

### **Journey to the Desert and Other Motifs in Albert Camus' "La femme adultère" and Richard Ford's "Abyss"**

Albert Camus' short story "La femme adultère" and Richard Ford's novella "Abyss" do not immediately invite comparison: Camus' story traces a middle-aged woman's growing awareness of the price she has paid for choosing and remaining in a marriage founded on mutual need rather than love, while Ford's explores the calamitous consequences suffered by protagonists whose sexual affair leads them to betray their spouses and the values and important meanings of their lives. Nor do the temporal or cultural settings of the protagonists' lives suggest obvious correspondences: the protagonists of "La femme adultère" are *pieds-noirs* in post-Second World War Algeria, while Ford's male and female protagonists are real estate agents in contemporary America. Yet, for all that might appear divergent in their thematic concerns and cultural contexts, a comparative analysis reveals that the structures and narrative dynamics of Camus' and Ford's stories originate to an important degree in their recourse to similar literary motifs, formal properties and, ultimately, themes. Indeed, the symmetry in narrative construction and thematic interests creates an intertextuality that illuminates not only themes the stories share but also the deployment of the literary motifs that determine the configuration of both narratives. In the comparative analysis to follow, the emphasis will indeed fall on literary motifs and not on literary reception: Richard Ford has, of course, read Camus, but had not read "La femme adultère" when he wrote "Abyss."<sup>1</sup>

The symmetry between the stories can best be appreciated initially by an overview of their shared structure and emplotment: a woman and a man in intimate relation to each other leave their familiar urban environment and travel together into the desert. There, they are exposed to a world that is unfamiliar in both its physical and human aspects, eliciting radically different responses from the female and male protagonists. The male characters are variously impatient with, dismissive of and hostile to the physical and cultural otherness of the desert world, while both female protagonists are deeply affected by their desert experiences, culminating in both cases in a spiritual transformation – fully realised in one protagonist and developing in the other before being brutally terminated.

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<sup>1</sup> Conversation with author, Dublin, November 28, 2008.

The basic narrative structure of Camus' story is adequately captured by this summary, as is the essence and intention of this story about a woman whose sense of herself and her life are transformed by her experience in the enigmatic and mysterious world of the desert. This plot summary, however, does not adequately convey the thrust of "Abyss"; the journey to and experience of the desert in Ford's story are elements of a narrative whose greater intention is to offer a modern parable on the inescapable causal relation between acts and consequences in the moral context of infidelity. Structurally, both narratives, in the manner in which their teleological energies are directed towards their respective climaxes, imitate their central thematic metaphor, that of the journey. In Camus' story this delimitation and focus are transparent, and are employed to emphasise the story's overarching narrative theme: "La femme adultère" moves Janine through the requisite stages of her journey so as to deliver her to her epiphanic moment of transformation, leaving one with the sense of a tightly knit and goal-oriented emplotment. Ford's story, however, being a novella, is much longer and thematically more expansive, although no less determined to transport its protagonists to their fate. But it accords itself the means to do so in more leisurely fashion, thus allowing itself both a greater breadth and depth of thematic exploration, and the textual space to present the perspective of both the male and female protagonist.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, it is the different narrative intentions and focus that render the congruence of the stories all the more intriguing. One may reasonably speculate, on the evidence of their texts, that Camus and Ford set out to write stories that were not destined to be thematically related, yet both writers found themselves drawing upon similar and familiar literary motifs, to a degree that engenders a mutually reinforcing thematic narrative paradigm. The remainder of this discussion will focus on the structuring and thematic function of the decisive motifs employed in both stories, namely the motifs of departure from a familiar space (the urban world), the journey into an unfamiliar and alien space (the desert), and the transformation of self occasioned by the encounter with this space.

