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RON RASH'S VISUAL AESTHETICS

Ron Rash is a contemporary American poet, short story writer and novelist. He was born in South Carolina where both his mother and his father worked in a textile mill, and when he was eight years old, his family moved back to western North Carolina, a region where Rash's ancestors had lived since the 18th century. Rash earned his BA at Gardner-Webb University in North Carolina, and his MA at Clemson University in South Carolina, and later he taught writing at TriCounty Technical College in South Carolina and Queens College in North Carolina. Rash continues to live in North Carolina; he is the Parris Distinguished Professor in Appalachian Cultural Studies at Western Carolina University where he teaches poetry and fiction-writing in the Department of English.

Rash is the author of about 20 books – novels, collections of short stories and poetry and other writings. His creative imagination is fueled by the past and the present of the Appalachian region, its history, landscape and cultural traditions that he knows so well and believes to be unique: “The part of the upper South I focus on has certainly had its share of hardship, of a failure to achieve the prosperity of the rest of America, though that failure is in large part due to the fact that more has been taken from the region, from coal and timber to soldiers for our wars, than given back. But this hardship has also produced an incredible outpouring of art – jazz, bluegrass, country music, blues, rock and roll, as well as a huge number of exceptional writers” [1]. The typical settings of his books are Appalachian mountains, valleys and coves, and he describes life in Appalachian rural communities and industrial towns, past and present.

Rash acknowledges a strong kinship between his fiction and a rich tradition of literature of the American South, and among the writers whom he admires and who influenced him a lot are W. Faulkner, E. Welty, F. O'Connor. He received the James Still Award of the Fellowship of Southern Writers, and the Fiction Book of the Year Award from the Southern Book Critics Circle as well the Thomas Robinson Prize for Southern Literature (in 2019). Rash doesn't mind being called a regional writer, and like Faulkner before him he believes that it is through the local that you can express the universal: “The best regional writers are like farmers drilling for water; if they bore deep and true enough into that particular place, beyond the surface of local color, they tap into universal correspondences, what Jung called the collective unconscious. Thus Faulkner's Mississippi, Munro's Ontario, and Marquez's Columbia are both exotic and familiar” [2]. Among Rash's literary themes and concerns are those that extend beyond his native Appalachia – crime and punishment, the nature of evil in human beings, the conflict between humans and their environment. It is because of his ability to probe for the universal within a specific cultural landscape that critics even called him the “Appalachian Shakespeare” [3]. The universal quality and depth of Rash's work has earned him

The Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, The Sherwood Anderson Prize, two O. Henry Prizes, a Guggenheim Fellowship and many other awards and distinctions. His works have been translated into 20 languages, and Rash's best-known novel *Serena* (2008) was a *New York Times* bestseller, a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and was adapted into a feature film in 2014.

One of the markers of Ron Rash's writing style is the quality which may be defined as literary visuality, that is his texts are connected to vision, sight and seeing in various ways. "Vision is central to everything I do," stated Ron Rash in an interview (q. from [4, p. 84]), and his intensive engagement with visuality may be prompted by his early exposure to visual arts through his father who became an art professor at Gardner-Webb College in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, and by a desire to ground his fiction in a particular place (the Appalachian region) and to "bring the place more intensely to the reader's mind" [5, p. 87].

First of all, Ron Rash's texts are programmed towards readerly visualization through certain textual strategies, such as an abundance of details, narrative construction of place and visuality of rhetorical figures. As Rash himself stated at various times: "...what I want to do is make the writing as vivid as possible for the reader" [6]; "... I try to be as descriptive as possible because I think people have to notice the world before they can care for it" [3].

Secondly, in his texts Rash represents various "practices of looking" and "scenes of seeing" to express his characters' individual visions, and together with visual descriptions and tropes they constitute what the American scholar Randall Wilhelm called "the patchwork quilt of Rash's visual aesthetics" [4, p. 84].

In fact, the very nature of Rash's poetic imagination is visual: his books almost always originate in compelling visual images that occupy his mind and demand their stories to be told. "They start with images and I just follow them. Sometimes I have a vague sense of the story already, but mainly it's just following the images" [7, p. 55]. For instance, *One Foot in Eden* began with Rash's vision of a farmer standing in his field with his back turned; *Serena* originated from an image of a woman on horseback silhouetted against the sky; *The Cove* began with an image of a young woman pulling back some rhododendron leaves and seeing a bedraggled young man playing a silver flute etc.

Rash's intensive engagement with visuality appears to be particularly meaningful in his novel *The Cove* published in 2012. The writer once remarked in an interview: "I'm very conscious that I'm often taking the reader into a deep place, sometimes a very dark place. By entering that place, I hope the reader might find something cathartic" [8, p. 185]. In *The Cove* Rash takes the reader to a place that is literally "dark" and "deep," as the setting of the main action of the novel is a gloomy cove in North Carolina mountains.

