William Austin's Fictions : A Certain Taste for Paradox

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Despite obvious idiosyncrasies, all of Austin's fictions present a remarkable unity of tone and style. Their undeniable allegorical dimension and moral — if not moralizing — conclusions inspired by the author's Unitarian philosophy (see Zimbalatti), together with a host of recurring intertextual elements (meteorological phenomena, money, honesty, misuse of power, etc.) contribute to weave a harmonious fictional fabric which is most of the time not devoid of supernatural — or, to put it in Austin's words, "marvelous" — connotations. If "Peter Rugg," "The Man with the Cloaks," and "Martha Gardner" clearly pertain to the supernatural genre, "Joseph Natterstrom" and "The Sufferings of a Country Schoolmaster" sound more like derisory fables or tales, though the hand of fate virtually manifests itself in them under the traits of implicit supernatural manifestations: Joseph Natterstrom's businesses are quite inexplicably dogged by hard luck, and the young unfortunate schoolteacher is saved *in extremis* by a curiously repentant dog. As to "The Origin of Chemistry," its esoteric, somewhat obscure style and puzzling literary status make it an original narrative whose fictional substance would not stand without a touch of the supernatural. But if these specificities promote Austin to the rank of precursor of the supernatural literature in America, even the casual reader feels more or less confusedly that Austin's peculiar literary knack of dramatizing his fictions lay beyond the notion of genre or style. In this paper, we will endeavor to demonstrate that what both puzzles and stirs up the reader's interest is not so much of irrational origin but is rather a side-effect of a clever literary exploitation of the limits of logic. Indeed, a closer look at Austin's pieces of fiction reveals that their narrative structures are based on the develop-

ments of paradoxes which not only generate the various fictional elements of the six short stories but unite them into a quite consistent corpus.

The story of Peter Rugg, Austin's best known tale, is emblematic of his particular use of the paradox. During his wanderings, Rugg is propelled into a world which is entirely submitted to paradoxical determinisms and their practical repercussions. First of all, the basics of his malediction could be summarized as follows: the more he approaches Boston, the farther he is from his native city:

> The last time Rugg spoke to me, he inquired how far it was to Boston. I told him just one hundred miles. "Why," said he, "how can you deceive me so? It is cruel to mislead a traveller. I have lost my way; pray direct me the nearest way to Boston." I repeated, it was one hundred miles. "How can you say so?" said he; "I was told last evening it was but fifty, and I have travelled all night." "But," said I, "you are now travelling from Boston. You must turn back." (*Rugg* 22-23)

Even when he manages to reach Boston, he is unable to recognize it and he rapidly convinces himself that he is not in his home city:

> Here the stranger seemed disconcerted, and uttered to himself quite audibly: "Strange mistake, how much this looks like the town of Boston! It certainly has a great resemblance to it; but I perceive my mistake now. Some other Mrs. Rugg, some other Middle-street. Then said he, "madam, can you direct me to Boston?" "Why, this is Boston, the city of Boston; I know of no other Boston." "City of Boston it may be; but it is not the Boston where I live. I recollect now, I came over a bridge instead of a ferry. Pray, what bridge is that I just came over?" It is Charles River Bridge." "I perceive my mistake; there is a ferry between Boston and Charlestown; there is no bridge. Ah, I perceive my mistake, if I was in Boston my horse would carry me directly to my own door. But my horse shows by his impatience that he is in a strange place. Absurd, that I should have mistaken this place for the old town of Boston! it is a much finer city than the town of Boston. It has been built long since Boston. I fancy Boston must lie at a distance from this city, as the good woman seems ignorant of it." (*Rugg* 25)

The same feeling of disorientation overwhelms him in the final denouement, when he eventually reaches Middle Street after some fifty years of wandering:

> "I thought I knew every man in Boston, but you appear to me a new generation of men. Yet I am familiar with many of the countenances here present, and I can call some of you by name; but in truth I do not recollect, that before this moment, I ever saw any one of you." (*Rugg* 51)

The actual nature of Peter Rugg's curse now appears more clearly. Beyond "[t]he tempest which [he] profanely defied at Menotomy" and which "ha[d] at length subsided" (*Rugg* 52), the malediction still subsists, and the very essence of it is *in fine* made explicit by the anonymous voice in the crowd: "Your estate, indeed, remains, but no home. You were cut off from the last age, and you can never be fitted to the present. Your home is gone, and you can never have another home in this world" (*Rugg* 52). Whereas the notion of home and that of private property can easily be confused for most of the Bostonian population, Rugg is condemned never to reconcile them. He is sentenced to living in the paradoxical situation of one who both owns an estate and cannot have a home for himself. Having missed the birth of a nation[1] whose founding principles implicitly rest on the right of its citizens to own land and make it their home, he is banned from it and doomed to living for ever in paradox.

The ordeal of the young student of "The Sufferings of a Country Schoolmaster" is also triggered off by transgressions of the ordinary social logic, though unlike Peter Rugg, he is apparently by no means responsible for it, since "although the town had sacrificed a victim, it could not be foreseen on whom destiny would fix for the future schoolmaster" (17). First of all, the young man is submitted to rules which do not fit the social context of his time:

> ... although born of white parents, I was at noon day, publickly sold at auction, on one fatal day in March, at a March meeting, to me the ides of March ! On that day was I sold at public auction, and afterwards, in

[1] He disappeared in 1770, on the eve of the American Revolution.