The first structuring motif in both stories is the departure from a familiar space. In both cases the depiction of the familiar world focuses on the values, choices,

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<sup>2</sup> In Camus' story the reader is offered Janine's perspective only; in Ford's, the perspective switches between that of Howard and Frances, although greater emphasis is given to Howard's point of view.

possibilities and limitations of the lives the characters have chosen and constructed for themselves within these worlds. Janine's reflections on her life with her husband Marcel are offered as the couple are in the bus transporting them into the desert. The physical discomfort of the trip and the cold that has penetrated Janine's body articulate the greater desolation that has begun to inhabit her; it is becoming clear to her that this journey encapsulates what she now perceives as the failure of her adult life, a failure she attributes to her marriage to Marcel. As a young woman she had seen the essential choice to be made in her life as one between "la vie libre et le mariage."<sup>3</sup> She chose the latter as insurance against growing old alone, discounting aspects of Marcel that displeased her, aware that "elle aimait être aimée." But her need for love satisfied more than the fulfilment of an emotional yearning; Marcel's initial attentions, and the manner in which he made her feel that "elle existait pour lui," supplied nothing less than the metaphysical foundation that "la faisait exister réellement" (13).<sup>4</sup>

However, Janine's choice and calculation have produced a life of disappointment and unfulfilled promise: "Non, rien ne se passait comme elle l'avait cru." Marcel had given up his law studies to become a businessman, and had soon ceased to take her to the beach, being more interested in his "petit commerce de tissus" (14). Janine ultimately concluded that his true passion lay in making money. In the manner of such men, Marcel fulfilled his conjugal duty in the only way he knew: he provided well for her materially, offering shelter instead of passion, security instead of intimacy. Janine's frustrated expectations and sense of lost opportunity are disclosed through the recurring emphasis on her heaviness of body and "la pénombre" (15) of their town apartment. These initial associations of the burden and gloom of a sedentary and enclosed urban existence set up the terms of a contrast that will be fully realised through the movement and light of the couple's journey into the desert's vast openness of earth and sky.

Although the bus carrying Janine and Marcel into the desert is carrying her away provisionally from what has congealed into a predictable and passionless life, the departure from this familiar world into the alien one of a winter desert landscape is initially made to represent nothing more than the transposition of this constricted

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Camus, *L'exil et le royaume* (Paris: Gallimard, Collection Folio, 1972), 13. Further references to Camus' story will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Where two or more quotations in a given passage have the same page-number reference, the page reference will be noted in parentheses after the final such quotation, as above.

urban life into a different landscape. Marcel is on a sales trip to sell his fabrics directly to the indigenous Arab shopkeepers, and has harried his wife into accompanying him. His familiar presence, disposition and activities are set to perpetuate the monotony and constriction of Janine's unfulfilled life and to attenuate the potential impact of departure and dislocation.

If the familiar urban space signifies, for Janine, a life of lost opportunity and boredom, this is less manifestly the case in "Abyss." While a certain dissatisfaction with their respective lives does indeed emerge as Howard and Frances initially get to know each other, this is essentially an effect of their frustration with societal conventions that seem set to impede the immediate sexual expression of the "large, instinctual carnal attraction"<sup>5</sup> and pulsing desires that their first meeting awakens in them. As the evening of their first encounter develops (at the awards banquet run by the company they both work for), a self-serving narrative about institutional and societal repression of sexual freedom is jointly authored, the initial function of which is to allow them to circle around each other in their game of sexual seduction without stepping outside the limits of propriety. If Frances and Howard carefully guide their conversation to the sentiment that marriage "shouldn't be a prison cell" (225), they are nonetheless aware of the institutional function of the Weiboldt Company for which they both work: from their first complicit conversation at the banquet to their eventual clandestine motel meetings near their respective home towns, their employer's code of conduct and their fear of exposure have them cast themselves as victims of a restrictive and coercive public moral code.

The familiar urban space soon to be departed in "Abyss," therefore, represents a space of repression and restriction, and particularly in sexual terms. The southwestern desert city of Phoenix, the first stop in the two-stage spatial transposition from Howard and Frances' New England to the desert, represents a space of potential freedom: "I feel so free now" (232), gushes Howard to Frances as they meet in his Phoenix hotel room on their first night there. For Frances, too, departure means escape and freedom. Her constricted life, like Janine's, is also attributed to her marriage, in her case to an "older," embittered husband, Ed, afflicted in some unspecified way by a workplace injury, leaving him unfit to work and imposing on her the burden of being the sole breadwinner. And, again like Janine, Frances' life has

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Ford, *A Multitude of Sins* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 224. Further references to Ford's story will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

suffered the disappointment of unfulfilled expectations: due to her husband's invalidity, "she'd been forced to jump into real estate as her full-time career, whereas she'd hoped to be a physiotherapist, and maybe work in France" (230). Beyond, therefore, the escape from restriction into the temporary freedom of an illicit sexual affair, Frances' departure from her familiar world represents a reward for devotion to duty and for bearing up to a quotidian routine of hard work and limited conjugal joy: she considers that she works "her tail off" selling in the tougher, cheaper end of the real estate market, which, she feels, authorises her to "wander into some fun with a guy like this big Howard" (227).

