or five words out of one hundred—the exact figures are unimportant. My impression is that by giving up one word out of two in Carver's work, one could reach something resembling Dawn Raffel, an autistic and opaque Carver, translated into a foreign dawnraffelesque or dawnraffelite language.

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NOTES

1. Hereafter quoted as *IYLD*. I have already examined the novel in a previous article: Monica Manolescu-Oancea, "La Pesanteur et la grâce: *Carrying the Body* de Dawn Raffel", in *Les Cahiers Charles V* ("Etats-Unis: formes récentes de l'imagination littéraire II"), Marc Chénétier (ed.), 38 (2005), 215-234. In a revised English version: Monica Manolescu-Oancea, "The Place of No Place in Dawn Raffel's *Carrying the Body*", *NOON*, Diane Williams (ed.), New York, 2008, 117-38.
2. In passing, one might add that there is one notable exception to the general rule of intertextual discreetness in Dawn Raffel's work: the story entitled "River of Portage" (*In the Year of Long Division*), which foregrounds a certain number of names belonging to the first explorers and colonizers of Wisconsin, from Jean Nicolet to Louis Joliet and father Jacques Marquette. The story itself is thus closely linked to the history of the region, to its archaic and archival background.
3. The question was formulated by William Irwin in the article "What is an Allusion?" (2001).
4. I would like to thank William Irwin for having taken the time to answer my queries regarding his articles and my own reading of Dawn Raffel. He kindly replied that in the case of recent authors like Dawn Raffel, it is useful to provide readers with "family portraits" of the kind that I am working on here, since they constitute introductions to the work itself.
5. See the interview with Dawn Raffel published in this issue of *Transatlantica*.

ABSTRACTS

This article wishes to examine the literary genealogy of Dawn Raffel and to explore the notion of intertextuality as well, together with the critical debate surrounding it. A tentative family portrait will be drawn through the study of the short story collection *In the Year of Long Division* (1994), with references to the novel *Carrying the Body* (2002).

Cet article se propose d'examiner la généalogie littéraire de l'écrivain contemporain Dawn Raffel et d'explorer également la notion d'intertextualité et le débat critique qu'elle suscite. Il s'agira d'esquisser un portrait de famille à travers l'étude des nouvelles du recueil *In the Year of Long Division* (1994), avec des références au roman *Carrying the Body* (2002).

INDEX

Keywords: critical debate about intertextuality, Dawn Raffel, intertextuality, relationship to tradition

Mots-clés: Dawn Raffel, débat critique sur l'intertextualité, intertextualité, rapport à la tradition

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