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The Post and the Bridge : Chronotopes of the Revolution in "Martha Gardner"

The story begins before the American Revolution. Martha Gardner lives in a small house, on the border between Boston and Charlestown, "on the land adjoining the old ferry" (83). Her house was destroyed in 1775, during the battle of Bunker Hill, which devastated the whole city of Charlestown. A few years later, after the Revolution, Martha came back and settled on the bank of the river by which she spent her childhood. Then, her troubles began:

In 1785 Charles River Bridge, the greatest enterprise of that day, was erected, near the door of Martha Gardner, on the Charlestown shore. The wealthy proprietors soon began to fancy that a valuable part of the estate of Martha Gardner was their corporate property. (83)

Razed by a blaze during the war, Charlestown rose from its ashes, thanks to the building of a tall wooden bridge connecting the city to Boston. This bridge, the symbol of the transformation of the country, of the reconstruction of a city, and of the birth of a democracy, turns into a nightmare for an ordinary American citizen, Martha Gardner: "she wrestled with the night-mare in the shape of the Great Corporation" (90).

How did this happen? After it had erected a tall bridge in front of Martha's estate, the most powerful and richest corporation of New England decided to expropriate her to have the use of the dock near the bridge.

For twenty years, the corporation persecutes Martha Gardner, and issues writs against her thrice. The successive trials end with a

judgement in favor of the old woman who manages each time to prove that she is the sole legal heir of the estate. She dies in 1809, soon after her last summons.

However, the persecutors will be punished. A new road, a new bridge — the Warren Bridge — will be built and the Charlestown Bridge, a toll bridge, will no longer be used. The corporation will go bankrupt:

The traveller who passes over Warren Bridge, and turns his eye over his shoulder and beholds the present desolation of Charles River Bridge, and sees the immense crowd passing over the new highway, if he hath any faith in moral re-action, will say, “In truth, Martha Gardner built Warren Bridge.” (93)

“Martha Gardner” is the last of the six short stories written by William Austin in his last years. However the man had a reputation in New England both as a man of law and a politician, not really as a writer.¹ In fact, this short story does not belong to the “great texts” of American literature, but it remains interesting as an echo of the first and most famous of Austin’s narratives: “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man.”²

Indeed, there are many common thematic elements in the two stories: tempests, roads and tolls, maledictions, money, easement and bridges.³ Moreover, Martha Gardner’s story, like Peter Rugg’s, begins before and comes to its close after the Independence War. With “Martha Gardner,” William Austin writes in circles: like his protagonist, Peter Rugg, he comes back to his starting point, with the same questions in mind, the same doubts, the same disillusionment. Obviously, there are things over which he could pass so easily.

¹ His *Letters from London*, a series of interviews with prominent politicians and essays on the English Law, are published in 1804 and achieve a substantial success.

² See *Peter Rugg, the Missing Man*, The original text, ed. Alain Geoffroy.

³ Both Peter Rugg and Martha Gardner have a problem with the Charlestown Bridge: one ignores it and the other has to face its owner’s aggressive attitude.

Austin's last narrative is quite explicitly organized according to a dividing line separating pre- and post-Revolutionary times. This line is materialized by the bridge. Indeed, the bridge is an ambivalent fictional motif: on the one hand, it corresponds to the end of the English colonization and it symbolizes the passage to a society of free men; on the other, it makes of these same men speculators and pettifoggers. This bi-polarity of the bridge motif introduces the American Revolution as an unsteady, conflicting figure, both a factor of progress and of social hardship.

Consequently, we can see in this business of "cadastral register," of conflict about a bridge, the *mise en intrigue*⁴ and the questioning of the new organization of the country: what is the point then of abandoning a colonial status for that of a free country if the newly gained independence generates a liberal society which persecutes its citizens?

If the judicial bodies of the country — the Supreme Court and the Court of Chancery — are still faithful to such principles as the right to private property and are the guarantors of the Law — Martha won her three cases —, the world of business is, by contrast, definitely immoral.

In this fiction, the bridge problematizes, one more time, the public issue of tolls and easements in early American society and questions new economic and social practices.⁵ Moreover, this questioning of History rests on the opposition to another object: "the old post." The bridge and the post could then be considered as "chronotopes." For Mikhail Bakhtine, the chronotope signals the materialization of time in space as it appears in literature. Moreover, if the bridge and the post are chronotopes in Austin's fiction, they can be seen consequently as the pivots of the whole narrative, for the chronotopes are "organizing

⁴ We borrow the phrase from Paul Ricoeur: "the *mise en intrigue* consists mainly in the selection and the arrangement of the events and the actions told which make up . . . a complete story with a beginning, a middle, and an ending." (73).