There are important structural resemblances between the texts once they remove their protagonists from their familiar urban worlds. An intimately related man and woman travel into the desert in a vehicle from which they observe the unfamiliar outside landscape but which restricts – without completely preventing – their contact with this world. This enforced enclosure also has the effect of compelling the couples into a proximity of shared isolation. In addition, both men are unsympathetic to the women they are with, and both are little valued by the women beyond their physical presence. At different stages in their respective journeys, both couples stay in the intermediary space of a hotel. Finally, the protagonists in both cases arrive at their respective destinations, facilitating a full and direct exposure to the otherness of the desert.

That Janine's journey to the desert represents merely a transposition to a different space of the confined life she leads at home is strongly reinforced by the opening scene of Camus' story: she sits in the enclosed space of the bus, as shielded from the outside world she is unable to see because of the winter desert storm as she is in her town apartment because of their "volets mi-clos" (15), and as encaged as the insect who flies, silent and exhausted, inside the bus. This simple relocation of Janine's confinement is confirmed by the tableau of Marcel and her sitting together in the bus: Marcel is with her, but physically only – they do not speak, he looks ahead fixedly, and is "absent" (11).

Yet the journey into unfamiliar space represents more than simply the transfer of Janine's disappointed life to another location: the very severity of the physical conditions and the absence of the familiar props of home, albeit those of her

confinement, leave her helplessly exposed to her lostness and loneliness, captured in the image of her irresolution as she arrives in her desert hotel room:

Elle ne savait où poser son sac, où se poser elle-même. Il fallait se coucher ou rester debout, et frissonner dans les deux cas. [...] Elle attendait, mais elle ne savait quoi. Elle sentait seulement sa solitude, et le froid qui la pénétrait, et un poids plus lourd à l'endroit du cœur. (19)

Janine's distress is due to more than her physical and emotional condition; it is also related to her thwarted expectations of the world she has undertaken to enter. Janine had pre-conceived this space of otherness according to the political and cultural perspectives of her *pied-noir* identity. Daniel-Henri Pageaux notes how, in travel literature, the traveller can see "l'étranger" only with "les outils emportés dans ses bagages (culturels)."<sup>6</sup> This is the intercultural paradigm attributed analogously by Camus to his *pieds-noirs* characters. Pageaux identifies three dominant levels of exchange "qui régissent la représentation de l'Autre" (151), those of "manie" (over-estimation of the other culture), "philie" (equal exchange with and acceptance of the other culture), and "phobie", defined thus by Pageaux: "la réalité culturelle étrangère est tenue pour inférieure et négative par rapport à la culture d'origine" (152). Janine's conception of the desert and its meanings is entirely a function of her sense of cultural superiority and indifference, as is Marcel's conception of the indigenous Arab population; both are manifestations of the "phobie" paradigm of conceiving the cultural other.

Janine and Marcel's conception of the inferiority of the other, indigenous culture can be conceived initially in spatial terms. They live in an urban space, which, while as *pieds-noirs* involves them living among the native population, is nonetheless a cosmopolitan space: they live in a quarter which is "mi-indigène, mi-européen" (15). Joep Leerssen identifies in "metropolitan" discourse a typical and, he suggests, structural representation of space into centre and periphery, a representation consistent with colonialist discourse in general.<sup>7</sup> Janine and Marcel inhabit the "centre," the urban space of the colonising French and European populations, where

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel-Henri Pageaux, "De l'imagerie culturelle à l'imaginaire," in *Précis de littérature comparée*, eds. Pierre Brunel and Yves Chevrel (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989), 156. Further references to Pageaux's essay will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Joep Leerssen, "The Allochronic Periphery: Towards a Grammar of Cross-Cultural Representation," in *Beyond Pug's Tour: National and Ethnic Stereotyping in Theory and Literary Practice*, ed. C.C. Barfoot (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 293-4.

Janine may choose “entre la vie libre et le mariage,” where she speaks French only and does not bother to learn the native language, and where Marcel can be an “étudiant en droit” if he so desires (13). The “periphery” is the remote, unexplored and alien region of the native population, the space of the inferior native culture.

