

AT A TIME OF CRISIS: ENGLISH AND AMERICAN STUDIES IN SPAIN



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Susagna Tubau (ed.)**

**Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat
Autònoma de Barcelona/AEDEAN, 2012**

**ISBN-10: 84-695-4273-7, ISBN-13: 978-84-695-4273-6
www.aedean.org**

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A STORYTELLER FROM THE BAYOU: INTROSPECTION AND SELF-REDEMPTION IN GAUTREAUX'S "WELDING WITH CHILDREN"

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Tim Gautreaux (Morgan City, 1947) is the author of two collections of short stories, *Same Place, Same Things* (1996) and *Welding with Children* (1999), in which he depicts the land, customs, traditions and deep-rooted religious background of his native Louisiana. His fiction follows in the footsteps of such Southern Catholic writers as Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy. This paper focuses on the homonymous story that opens his second volume and offers a reading which explores the second chance patterns displayed by the fiction of this author. In this analysis, the initial role of Bruton, father, grandfather and the moral buttress of his family, is questioned by Mr. Fordlyson, one of his neighbors, whose stinging remarks stir his conscience, forcing him to reconsider whether his grandchildren's misbehaviour and disobedience is primarily a response to his unwed daughters' moral laxness, or there is someone else to be blamed.

Keywords: Southern literature, Catholicism, redemption, Flannery O'Connor

Upon the reception of the National Book Award in 1962 for his novel *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy was asked if he could explain why Southern literature in 20th century America prevailed over the rest of other regional forms. The Alabama writer responded that the main reason was to be found in that those Southern states "lost the War". This subtle remark gave rise to various interpretations. Thus, Ralph C. Wood, an expert in Flannery O'Connor's fiction, declared that "the South acquired an ineradicable sense of the tragic: the awareness that even the best of cultures can go profoundly wrong, that seeming good can be built on massive evil, that many things broken cannot be mended, and that much evil must patiently be endured" (2004: 59). Whatever the reason may be, it seems clear that the Mason-Dixon Line surveyed between 1763 and 1767, the boundary which once solved the dispute between British colonies in Colonial America, marked not only the psychological frontier between two different ways of life –the division between the Confederate war-torn states and their victorious Northern counterparts– but also different ways of regarding reality or interpreting literature. The South came to be an spatial entity which in time became the home of some of the most renowned American fiction writers whose literature accounted for themes and characters dissimilar to those found in the fiction of non-Southern writers.

One of the most remarkable advocates of the current Southern literature of the United States is Tim Gautreaux (1949), an author whose literary career rose to prominence when he was well into his forties. A native of Louisiana, Gautreaux's fiction portrays working-class characters, primarily from the Cajun ethnic community, descendants of Acadian French settlers expelled from British Nova Scotia following the Treaty of Paris (1763) which ended the French and Indian War. From the publication of his early stories, dealing with moral dilemmas and redemption, critics have praised Gautreaux's mastery on the confection of well-wrought plots, on his ability to develop complex characters, as well as memorable dialogue and pithy descriptions (Nisly 2002: 136). In this regard, the fiction of Gautreaux –consisting

of two short story collections and three novels to date— has been compared in many ways to that of Flannery O'Connor (Nisly 2002 and 2006; Kane 2004b; Cañadas 2006a) and the novels by his mentor Walker Percy (Kane 2004b), a fact that Gautreaux himself has acknowledged in different interviews (Bolick & Watta 1997; Kane 2004a; Bauer 2009).