The novel tells the story of Laurel Shelton and her brother Hank who live on a farm in a cove in the Appalachian mountains during the final months of World War I, Walter, a German musician who escaped from North Carolina German Internment Camp in Hot Springs and found shelter on Sheltons' farm in the cove,

and Chauncey Feith, a local recruitment officer. He leads an attack on the Sheltons' farm when Walter's identity is disclosed. Feith accidentally shoots Laurel and then deliberately kills her brother to avoid his revenge.

The first "scene of seeing" in *The Cove* occurs in the Prologue which takes place about 40 years after the main action of the novel. A Tennessee Valley Authority worker has arrived to expect the cove because it is going to be flooded into a lake, and his curious but detached glance registers the exterior features of the local landscape and of what used to be a farm: "He passed under the limb and the land fell sharply. The cliff loomed over him now, the trail's surface more granite than dirt. The land leveled a last time and he walked into a stand of dead chestnut trees, their limbs broken off, massive trunks cracked as though a plague of lightning had swept through the cove. The cabin still stood, flanked on its sides by two wells, only one with a rope and pulley. Rusty sags of barbed wire outlined a pasture that held nothing but briar and broom sedge. Collapsed boards smothered the barn's corbelled foundation. No sign of any recent human presence, which was all for the better" [9, p. 2–3]. All these details create not only a palpable physical environment but also a particular visual code that invites interpretation; however, because the TVA worker's vision is *external*, he is able to interpret what he sees only in a general way, as signs of decay and death. This ominous beginning where the cove emerges as a dark, sinister place, "submerged in shadow," allows Rash to establish the novel's connection to a rich tradition of southern (Appalachian) literary gothic and to foreground environmental concerns recurring in his fiction.

Visuality in the novel is further enhanced in the chapters told from Laurel's perspective. Here the vision of the cove is that of *an insider*, so the emphasis is not so much on seeing and interpreting as on the *construction of subjectivity* through acts of seeing, both physical and mental. In her consciousness Laurel continually registers the cove's intimidating darkness and interlinks the present with past events, mainly with the misfortunes that the family had to face after they moved to the cove. In Laurel's unhappy memories of the past and her rendering of the bleak present, Rash demonstrates her sensitivity to colors and shapes that becomes a defining feature of her vision of the world. "A purple butterfly lit on the stream edge to sip water" [9, p. 11]; "A trout wavered in the pool's center, its fins orange as fire, flanks spotted red and gold" [9, p. 139] – through such visual details Rash suggests Laurel's deep need for beauty, recognition and love intensified by her loneliness and the darkness of the cove. In fact, Laurel is forever searching for ways to bring light and beauty into the cove and into her life. One of her most vivid memories is that of a flock of parakeets who once flew into the cove and brightened up its darkness. Her favorite place in the cove is the granite outcrop where she can get relief from the overpowering shadows and where the light is "like warm honey." Rash suggests Laurel's spiritual connection to her natural surrounding, no matter how oppressive it may be. In fact, it has become a part of her identity: "the cove itself had marked Laurel as its own" [9, p. 18], which reflects Rash's idea that "landscape is destiny" [6]. The local townsfolk also associate Laurel with the cove, a "cursed place," and the birthmark on her body in

the shape of a purple stain provokes more irrational fear and prejudice. In the novel's semiotic system it becomes a visual representation of Laurel's otherness and adds to her isolation, loneliness and suffering.

A major event in Laurel's life, encountering Water for the first time, is staged by Rash as an act of seeing and observing. When Laurel first hears Walter's flute-playing she follows the sound and it leads her to "brightness": "Laurel crouched and moved nearer, pulled aside a last thick-leaved rhododendron branch. A flash of silvery flame caused her to scuttle back into the thicket, brightness pulsing on the back of her eyelids" [9, p. 9–10]. Rash stages this episode as an act of seeing that not only brings light and music into Laurel's life but also empowers her, gives her agency as Walter is unaware that he is being watched: "Laurel let her gaze take in a blue chambray shirt torn and frayed and missing buttons, the corduroy pants ragged as the shirt, and shoes whose true color was lost in a lathering of dried mud. Sunday shoes, not brogans or top overs. Except for the flute, whatever else the man possessed looked to be in the haversack. A circle of black ground and charred wood argued he'd been on the ridge at least a day" [9, p. 10]. Later in the novel when they meet and become friends and lovers, the focus in the narrative changes from her seeing to being seen by Walter to reflect Laurel's increasing awareness of her own self. In both cases there is an emphasis on the construction of subjectivity – in the first case by being aware of an Other in the presence of one's Self, in the second – being aware of one's Self in the presence of an Other, confronted with the gaze of an Other ("The I is always in the field of the Other," as stated by Jacques Lacan [10, p. 123]).