Informed by this frame of reference, Janine, in the desert, is the ignorant and complacent traveller wrenched from the cocoon of a familiar cultural space. Yet she is discomfited to find neither the fantasised enchantments nor the horrors of the cultural other, but, rather, a prosaic reality that a modicum of cultural curiosity and awareness would have revealed to her:

[R]ien ne ressemblait à ce qu'elle avait imaginé. Elle avait craint la chaleur, les essaims de mouches, les hôtels crasseux, pleins d'odeurs anisées. [...] Elle avait rêvé aussi de palmiers et de sable doux. Elle voyait à présent que le désert n'était pas cela, mais seulement la pierre, la pierre partout. (16)

The fantasised image of the remote, rural and inferior natives is crudely expressed through the contact with the Arabs of the desert, and particularly so in Marcel's case. Marcel has a merchant's pragmatism, which allows him to overcome his sense of cultural superiority as long as the natives buy his goods. But he does so gracelessly, and his contacts with Arabs are marked by impatience, condescension, rudeness and disdain, be it with the bus driver, the old Arab hotel waiter, or the Arab shop-owners. He is particularly indignant at any display of Arab pride, or at Arab failure to acknowledge his innate superiority. His attitude in these encounters, and the disparaging remarks he makes about the desert, the Qur'an and specific native cultural practices, identify Marcel as the exemplar of Pageaux's concept of cultural “phobie.”

Janine's journey to the desert has been accomplished by bus, and culminates initially in the tableau of her weary vacillation in her hotel room. Both bus and room are further sites of enclosure, and have had the effect of inhibiting direct contact with the unfamiliar world of the desert. But Janine has nonetheless been able to observe the native Arabs and the radical cultural otherness of their world. The text records her awareness of the extraordinary silence of the Arab bus passengers, their effortless and graceful occupation of their immediate space (notably their lack of resistance to the wild swaying of the bus in the desert storm), their serene demeanour, and the absence of luggage. She also registers the almost-ghostly appearance and disappearance of the mysterious “bergers” (17) outside the bus, an evanescence that seems emblematic of

an indecipherable code of being in the desert. And it is in the other intermediary and interjacent space, that of the hotel room, and at the precise moment of her greatest dejection, that Janine finds herself able to respond to the otherwise-alien world of the desert: her ears pick out, above Marcel's impatient cries from the street, "cette rumeur de fleuve [...] que le vent faisait naître dans les palmiers," which becomes to her ears a soothing "sifflement de vagues" (19). Alone and disconsolate, it is the enigmatic desert to which she is alert and which provides her only comfort.

Consistent with their distinct temporal, cultural and social contexts, the desert spaces in the two stories are accorded singular meanings, without, for all that, excluding continuing structural and thematic parallels. The modernity of a technologically advanced late-20<sup>th</sup>-century Western capitalist society and the exigencies of the competitive market economy in which Howard and Frances' employers operate do not allow for a gradual land-travel transition for the couple from lush New England to barren Arizona desert: airplanes whisk Howard and Frances in a few hours to their company's sales conference in Phoenix. The desert city should represent an intermediary stage in what will become a journey further into the desert, yet they find themselves in an environment in which every effort has been made to colonise the otherness of the desert by transforming it into a standardised and commodified American consumer product of frictionless ease and entertainment:

In Phoenix, the Weiboldt "Sales Festival" had taken over a towering chrome-and-glass Radisson in a crowded western foothill suburb that presented big views back toward the oppressive, boundariless city. There were two golf courses, forty-five tennis courts, a water-fun center for kids, an aquarium, a casino, an IMAX, a multiplex with eighteen screens, a hospital, a library, a crisis counseling center and an elevated monorail that sped away someplace into the desert. (229)

Everything seems explicitly contrived to create an experience that actively repudiates the natural setting. Howard and Frances are in the desert world, yet are shielded from it: the hotel offers views, not of the desert, but back towards the urban space of the city; the water attractions and golf courses loudly proclaim the subjection of the desert; and the monorail asserts a technological mastery that excludes physical contact with a disregarded and unnameable desert destination. The aggressive modernity and expansiveness of the hotel complex recalls America's violent 19<sup>th</sup>-century conquest of the western frontier: now, as then, the wilderness and its native



cultures have been colonised, a conquest explicitly articulated in the hotel's food court, "which had an OK Corral theme, and the servers were dressed like desperadoes with guns and fake moustaches" (238).