A teacher of creative writing, Gautreaux would recommend his students to base their characters on the people they know so as to make their stories as realistic as possible (Bauer 2009). This aspect allows for his stories to be deeply ingrained in the land and the community he knows so well. Despite his resistance to be labelled as a "southern writer" based on the assumption that everyone is a regional writer, Gautreaux, however, does not regret being referred to as a Catholic writer in the footsteps of such Southern Catholic authors as Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy or Andre Dubus. Yet, despite acknowledging that he has "always been a Roman Catholic, since baptism, since birth" (Bauer 2009), Gautreaux's fictional depiction of religious aspects, such as the role of the sacraments or the effect of grace on the individual, the treatment of violence or human compassion differs significantly from the theological intricacies exhibited by Flannery O'Connor.¹ This aspect drew the attention of Lamar Nisly who indicates the ambivalent treatment of characters in both Southern writers. He eventually noticed that one of O'Connor's "central points is to provide a shocking conclusion, hoping to jolt her readers into a confrontation with Christianity" whereas Gautreaux "follows his characters past their crisis, allowing his readers to experience changes that they themselves may need to make". Nisly underscored a tendency towards extremism in O'Connor's fiction, which is not encountered in Gautreaux. In this sense, Gautreaux adheres to the humanist vein and moral questioning in the tradition of Walker Percy, who became his mentor after he attended the novel-writing seminar offered by Percy at Loyola University in New Orleans. Gautreaux admitted being naturally influenced by Walker Percy's morals and ethics. In this respect, his conception of storytelling was permeated by his teachings: "I consider myself to be a Catholic writer in the tradition of Walker Percy", acknowledged Gautreaux in an interview. "If a story does not deal with a moral question", he added, "I don't think it's much of a story" (Bolick and Watta 1997).

Certain literary patterns appear in many of Gautreaux's stories, most of them involving characters immersed in moral dilemmas and, as Margaret Donovan Bauer noticed, being "reminiscent of O'Connor's stories" (2010: 9). Thus, while he worked as a college professor until his retirement, only a few of his stories recreate university life. It seems that less educated people are more compelling, and their sordid lives a better field for language and thematic experimentation: educated people, Gautreaux explains, "tend to speak a standard English which is not creative and is not conducive to storytelling or bullshitting or any verbal color at all. ... People who are uneducated basically have to make up an idiom as they go along. These are the people I like to listen to, because they're very acrobatic with the way they use the language" (in Nisly 2002: 138). The result is that Gautreaux populates his fiction with working class-characters—old steam engines operators, pump repairmen, tugboat crew members or machinists— most of them belonging to the Cajun community. Many of these characters bear French names which end in '-eaux', such as Thibodeaux, Barrileaux, Boudreaux, clearly reflecting the demographics of Cajun country, a fact that, as Emilio Cañadas has rightly put it, converts Gautreaux into the "mouthpiece" of a community, the Cajun community (2008: 221).

Welding with Children is a most appropriate title for Gautreaux's second collection of stories. In this volume, many protagonists undergo a process of awakening which prompts them to *mend* other people's lives and *weld* them *with* hopes and second chances. What we see in Gautreaux's fiction is a need for a second opportunity, a point which exhibits the author's humane compassion. Thus, for instance, in "Resistance", one of the stories in this collection, Mr Boudreaux's unswerving enthusiasm pushes him to an extreme, going beyond

his own physical limits, in order to *mend* a school project carried out by Carmine, a teenage girl who he becomes friendly with, which is eventually torn to pieces by her father in a drunken rage. A similar situation occurs in the homonymous story. In it, the protagonist becomes a prototype of Gautreaux's characters as he accepts responsibility for past errors and embarks on the moral education of his grandchildren. I aim to explain that the protagonist's involvement in his grandchildren's education accounts for his self-redemption as well as a recognition of his failure as a father in his daughters' upbringing.

"Welding with Children", is a hilarious yet poignant story that opens Gautreaux's second collection of short stories. As previously stated, this story depicts the unsuccessful attempts of a grandfather who struggles to give a decent moral education to his squabbling grandchildren, offspring of his four unwed daughters. This narrative reflects one of most common themes in Gautreaux's fiction, that of older relatives or "service persons who visit our homes and get just a little entangled in our lives" (in Nisly 2002: 139). The characters of this story, however, are neither Catholic nor members of the Cajun community, though they are profoundly influenced by the land and Louisiana customs. Mr Bruton, the protagonist and first-person narrator of this story, fits in the rubric of Gautreaux's characters: an occasional welder who lives in the small Louisiana town of Gumwood, in a house surrounded by a three-acre yard in which there was not much space for his grandchildren to play, as there he kept "four derelict cars, six engines, four washing machines, ten broken lawn mowers, and two and one-quarter tons of scrap iron" (Gautreaux 1999: 16). The unkempt aspect of Bruton's yard, where his grandchildren will use an engine hanging from a tree as a swing, reflects unmistakably his own lack of commitment in the family education: all of his four daughters had their offspring out of wedlock. Bruton regrets that he never involved himself in the education of his daughters and he suddenly recognizes the resulting burden on his wife, a working mother, who could not assume their daughters' education.