⁵ The theme of the bridge is also to be found in another American supernatural short story: "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," by Washington Irving (1819).

centers of the major events of the novel, whose “cruxes” both intertwine and untangle themselves in the chronotope” (trans. from Bakhtine 237; 391). Our hypothesis here is that Martha Gardner’s old post and the bridge of the new land speculators are narrative switches which both summarize and oppose two models of American identity: the post embodies the mythical time of the prehistory of the American nation, when the first immigrants sailed across the ocean, whereas the bridge materializes a point of departure which is not mythical but historical, suggesting that the American identity originated in the political traumatism⁶ of the Independence War.

The narrative opposition between History and Myth appears in the introducing lines of the fiction which both looks like a matter for public affairs and sounds like a legend:

The story of Martha Gardner, although located under our own eyes, and the principal fact a matter of public record, is so much like a legendary tale, that it is impossible to treat the subject without a tinge of the marvellous. (85)

In memoriam

SIR FRANCIS WILLOUGHBY attempted the first settlement in Charlestown on the land adjoining the old ferry. Afterward Martha Gardner became heir to part of the same estate. What inhabitant of that region . . . cannot remember Martha Gardner ? . . . [H]er little mansion measuring ten feet by twelve, which during her life was a frontier cottage between Boston and Charlestown. (83)

The first sentence of the narrative calls to mind Martha’s line of descent and her connection with the occupiers of the coveted estate. Martha inherited this plot of land — adjoining the dock — which was part of the family patrimony. This genealogical logic invites us to take account of the role of collective memory: by granting the right to property from the first to the last descendant, it contrasts with conjunc-

⁶ The word here has no psychological value. It just points at an event deeply modifying the life of a person.

tural discontinuity and the unforeseen turn of historical events. The genealogical order legitimating Martha's ownership protects her from a kind of damage which seems to subvert the new American society: oblivion.

Martha, or collective memory. Let us notice here the pivotal role of the memory register connecting Martha with pre-Revolutionary times: "What inhabitant of that region . . . cannot remember Martha Gardner" (83); "have you forgotten your old wooden post" (86); "That was a pure pleasure never to be forgotten" (87). Moreover, the retribution which strikes her opponents — the self-seeking developers — confirms the rule: those who have lost their memory are doomed to be abandoned and condemned to oblivion themselves. The prophetic imprecation is crystal-clear: the place "shall be desolate and forsaken" (92).

An idyllic place

Everyone knows Martha was among the first settlers of this city and her family name was linked with the history of the land: "Her family name was Bunker, whence came Bunker hill" (83). Martha Gardner is introduced as a pioneer, born from one of the families who sailed across the Ocean to tame a still virgin land and make it their home. Martha Gardner, the daughter and grand-daughter of the first immigrants, is for ever rooted in this "vintage" land and attached to her cradle-house — "if my house moves, it shall be my cradle" (91). The land and the river shelter the dearest memories of her childhood:

Martha, when a child played in the boat, and when it floated on an ebb tide down the dock the length of its tether, she sailed up the dock by the help of the rope. That was a pure pleasure never to be forgotten.
(87)

The evocation of Martha's life during the colonial period evokes a time of serenity. The reader discovers her sweet uneventful

life:⁷ children's plays and later on, the "sweetmeats, nuts, and apples" (83) which could be found in her little shop. At that time, commerce was a family activity. This convivial image of an economic world deprived of any aggressiveness pertains to the Puritan utopia of Pastoralism, that of a Golden Age, founding an idyllic space-time, industrious and fecund.

The idyllic life and its *peripeteia* are inseparable from this "corner" concretely situated in space, where the fathers and the ancestors used to live and where the children and grand-children will live in turn. This microworld, spatially limited, is self-sufficient; it is not linked with other places. . . . *The unity of the place* dims all temporal limits between the individual existences, the various phases of one and the same existence. . . . *The unity of the place* makes closer and intimate those who have lived at the same place, in identical conditions, and have seen the same things. This blurring of all temporal frontiers, determined by *the unity of the place*, contributes substantially to creating the cyclical rhythm of the time characteristic of the idyll. (trans. from Bakhtine 368)

The first section of Austin's narrative builds a space-time "totally one" (Ibid.), in which the personal life of the heroin — her marriage, the death of her husband, her home — merges into collective life — Martha's shop, the blaze of Bunker Hill. The colonial space-time is depicted with "natural" images — the land, the fruit, the river, the tide — which evoke a taste of sweetness, the impression of a simple "pure" happiness, punctuated with the seasons, the flowing of the river and the spontaneous movements of the ocean. This conjures up a harmonious sensuous relationship with the world, as though, at this very moment, "time plunged into the earth" (Bakhtine 352; our translation).