In "Abyss," in contrast to "La femme adultère," the hotel stay precedes the final journey into the desert. This phase of Howard and Frances' journey should function as an intermediate stage in their exposure to the desert, but their enclosure in the prophylactic comfort of their hotel seals them off from their outside environment.<sup>8</sup> Their eventual journey into the desert, however, does serve a function similar to the journey in Camus' text. Howard and Frances travel into the desert in a car from which they view the outside landscape and which restricts, but does not completely prevent, their contact with this world. Their car, therefore, becomes the intermediary space of enclosure from which they observe the desert world and its native inhabitants. Everything they see bespeaks capitalism's colonisation and commodification of the desert:

Mostly all you saw was new development—big gas stations, shopping malls, half-finished cinema plazas, new franchise restaurant pads, housing sprawled along empty streambeds that had been walled up beside giant golf courses with hundreds of sprinklers turning the dry air to mist. (241)

They drive along the "illuminated highway" (251) that cuts through the desert, and spend the night in a roadside motel whose rooms take the form of "white stucco teepees with phony lodge poles showing through phony smoke holes" (255). And even when they are still well away from their ultimate destination of the Grand Canyon, they begin "encountering campers and more tour buses" (262). The potential alien otherness of the desert has been domesticated into the familiarity of a site of mass tourism. For Howard, from whose perspective the desert is thus portrayed as a space ravaged by civilisation, "[t]here was nothing interesting or original or wild to see" (241). His reaction is induced partly by his sour attitude consequent to the growing disaffection between him and Frances, partly by a distaste for the gaudy presence of capitalist excess, and partly by a lack of empathy with the desert itself. Unable to apprehend the desert outside the restricted frame of reference allowed by his particular "bagages culturels," he comes to see the desert as a "fucked-up

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<sup>8</sup> Howard and Frances stay in "sealed, air-conditioned rooms with heavy light-proof curtains" (229).

landscape,” as “[d]ry, empty, bright, chilly, alien, and difficult to breathe in,” and as a form of “hell” (260).

It is Frances’ idea to drive from Phoenix to visit the Grand Canyon: “I bought a book about it,” she tells Howard, adding that she had “always wanted” to see it (239), and later invoking her immigrant father’s view that “the Grand Canyon meant something absolute. It meant everything important about America. I guess that’s what it means to me” (243). This sanctified – if inherited – meaning does not, however, disqualify modernity’s luxuries, vanities and distractions. These will envelop Frances in their protective layers, beginning with the new and enormous car she rents to take them to the Grand Canyon:

Frances was in high spirits behind the white-leather steering wheel. She’d brought her Grand Canyon book, her cell phone and some noisy Tito Puente CDs [...]. She’d changed into tight white Bermudas, a blue sailcloth blouse with a white anchor painted on the front, some tiny sapphire earrings and a pair of pink Keds with little tasseled half-socks. She’d also bought a quart of cheap gin, which they both started drinking. (242)

Frances’ self-presentation and demeanour refuse the desert environment as aggressively as their Phoenix hotel, despite her ostensible attachment to the site she has elevated to definitive and transcendent national meaning. Her identification with the malign effects of modernity’s colonisation of the desert is confirmed in her semi-drunken running-over of two jackrabbits, adding to the “dozens” (241) already killed by other drivers, and by her stopping several times to take tourist photos with her “new sleek” Japanese camera (263). Her reaction to killing the second jackrabbit is to mockingly mourn “the brave rabbit who gave his life so we could see the Grand Canyon and commit adultery” (244).