The story begins when Bruton is required to look after his four grandchildren while their mothers are away. Surprisingly, his wife cannot assume any responsibility for her grandchildren as she had made plans to go to the casino as Tuesdays are her days off. Bruton's eldest daughter also brings along a bed rail with a broken-off end for him to weld back together. The image of the broken bed rail justly emphasizes his elder daughter's moral laxness and anticipates the faulty child upbringing characterizing the family. Bruton is left home alone with his four grandchildren, Nu-Nu, Moonbean, Tammynette and Freddie, whose ages range from seven months to six years old. Unable to weld the bed rail as his naughty grandchildren constantly misbehave and disobey his orders, Bruton decides to drive them to the local Pak-a-Sak. On the way to the town convenience store, Bruton is stung by the comments of a group of town elders sitting outside the store. One of the members, Mr Forlyson, a Methodist preacher, tells the rest of them "Here comes Bruton and his bastardmobile" (1999: 4). Though initially disturbed by this comment, this incident will later on acquire an epiphanic resonance, as it will mark the beginning of Bruton's personal crisis which eventually will drive him to his moral awakening. However, Bruton fails to see the deeper meaning of Forlyson's remarks, which remind him of his failure as an educator:

"Hey, Bruton", the younger said, a Mr. Fordlyson, maybe sixty-five. "All them kids yours? You start over?"

"Grandkids", I said, holding Nu-Nu over his shoes so maybe he'd drool on them.

The older one wore a straw fedora and was nicked up in twenty places with skin cancer operations. He snorted. "Maybe you can do better with this batch, he told me". (5)

In this rural Louisiana society, everybody knows about each other's family lives, as Bruton states: "Gunwood is one of those towns where everybody looks at everything that moves" (7). Although he prefers to disregard this comment by emphasizing that Mr. Fordlyson thought he

was king of Gunwood because “he owned about 1 percent of the pissant bank down next to the gin” (5), Bruton overhears his grandchild’s words which compared his behaviour to that of white trash people, what suddenly makes him assume his own culpability in his daughters’ upbringing: “None of them has any religion to speak of. I thought they’d pick it up from their mamma, like I did from mine” (7). By observing what he considers a Southern tradition, that which makes women responsible for child’s upbringing, Bruton accepts his own culpability as he had neglected his duties as a father when his daughters were just teenagers: “I guess a lot of what’s wrong with my girls is my fault, but I don’t know what I could’ve done different” (7). His daughters grew up watching cable and videos and, eventually, they began to date truck drivers and garage mechanics whom they regarded as movie stars. In a sense, Mr. Fordlyson’s words about doing it better this time with this new batch, his grandchildren, imply that for Bruton there is still a second chance of redemption and *mending* their grandchildren’s lives is still possible. However, Bruton’s overt awakening has not yet taken place as he fails to grasp the true meaning of Mr. Fodlyson’s words.

Assuming his part of responsibility, Bruton takes pain to furnish his grandchildren with that morality he never taught his daughters. Thus, when he finds a Bible storybook, Bruton decides to read those stories of Abraham and Moses and in passing “teaching them something about something” (8). The result is some of the most hilarious passages in Gautreaux’s fiction. Thus, everytime Bruton introduces a story from the Genesis and Exodus, the children interrupt him with a humorous comment which reflects the reality they have been exposed to. He then goes on to relate to them how God made the earth until he hears Moonbean say that if shaved, God would look like “that old man down at the Pak-a-Sak”, meaning Mr. Fordlyson. Moving on to the story of the Garden of Eden, Bruton will tell his grandchildren that the snake lied to Adam and Eve. Puzzled about their grandparent’s story, they wonder how a snake could speak. Their grandfather tells them that that snake is the devil in disguise, what prompts Tammynette to answer “That Elvis Presley tune’s got nothing to do with the devil making himself into a snake in the Garden of Eden” (9). The children will be eventually attracted by the stories of Noah and the Flood or Abraham almost stabbing Isaac, as “the Bible was turning into one big adventure film” (10). When Bruton asks Freddie what the point of the story of Abraham and Isaac was, Tammynette’s opinion is that:

“He’s just like O.J. Simpson!”