This evocation is undated:⁸ the only landmarks of that time are indications about the generations — "the meridian of life;" "man or

⁷ "Those who remember Martha, and recollect how silent, modest, industrious, and unassuming she was, will think it impossible that any thing interesting can grow out of her history" (83).

⁸ The dates punctuating the narrative "the seventeenth day of June;" "1785;" "1809;" "the morning of the eighteenth" signal the passage from a prehistoric to a historic society.

woman of sixty” — summarized in the text by a generic phrase: “previous to”: “*Previous to the American Revolution Martha Gardner lived in Charlestown*” (83, italics ours). Then, unexpectedly — the reader is not informed of what actually happened — comes the aftermath of the Revolution: “*After the war, she returned, and erected her small cottage on the border of the beautiful river*” (83; italics ours). *Previous to / After*: the episode takes up one short paragraph, just a few lines in Martha Gardner’s history.

Indeed, despite the blaze and the brutal irruption of History, everything goes again like it used to, as if, for Martha, the American Revolution did not change anything. She mentions it as though it were a mere incident, “a momentary conflict” (85) which left no more traces on her than a bad dream, an epiphenomenon unable to change the course of her life: for Martha’s presence on the bank of the river, on the land of her ancestors, seems inexorable: “there she lived, and there she died in 1809” (83); there is nothing mortal about her — she will never die” (89). The narrator stages Martha Gardner in some mythical, prophetic temporality which fills the gap between the past and the future.

*The American bad Dream*⁹

Nevertheless, she is eventually shattered by one thing: the ambitions and the judicial persecutions of the new economic and political order of the country are in her eyes far more violent and destructive than the British colonization and the war itself. The past and its humaneness give way to a monstrously harsh present. With the rise of the new American society, Martha’s idyllic life tuns into absolute hell. The American Dream has changed into a daily nightmare:

Martha was compelled either to resign her title, or engage in a lawsuit with the richest corporation in New-England (83); the Corporation appears to me in all its terrors (86); there stands the Great Corporation of Charles River Bridge against Martha Gardner. They, seemingly almighty, and I, nothing. (86)

⁹ We borrow the phrase from Terramorsi’s *Le mauvais rêve américain*.

Let the Great Corporation take my estate. I will contend no longer. If they have resolved to contend again, let them take my estate this moment rather than I should close my few remaining days in anxiety and distress. (88)

Do not let the Great Corporation with their long arms reach beyond your simple rights (89); it is death to me (88); in her phantom sleep, she wrestled with the night-mare in the shape of the Great Corporation. (90)

The new American society is a frightening one: it pursues, catches and seizes, according to the practices of a new economic order, unscrupulous and amoral. Regardless of the ancestral rights to property, the selectmen, then the businessmen of Charlestown, relentlessly endeavor to take from Martha Gardner her dearest and only possession: her small estate.

Despite her occasional fits of dejection, Martha Gardner resists courageously. Facing both adversity and land speculation, she soon assumes a harder attitude, “looking to heaven more like a figure of stone than a living being” (85). Whereas the world around her keeps changing, Martha stands still, frozen, the “eternal” guardian of the premises. She is back and will not move again. Counter to the general trend of the social relationships and disregarding the mercantile economy which excludes her,¹⁰ Martha would rather continue to dream: “Why did you awake me?” (86). But what is she dreaming of? Dreams are always subversive. To the imperialism of the Capital, she opposes a substitutive imaginary construction, another reality, unknown to the reader, probably another New World. Despite the concrete changes brought by the Revolution, Martha Gardner still remains in her untimely temporality: a mythical space-time, which cannot be negotiated.

The totem-post and the Foundation

The episode of the post pertains to that imprescriptible space-time whose nature it is to be sacred:

¹⁰ Martha is “like the dummy in a game of bridge, included in the system but excluded from the game” (trans. from Barbéris 620).