It is striking that the first indications of a sensitivity in both female characters to the desert’s otherness occurs through the observation of the native desert inhabitants. Where Janine is alert to the deportment of the Arab bus passengers and the ethereal “bergers” she sees from inside the bus, a change in Frances is signalled through her sighting of the desert “Indians.” These are identified as “shadowy men [...] seemingly unaware of the highway” (250), a mysteriousness emphasised in the second, evanescent sighting in the car headlights of the “indistinct” figures of two Indians, who appear and disappear as quickly as the “bergers”: “In an instant they were gone” (253). In both Camus’ and Ford’s stories the native desert inhabitants represent, for

the female characters, the antithesis of the urban lives they lead and the values these lives exemplify: the possessions-poor Arab bus passengers stand in contrast to the mercantile and materialist existence of Janine and Marcel, while the Indians observed by Frances are now identified by her as “our ancient spirits,” who, she asserts, are returning from the Grand Canyon, “a completely spiritual place” and, for the Indians, “the door to the underworld” (253). Equally, it is the reaction of the male characters to the native desert inhabitants that serves to associate Marcel and Howard with the urban-world cultures to which they are attached, and to identify them as hostile to the desert world and impervious to possible effects of the desert experience. Marcel’s disdain for the Arabs is matched by Howard’s scorn and cynicism with regard to the Indians. He provocatively insists that the Indians would “[strip] the car and [kill] us” (250) if they broke down, and twice scoffs at Frances’ notion of the Indians as their ancient spirits.

As they approach their destination, the estrangement of Ford’s characters from each other is communicated through their contrasting capacities for openness to the desert and the Grand Canyon. Howard concludes that “I don’t think I’m going to get the Grand Canyon” (263), while Frances is increasingly sensitive to the desert landscape and its plant life, and conceives of the “scrub desert floor,” as their car climbs towards their destination, as “a sand painting an Indian might do.” In her grasping to understand her reactions to the desert, as earlier upon sighting the Indians, Frances’ thinking is entirely conventional, and even trite, reducing this elevated view of the desert floor to a “lesson of the outdoors” and concluding that she “would have to go outdoors more.” Yet she also intuits that this lesson has something to do with “how much that actually existed was hidden in the things you saw; and, that all the things you felt so sure about, you shouldn’t.” This is an instinctive expression of her sense of the potentially transformative effect of the desert, confirmed as she now contrasts the meanings she attaches to the “outdoors” with her life “[s]elling real estate” (264). On the threshold of a full and unmediated contact with the desert, Frances’ being, like Janine’s in the hotel room, is beginning to respond to the centripetal force of the desert.

The final shared motif in both stories is the epiphanic and transformative experiences of the female protagonists occasioned by their respective encounters with the awe-inspiring grandeur of the desert. As was the case with the two earlier shared

motifs, both stories' deployment of the transformation motif engenders common structural and thematic features (in addition, that is, to the pivotal epiphanic experiences themselves and the various meanings attached to them). Specifically, both women desire solitude and seek to remove themselves physically from their male companions, and, second, the response of both women to their elemental experience is conveyed, if with very different emphases and from different perspectives, in sexual terms, specifically as a metaphorical act of adultery.

Janine's transformative experience in response to the desert evolves over two stages: the first, when she visits the fort with Marcel, is, broadly speaking, spiritual; the second, when she returns alone at night to this same vantage point, is essentially physical. In both cases, of course, Janine's response is also intensely emotional. In her first, late-afternoon visit to the top of the fort, it is both the shock of the spectacle of the desert and her awareness of the cosmos that penetrate to the core of her being: the sharpness of the clear blue sky, the vastness of the space, the trembling quality of the air, the clarity of the sounds that reach them, the immensity and sense of limitlessness suggested by the horizon, and the intensity of the ultimate silence combine to overwhelm Janine's powers of apprehension and language, leaving her "sans voix" (26), an experience all the more powerful and symbolic in its contrast with the enclosure that has marked both Janine's life and her journey thus far into the desert.

Her immediate response to the panorama of earth and sky oscillates between an attempt to comprehend the relevance to her life of this cosmic spectacle and an attempt to decipher the meanings both of what she perceives to be signs traced on the surface of the desert floor and of the infinite "vide qui s'ouvrait devant elle" (26). In the first case, Janine interprets the immensity of the desert in terms of loss, as representing something about human possibility that had been missing in her life and would now be forever withheld. This sense of the wasted potential of her life is akin to that of a bereavement, in two senses: first, the term denotes loss and dispossession, and it is indeed Janine's realisation that time has definitively dispossessed her of the promise that life held when she was a "jeune fille" (28), the promise embodied in the "étrange royaume" she apprehends, but which "ne serait le sien, plus jamais" (27); and, second, the connotation of death in "bereavement" anticipates the condition of death to which Janine now feels condemned. Thinking of those for whom it was still possible to "fouler silencieusement cette terre," she grieves: "Qu'y ferait-elle désormais, sinon s'y traîner jusqu'au sommeil, jusqu'à la mort ?" (28).