Freddie shook his head. “Naw. God told Abraham to do it just as a test”.

“Maybe God told O.J. to do what he did”, Tammynette sang.

“Naw. O.J. did it on his own”, Freddie told her. “He didn’t like his wife no more”.

“Well, maybe Abraham didn’t like his son no more neither, so he was gonna kill him dead and God stopped him”. Tammynette’s voice was starting to rise the way her mother’s did when she’d been drinking.

“Daddies don’t kill their sons when they don’t like them”, Freddie told her. “They just pack up an leave”. (11)

The episode of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in which Lot’s wife was transformed into a pillar of salt will also be interpreted by Moonbean as a transformation being made by Martians: “I saw this movie once where Martians shot a gun at you and turned you into a statue” (11). Bruton eventually gives up his storytelling after Moses and the Ten Commandments, though he makes sure he spends “a lot of time on number six, since that one give their mammas so much trouble” (11). By mentioning this point, Bruton is making clear that it was their daughters’ moral laxity and the absence of an authentic religious education that wrecked their lives and made them unwed mothers.

Discouraged by the ill-effects of his teachings, Bruton fantasizes about the possibility of gathering all the kids in his car and drive them northwest to start over a new life together,

“away from their mammas, TVs, mildew, their casino-mad grandmother, and Louisiana in general” (12). In this sense, Bruton becomes an archetype of those male protagonists in many of Gautreaux’s stories who find the Southern mode of living too constraining for them to live. This is what happens to Harry, the pump repairman in “Same Place, Same Things”, whose freedom and mobility is envied by Ada, a Southern widow who murdered her husband and sees in Harry as the last chance to leave behind the South (Gautreaux 1996: 15).

The following day, on his way to pick up a window grate that the town marshall wanted to have it fixed, Bruton finds old Mr. Fordlyson seated in the middle of a bench under a huge pecan tree which the locals refer to as the “Tree of Knowledge”. Lamar Nisly has rightly pointed out the connection between Mr Fordlyson and God, as anticipated by Moonbean, which becomes even more evident with the Garden of Eden image. Under the Tree of Knowledge, Mr Fordlyson stops Bruton from eating the fruits fallen from the tree, with a command, “Don’t eat that green pecan –it’ll make you sick” (Nisly 2006: 78). To the reader’s surprise, Bruton seeks the advice of Mr. Fordlyson. The man who had made the cutting remark the day before, makes Bruton aware that he cannot postpone assuming his grandchildren’s upbringing as their mammas renounced their right to educate them –a critique of Bruton’s lack of parental commitment to his own daughters. The scene under the Tree of Knowledge brings back the description given by Tammynette when she suggested that Mr. Fordlyson would resemble God if he shaved his beard. Bruton might have remembered that hilarious episode when he is summoned to Mr. Fordlyson’s presence: “Okay, wise man. I came to the Tree of Knowledge. Tell me what to do” (16). Mr. Fordlyson incarnates that good service man, like Mr Boudreaux in “Resistance”, who, in this case, shows sympathy and compassion towards Bruton. As a way of fixing family morals, Mr. Fordlyson suggests that Bruton should take his grandchildren to Sunday school, and that any denomination, First Baptist, Methodists, Presbyterians or even Catholics, “whose church has so many services a weekend, the priests can run the place on volume like Wal-Mart” (15), might help straighten up their morality better than their own mothers would do. However, when Mr. Fordlyson recommends Bruton cleaning up the yard, he fails to understand the deeper meaning of this proposal:

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“It’s got everything to do with everything”.

“Why?”