Why, have you forgotten your old wooden post with Ebenezer Mansir's name carved on it, . . . and which, after traversing the whole world of waters, floated back, after two years, to your own door, and was replaced in its own post-hole ? (86)

Soon after the erection of Charles River Bridge, the Select-men of Charlestown believed a portion of Martha Gardner's estate was the town dock, and they ordered a favorite wooden post standing at the dock to be cut away. (87)

Nothing more was thought of this until two years after, when the old post . . . came floating up the dock at mid-day, shining like an emerald ; and as the tide receded, deposited itself beside its old situation. (87)

In the history of urbanism, the erection of a post has a specific meaning: it signals the creation of the town and the institution of the regulation of the traffic along axes determined by the compass — North/South; East/West. In Austin's fiction, the "old wooden post" symbolizes the origin of Martha's home and her family's. Its connection with water and boats makes it the materialization of the primal scene which founded the American nation: the initiatory journey across the Atlantic. The wooden post symbolizes the memory and the identity of the first settlers: in that sense, it has a totemic dimension, both linking and protecting the members of a group.

The post bears an inscription in Hebrew — "Ebenezer Mansir"¹¹ — which corresponds to the sacred character of the first Americans colonists, that of a chosen people — they crossed the Atlantic like the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea — to find their Promised Land. Quite consistently, Martha Gardner, at the end of the narrative, compares herself with Jacob,¹² the eponymous ancestor of Israel, to which God gave a land for his people.

¹¹ See in this issue: Terramorsi (113 n. 7).

¹² "I am on the top of Jacob's ladder" (91) she said. Jacob, *yagob-el*, is under the protection of God. The story of Jacob's dream has become a "cultural legend" told in "Genesis" (XXVII, 10-21): Jacob dreamed of a ladder high enough to reach the open skies, and God revealed him the gift of Canaan to his people.

Thus, Martha Gardner's old post reactivates the whole mythology of the origins of the United States, namely "the break of the American Puritans with their European past and with History itself; the re-creation of the world in America, according to the utopia of the Pastoral Epistle and the New Jerusalem" (trans. from Terramorsi 18).

Consequently, the uprooting of the embarrassing pole by the selectmen after the Revolution and the erection of the Charles River Bridge can be read as sacrileges and denials of History. The post is torn out and thrown into the river: beyond the economic stakes, those of ideology: the past is cancelled, forgotten, and once more, they have to begin all over again. To tear off the post amounts to dismissing the collective memory of the first settlers and to generating wandering souls. However, what should be forgotten does not fail to come back and seek revenge. The return of the totem testifies to the existence and power of the group: "it seemed like the return of a wandering spirit, cast out of its native element to its first happy state" (86).

Providence vs. Politics

The challenged powers are neither economic or political: they are natural, they stem from the land where Martha Gardner and her folks were born. The wanderings of the post on the seas and its return to its point of departure sound like an Ordeal: "Who knows but that post may one day come back again, to convince the Select-men of my right and their wrong?" (87). Martha's prophecy has been fulfilled: the post has come back to put an end to a usurpation. Here again, "the Puritan schema of the taming of the American wilderness inextricably merges space and time, the Word and the land" (trans. from Terramorsi 19).

Repeatedly, the deeds of Providence cancel profane decisions when they are unjust: the episode of "the angle behind the curtain" enables Martha Gardner, on the eve of her second trial, to find again her deeds, miraculously rescued from the Charlestown blaze, many years before:

Search was immediately made, and in an old trunk, at the bottom of the old trunk, in the garret, behind the chimney, Sir Francis Willoughby's original deed to Martha Gardner's ancestor was quietly reposing in perfect preservation. (87)

Money does not give the corporation all the rights. Every time they try to expropriate Martha, Providence, through the Elements, manifests itself to remind everyone that she is in her rights. As she risked, in a third trial, to losing her home and her plot of land, a violent storm broke, almost swallowing up Boston, Charlestown and the Charles River Bridge:

While Martha was preparing for her last conflict with the Corporation, a great storm in November threatened wide desolation to the neighboring shores of Boston and Charlestown. . . . The third day of this memorable storm afforded the sublimest scene ever beheld in New-England. It seemed . . . that he who gave the sea its bounds had released the conditions . . . while, during the momentary lulling of the wind and subsiding of the waters, the surges broke upon the eye like so many gambolling sea-monsters, dancing to the ceaseless roar of Chelsea and Lynn beaches . . . Three days more and the heights of Boston and Charlestown would have appeared like islands in the Atlantic ocean. (89-90)

This supernatural tempest — a veritable cataclysm — looks like the description of the end of the world: Nature is literally beside itself. The infuriated elements are raging, as though the new economic world went *against nature*: “the winds and the waves” (91) testify to the divine wrath.