In the case of the desert signs, just as Frances conceives of the topography of the desert floor as a “sand painting” to be interpreted, so Janine understands “un troupeau de dromadaires immobiles” that she sees on the desert floor as representing “une étrange écriture dont il fallait déchiffrer le sens” (26). The attempt to interpret this landscape extends to the nomads whose tents she sees, and which also constitute a kind of topographical text. Janine’s metaphors of dispossession and death reverberate here as, first, she conceives of the nomads who wander the desert vastness as people who, unlike her, are “libres,” who “ne possédaient rien mais ne servaient personne” (27), and, second, as she comprehends this “royaume” as functioning in a mode of being beyond time, where “personne, à partir de cet instant, ne vieillirait plus ni ne mourrait.” Janine’s posture, as an impatient Marcel leads her away from the fort, captures her distress: dispossessed of promise and hope, and burdened with her sentence of death, “[e]lle marchait [...] courbée sous une immense et brusque fatigue, traînant son corps dont le poids lui paraissait maintenant insupportable” (28).

The potential for Janine’s transformation has been established; the transformation itself will be realised through a metaphorical sexual encounter, an infidelity prompted by Janine’s chain of thoughts as she lies with Marcel in their conjugal bed: she feels alone and abandoned; the absence of love is epitomised as an absence of physical lovemaking; and the memory of the intense spiritual yearning of the afternoon transmutes into a physical yearning that has Janine’s body crave “un amour qui crierait en plein jour” (30), as opposed to the tenebrous fumbings that characterise her lovemaking with Marcel, and that has her now call out silently to him “de tout son cœur” with the “nom d’amour qu’elle lui donnait autrefois.” The assuagement of physical desire through the act of physical love crystallises in Janine’s mind as the path to her being “délivrée”(31) before death and from the fear of death. She leaves Marcel and flees to consummate her desire elsewhere. Janine’s union with the nocturnal desert sky and the cosmos is rendered lyrically and sensually and unmistakably as a sexual act by way of her physical posture and movements, the liquid metaphors, the metaphors of opening, rising and filling, the explicit evocation of her “désir” and “gémissements” (34) and the imagery of climax, release and repose. Janine’s writhing is enacted as a powerful physical struggle being played out in her body, analogous to a physical transformation, hence Marcel’s uncomprehending look when she returns to bed: “il la regarda, sans comprendre” (35).

In “Abyss,” adultery neither occupies the same terminal structural position nor has a purely metaphorical meaning. It functions at both a literal and metaphorical level, but it is linked, as in Camus’ story, to the motif of transformation, nascent and almost-instantly terminated though that process is in Frances’ case. There are other striking parallels in the manner in which the two texts develop the female protagonists’ transformative encounters with the desert. Frances’ initial response as she comes within the force field of the Grand Canyon is a purely spiritual one. In her anticipation of finally seeing the canyon Frances feels “exhilarated—it was dizzying,” a feeling that “set loose [...] a spirit she’d never realized was there, much less locked up and trapped,” and that she contrasts with the “dragging, grinding minutiae of every day.” Echoing Janine’s desire to be “*délivrée*,” Frances tells herself that “[g]reat wonders all had powers to set free in you what wasn’t free” (265). As she draws nearer the canyon she has already entered a different mode of being, sensing a profound liberation of force and an awakening of a dormant spiritual potential within her. It is following this spiritual sensation that she considers ruses that would allow her to detach herself from Howard, who has decided to see the Grand Canyon, provocatively and cynically, in purely literal and practical terms. But given the impossibility of solitude, Frances demands simply that he be silent when they finally behold the canyon. And just as Janine was left “*sans voix*” as she first apprehended the “*vide*” of the desert, so Frances cannot find the words to “say [...] right” (273) how the Grand Canyon affects her, such is the intensity of her reaction to the “enormous and bottomless” space (270). But she manages to conclude, when challenged by Howard to interpret this “empty” space (272), that it is “full of healing energy” (273).