“If you don’t know, I can’t tell you”. Here he stood up, and I saw his daughter at the curb in her Lincoln. One leg wouldn’t straighten all the way out, and I could see the pain in his face. I grabbed his arm, and he smiled a mean little smile and leaned in to me for a second and said, “Bruton, everything worth doing hurts like hell”. (16)

Although in Gautreaux’s fiction, the presence of machines may refer to people’s social origin or the dignity of human characters, in this particular story, the act of piling up scrap iron, old engines and all sort of machinery acquires an opposite moral meaning: an unkempt backyard represents a personal cleansing which must be undertaken before attempting to help other people. Initially, Mr. Fordlyson’s cutting remarks and provocative phrases were intended to stir Bruton’s morality. Right after that epiphanic moment, Bruton still believed that he had done his best in his daughters’ education and that making his grandchildren understand the morals from the Bible stories would be enough to make up for that past inaction. Nonetheless, as the story progresses, Mr. Fordlyson makes Bruton aware that a change is painful and that “everything worth doing it hurts like hell” (16). It is high time for Bruton to face the music or else there will be no point of return if he fails to see that is up to him to put his grandchildren on the right track.

When he returns home, Bruton sets out to refurbish the house and he begins replacing

screens on the little porch or putting down a coat of enamel on the big one. Those changes frighten off his wife who asks him: "What's got into you, changing our religion and all?" (17). When his eldest daughter comes home to drop off her little boy along with Freddie, Bruton calmly welcomes them by saying that both Nu-Nu and Freddie will be all right there with them.

Although Gautreaux allows his characters to have second chances, occasionally some of those stories end up with little possibility of hope.² In "Welding with Children", when Bruton's oldest daughter comes around to leave her seven-month boy with his grandparents, she is happy to announce that Nu-Nu finally said his first word yesterday, Da-da, even though, as Bruton admits "he'll be saying that in one way or another for the rest of his life and never be able to face the fact that Da-da had skipped town, whoever Da-da was" (19). This final passage of the story suggests that Bruton has understood and accepted his role as educator, this time assuming in passing that he can neither rely on his own wife nor on his daughters. In a sense, the moral of the story is found in this second chance offered to the protagonist by Mr Fordlyson, whose gnawing attitude of interference in Bruton's life eventually becomes the cornerstone for Bruton's redemption.

The artistry in Gautreaux's fiction is certainly found in the moral choices that interweave the lives of his characters, with their land, their community and their customs, and yet, doing it with a little dose of sentimentality. In a recent interview he manifested his despair when he sees what is being produced in American fiction and the little importance given to the possibility of learning from our own errors:

I seem to run across two types of stories that worry me. One is the *New Yorker* type tale where everything is a joke and the reader can't really take anything, including death and disease, seriously. ... And the other type of story I run across is a truly dark narrative about vicious people who don't learn anything from what they do and are not punished in any way and never get their comeuppance. Sometimes that's realism. And such stories belong in the canon. But the mistake a writer of those types of stories makes, I think, is to write *all* of his stories like that because then, cumulative the author gets away from realism. ... It is unrealistic to ignore compassion and the ability people have to cope and even triumph over their problems. (in Bauer 2009)

It is under this dimension that Gautreaux's role as a writer must be regarded. He is a humanist, a moralist and a champion of realism, aspects that, he points out, tend to be more unusual in contemporary American fiction.

Notes

1. Even a Southern writer, Andre Dubus, an avowedly Roman Catholic, once regretted having read O'Connor's interpretation of the sacraments because "Everytime I read her stories I look for the sacraments and get lost in the story" (Samway 1988: 124).
2. In his article "Second Chances: Patterns of Failure and Redemption in Tim Gautreaux's Same Place, Same Things" (2005), Ed Piacentino analyses how many of Gautreaux's characters redeem their lives' failures through the recognition of their personal culpability and responsibility for their acts.

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THIS TEXT IS PART OF THE VOLUME:

Martín Alegre, Sara (coord. and ed.), Melissa Moyer (ed.), Elisabet Pladevall (ed.) & Susagna Tubau (ed.). *At a Time of Crisis: English and American Studies in Spain*. Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/AEDEAN, 2012. ISBN-10: 84-695-4273-7, ISBN-13: 978-84-695-4273-6. Available from www.aedean.org