But Martha Gardner is not afraid. She has nothing to fear for, like Job, she is under the protection of God. *She remained natural*, and finds in the final deluge some of her former serenity: “This storm gives me new courage . . . [and] quiets my soul . . . I am at the gate of heaven, and hear a voice you cannot hear” (90-91). The storm, not unlike the Last Judgement, puts a final end to the persecution, and Martha finds her place in the world again.

The representatives of the political order — the select-men — and those of the economic order — the rich proprietors of the Corpora-

tion — have to yield to the “Supreme Power” (91). These providential powers — the ghost pole calling to mind the “lost angel” (86); “the angel behind the curtain (87); the tempest; or else the “voice” and her “imprecation” (85) — are the instruments of the divine justice — “eternal” (86) — which protects Martha and avenges her for her harms:

‘Martha Gardner shall be avenged’ . . . The time is coming when there shall be no more passing over that Bridge than there is at this moment. It shall be desolate and forsaken . . . The traveller shall pass over another highway . . . No living thing shall pass over it . . . and they of the Great Corporation shall avoid it — turn from it, and pass another way. (92)

The advent of a supernatural, prophetic time will make out for the excesses of the conjecture. The blaze, the river and the deluge manifest themselves as regulating principles — destruction / purification / regeneration — for they partake of a natural, mythical world, in contrast with the political, historical world. Unless they belong to a political order stemming from the very Puritan obsession of purity...

The repressed History

“Martha Gardner; or Moral Reaction” is, as already mentioned, the last of the six literary works written by the author in the second half of his life. One could think easily that, by the end of his career, Austin, a Democrat, a jurist specialized in English Law, felt like devoting himself to another kind of activity. However, even in his literary works, politics remains at the core of his preoccupations. Indeed, Austin’s literary practice is more than a mere distraction to prepare his retirement: his literary production finishes off his long judicial and political careers, as it is the necessary denouement of his practice.

Literature makes up for what cannot be said differently; it feeds itself of the working out of language, not a mere formal elaboration or illustration, but a performance which produces meaning. Literature, through the working out of language, tells the anxiety, the questioning and the transgression of a false order. (trans. from Barbéris 236)

Whom or what does Austin write for, *i.e.* against whom or what? He still speaks of politics, but under a different form: at the time of his full intellectual maturity, he gives up the publication of essays and dedicates himself to creative writing. But what does he say in his fictions which could not be said — or could not be said as clearly — another way?

In this paper, we have tried to demonstrate that the literary works of William Austin are a critical questioning of History. By presenting American society as a harsh, amnesic society — with no memory, forgetful of its own causes — and as a stalemate — lethal because it lacks any social otherness — Austin's fiction subversively questions the benefits of the Revolution.

In 1837, when “Martha Gardner; or Moral Reaction” was published in the *American Monthly Magazine*, the country was probably unprepared for any kind of self-criticism. Moreover, the essay would only address an audience of specialists; it would be too Manichaeian and too uncompromising. On the other hand, written in the somewhat journalistic style so typical of Austin,¹³ his fictions, in the guise of the imaginary, enable him to present to a larger audience a complex and “open” History, which everyone can read. The literary text — specifically the supernatural text — opens an unreal space — harmless for it is protected from the emergencies of everyday life — in which the writer can take the liberty of asking the questions he wants without feeling obliged to answer them.

William Austin's literature is no entertainment. It testifies to his quest for a new type of narrative enabling him to tell, in veiled terms, the contradictions of American History: both a new and an old

¹³ The same style appears in “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man,” probably contributing to the mislead readers of his time who mistook Peter Rugg for a real character: “So convincing was Austin's depiction of Rugg's fictional exploits, that the tale mistaken for fact by many of its initial readers, several of whom wrote to the *New England Galaxy* soon after the first part of “Peter Rugg” appeared in 1824 and demanded to know more of Rugg's whereabouts” (Zimbalatti 40).

History, the History of a country which at the same time integrates and excludes its citizens.

If Martha Gardner's story makes the History of the United States thinkable in its own way, it is because it proposes — in a “once-upon-a-time” mode — *an exemplary reality*: not a critical reflection of the real, but *an example of the real*. In that sense, Austin's short story organizes “a historical effectuateness” (trans. from Certeau 119), what Pierre Barbéris calls a “super-History” (21).

Austin's fiction actually founds a new historiography: in a roundabout way, starting from the weird story of a post and a nasty business about a bridge borrowed from actual facts, it challenges his audience at large and forces them to take sides: how could they disapprove of divine powers protecting righteous people from imperialistic economic powers? What if economic liberalism conflicted *in fine* with the foundations of the democratic ideal of the United States?

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