As in “*La femme adultère*,” the spiritual experience is followed by the metaphorical act of adultery. In “Abyss,” however, the latter is less the effect of causal momentum, but has its roots, rather, in Frances’ highly conceptualised notion of the adulterous act, the articulation of which precedes its metaphorical enactment at the Grand Canyon. As Frances reflects on a particularly aggressive motel-room sexual encounter with Howard, she seeks to reclaim that experience from its status as animal-like copulation by re-conceiving it in terms she had articulated a little earlier: “adultery was the act that *rid, erased* [...]. It was a remedy for ills you couldn’t get cured any other way” (256-7). As Frances increasingly regrets her affair with Howard, it becomes important for her to salvage something from this sexual relationship. So it is that, after the aggressive motel-room sexual act, she re-contextualises it in terms

that explicitly invoke her earlier conceptualisation of adultery. Her sex with Howard, she now reflects, is essentially about Howard “[letting] her *employ* him [...] become the implement for what she wanted fixed, emptied, ended, ridded” (258). Her adulterous sex with Howard is now reconfigured into an act of self-cleansing, self-healing and self-renewal, thus creating the conditions for and possibility of self-transformation.

How may we connect Frances’ notion of adultery to her response to the Grand Canyon? The text allows two corroborations of the proposition that her encounter with the canyon can be conceived as a form of adultery as Frances understands the concept. First, the language she uses to conceive of her literal adultery is very similar to the language she uses to conceive of her experience at the canyon. Where literal adultery rids and erases, and is a remedy and cure, her merging with the Grand Canyon “[sets] loose [...] a spirit” and releases what is “trapped” (265); it also “extinguishes all bad thoughts” and dispenses its “healing energy” (273). The analogue is clear: in both cases, the language is that of purging, purification, revival and healing. But the effects of Frances’ union with the Grand Canyon extend beyond the purging and healing common to the literal and metaphorical acts of adultery. The potential for self-transformation facilitated by the physical act of adultery has – in the intensity of Frances’ conjoining with the canyon – already begun to be realised. This merging has “set loose [...] a spirit she’d never realized was there.” The transformation is taking place; a new Frances is being born.

Second, Frances’ union with the Grand Canyon is explicitly linked by Howard to their motel-room adultery of the previous evening. As Howard watches what he twice refers to as Frances’ “religious experience” at the canyon (271, 272), he recalls how, during their sex the previous evening, “she’d fixed her eyes on his face when she took him in,” causing him to wonder “if she was looking at the canyon the same way now.” Howard’s perception of this act as a metaphorical adultery is reinforced through the textual emphasis on Frances giving herself to the canyon: she speaks “as if she was speaking to the canyon, not to [Howard],” and she feels the need to get physically closer to the canyon, climbing over a boundary wall to do so. She falls to her death in her desire to have a photograph of “just me and the canyon” (273).

The motifs of departure from a familiar space, a journey into the unfamiliar and alien space of the desert, and the self-transformation occasioned by the encounter with

this space have strongly shaped the structures and influenced the themes of Camus' and Ford's stories. The correspondences do not end there. Through the stories' conclusions it is plausible to argue that spiritual self-transformation is achieved at the cost of death, that both female protagonists are condemned to a form of death as a punishment for their adulterous behaviour. Janine flees Marcel in her attempt to elude the death she feels certain awaits her. She commits her one and only act of rebellion and infidelity, and returns to pronounce the final words of the text, words that seem to confirm her acceptance of her sentence: "Ce n'est rien, mon chéri, disait-elle, ce n'est rien" (35). Life as "rien," a form of living death, is surely the destiny that awaits her, the necessary fate of "une femme adultère." Frances' "rien" is triggered by her fall into the abyss, into the nothing and oblivion of real death. In a collection entitled *A Multitude of Sins*, and in a story that is relentless in its binary logic of cause and effect, of acts and consequences, death is unmistakably a punishment for the sin of infidelity. Frances' fall into the abyss recalls the original Fall, and the endings of both stories resonate with the morality of the biblical narratives of transgression and punishment. The title of Ford's collection is taken from the New Testament, but it is the Old Testament injunction against adultery that resounds in both stories: "But he that is an adulterer, for the folly of his heart shall destroy his own soul: He gathereth to himself shame and dishonour, and his reproach shall not be blotted out."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Proverbs 6:32-33. For further discussion of the moral dimension of Ford's collection, see Brian Duffy, *Morality, Identity and Narrative in the Fiction of Richard Ford* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008).