One more way for Laurel to transcend the darkness of the cove is imagining *Vaterland*, the German ocean liner where Walter had worked as a musician. It was the largest ship in the world in 1914, and it got stranded in New York harbor for three years before the USA entered World War I and the remaining members of its crew were sent to an internment camp. Laurel urges Walter to give her a detailed account of the ship in all its splendor, and the ship becomes "more vivid to him than any time since he had left New York. Sometimes it was as if he saw it more clearly now than when he'd been on it. Laurel too. She now knew half the ship as well as he did" [9, p. 186–187]. As a result, their visions merge, symbolically bridging the gap between Self and Other.

In the character of Walter Rash problematizes the insider/outsider binary, a characteristic trope of Southern literature. On the one hand, he is an outsider similar to the TVA worker in the Prologue, and as a German placed in the Internment Camp he is an "enemy alien." Walter's initial perception of the cove as a "dreary place" with an emphasis on its austerity, darkness and lack of color is that of a foreigner, an outsider, but his vision of the cove changes as he becomes more and more involved with the work on the farm and as his relationship with Laurel progresses. As noted by Thomas Ærvold Bjerre, in the character of Walter Rash also complicates the "enemy-friend" binary characteristic of war narratives: "Rash did not depict Walter as an enemy figure; that role goes to Chauncey Feith,

<...> someone who creates discord in the community <...>. Walter, on the other hand, is an “alien” but one who <...> proves his worth through hard physical labor, in that way striking a kind of claim on the cove” [11, p. 214]. At the end of the novel Walter is devastated to learn about the tragedy that took place in the cove while he was hiding in the woods at Laurel’s insistence.

Six chapters of the novel (in hardback edition) are presented through the viewpoint of Chauncey Feith. Through this character Rash represents *the dialectics of the seen and the unseen*, and he actually makes the unseen (Feith’s dark hidden motives) visible to the reader through a number of narrative strategies including the highly performative character of Feith’s behavior and the emphasis on his outward appearance. Feith’s fresh-pressed uniform, polished shoes and an entourage of youths from the Boys Working Reserve are supposed to transmit a visual message to the community that he is an “unsung hero” whose job requires “a day-to-day courage.” Feith has high political ambitions and desperately needs the support of the local community, but his position is shaky because of the scorn of the war veterans. Rash juxtaposes the visual images of Chauncey’s smooth skin and immaculate uniform and the wounded bodies of the returned veterans like that of Michael Davenport (“Black patches covered his eyes <...>. Burn scars welted his face and neck and phlegm clotted each breath” [9, p. 122]) to expose Feith’s ignorance and exaggerated patriotic fervor as compared to the terrible reality of war. Feith’s behavior may also be illustrative of the concept of the gaze in the sense that it implies the “realization of being seen and interpreted by others, and adjusting one’s conduct accordingly [12, p. 1]. Feith tries to demonstrate his authority by heightening anti-German sentiments and demanding that “potentially subversive” books in German should be removed from the college library and Professor Horatio Mayer should be dismissed from Mars Hill College because he teaches German and could be a spy. Chauncey’s ignorance and xenophobia are exposed by Rash through his vision of the books as “lined up row after row as if poised for an attack” and of the German language as looking “sinister, especially the two dots that resembled a rattlesnake bite” [9, p. 99].

As suggested by Th. Æ. Bjerre, Feith’s exaggerated patriotic fervor is largely prompted by his deep-seated fear of being called “a coward, a non-man” [11, p. 214], and this is what causes the tragic ending of the novel: on the day of the welcome home parade for the injured veteran Paul Clayton who spent several months in a Washington hospital some local men see a wanted poster at the train depot and realize that the German runaway from the internment camp in Hot Springs is the man whom they saw in the cove with the Sheltons. “Let’s go get the damn Hun” they demand, and Chauncey cannot avoid leading the manhunt which results in bloodshed: Laurel and Hank are shot by Chauncey (Laurel by accident and Hank deliberately, while tied up) and die. Feith’s tripping into the well puts an end to his evil doings; if the cove is quite literally “the heart of darkness” in the novel, Chauncey’s heart is metaphorically dark, tainted by cowardice, xenophobia, cruelty and egocentrism.

To conclude, *The Cove* offers multiple forms of engagement with the visual including details, images, and acts of seeing, and it foregrounds individual vision as production of subjectivity and construction of agency. The cove itself emerges as a fictional space that is in turn local, liminal, and multicultural, a palpable physical environment and a highly symbolical locus, a site marked by death and violence, but also associated with dialogue and hope. This is where the novel's discourses of love, war, nature, memory and otherness converge to express Ron Rash's unique style, poetic imagination and sociopolitical vision. Through its complex interplay of light and shadow, past and present, individual and community, Self and Other, the novel illustrates what Hal Forster defined as "a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein" [13, p. ix].

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