> the month of December, was I kidnapped into a district school in the town of ..... (17)

Beyond Austin's oblique criticism of "the peculiar institution," the short story opens with a paradox challenging the rules in force before the abolition of slavery: the young student is white, but he is sold at auction and displaced against his will, as if he were a black man. Moreover, even the auction did not follow the usual rules of that most questionable practice for the town council has decided against all logic that "the master should be put up at auction, and whoever will take him for the least money, should have him" (17). The reversal of the basic rule of all auction sale generates a second paradox which precipitates the young man's misfortune.

From then on, his life pertains to the paradoxical nature of the nightmare. Whereas he is dreaming of making a *fortune*, he experiences the various tribulations of utter *misfortune*. First, he discovers with surprise that, despite their high degree of education, his class-mates would rather teach horses than schoolboys:

> The best scholars, all of them, refused the offer, alleging it would be a reproach to literature to teach a school for fifteen dollars per month, when they could get as much for tending a stable in Boston ; and as horses are generally more docile than boys, the stable had the preference. (18)

Then the town agent's rationale about the value of money contributes to muddling up things for him, preventing him from making a rational, thoughtful decision, all the more so for his mind is already confused:

> "Fifteen dollars per month," thought I, "is very well to begin with. If I refuse, I shall certainly lose the money ; and then I shall as certainly dream of it. Now it is vastly more pleasant to dream that you have got money, than to dream that you have lost it." (18)

Having reached the town which hired him, he soon realized that the laws of ordinary life no longer prevail in this "outlawed" place (19). Instead of fearing wild beasts, the population seems to be regret-

ting that there were not enough of them in the area, so that "[they] should have reason to rejoice at the sight of a wild beast" (19). The town agent furnishes an unexpected explanation to his curious remark, adding that would one wild animal appear in the vicinity, "he would soon take off the rust from [their] spits" (19), implicitly suggesting that wild beasts have been exterminated by the ferocious appetite of the inhabitants of that disquieting region. This puzzling insinuation redoubles the paradox, implying that everything is upside down in this dismal place: the wild animals have been the victims of the human beings, and not the other way round as should be expected.

Even in their smallest details, things seem to work the wrong way. The cider "would have been excellent had it tasted of the apple" (20). The young schoolmaster foresaw little attendance at his classes for "[f]rom the appearance of the surrounding country, [he] anticipated an easy task, especially when [he] saw the school house, which appeared like a martin box at a short distance (20), but to his utter surprise, "although the schoolhouse was very small, it was full within, and surrounded without" (20). The laws of hospitality are deliberately baffled by his hosts and although his value as a teacher has been immediately acknowledged, he "soon found that popularity would not fill an empty stomach" (21) and "from the first day [he] perceived [he] was at board on speculation" (21). Immersed in paradox, he soon starts to think paradoxically. Bitterly disappointed by the indigence of his hosts' house, he finds solace in the book of origins: "Thousands in Boston would die of chagrin, to be reduced to this necessity. Yet Adam and Eve lived very comfortably without any of these things" (20). He even invokes a peculiar episode of the history of his province during which his ancestors were confronted with a paradoxical situation similar to his own: "These people had appointed a thanksgiving, which threatened to change itself into a fast" (26). If Austin obviously criticizes the lack of judgement of his fellow rural citizens in these lines — and probably complains as well of the general lack of consideration for the scholars of his time —, his literary exploitation of the paradox in his narrative must not be underestimated for it reveals the spring mechanism of the "unreal" atmosphere infusing his tale, thus providing

it with an original character announcing the breaches in ordinary logic typical of the burgeoning American supernatural genre.

"The Late Joseph Natterstrom" is also structured around a host of paradoxical small facts preparing the reader to admit Natterstrom's paradoxical fate. The narrative opens on such an incongruous event. Lost in the desert, Ebn Beg and Ibrahim Hamet are attacked by thieves, but instead of being robbed of their money as should be expected, they come out richer from their adventure:

> ... the caravan of Beg and Hamet proved too powerful for the children of Hagar, who became the prey of the stranger. The spoils of that day enriched Beg and Hamet, for those Arabs had shortly before enriched themselves at the expense of another caravan. (38)

Moreover, the world surrounding them is systematically depicted as paradoxical. Peace reigns in their native village, but it is the "peace of the grave" (38). Although they are Turks, they could easily be mistaken for French people for they assumed "a seemingly impossible change, from a Turk to a Frenchman" (38). Their vision of America is also distorted by the same type of contrast and they see it as "a very young country" in which lives "a very old people" (39), a conception which Saint John de Crevecœur would certainly not have approved.[2] But the paradox becomes manifest as soon as Ebn Beg tries to meet Natterstrom in person. Indeed, although everybody in New York knows him by reputation, no one seems to have actually met him, which Austin underlines by repeating it insistently:

> ... he must be known to almost every body ; but for my part, I do not recollect ever to have seen him. (41)

> I must confess I cannot describe him to you, and do not distinctly recollect that I ever saw him, but almost everybody knows Natterstrom. (41)

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[2] In his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) he saw in the American "a new type of man."

> All agreed that no man in New-York was better known than Joe Natterstrom, yet no one, of whom Beg inquired, could identify him, or tell where he resided. (40)

> Natterstrom was known by reputation, at every bank in the city, and it seems, could have commanded their funds, but none of the officers knew him. (41)

Being a paradoxical man in essence, Natterstrom is likely to generate paradoxes himself. After his enigmatic meeting with Ebn Beg "Natterstrom was esteemed the most fortunate man in the world, but Natterstrom pronounced himself the most unfortunate" (17). However surprising it may sound, he has very good reasons to think so for, from then on, "[w]hatever he touches, with his own hand, he poisons ; but whatever he touches, with Beck's hand, he converts to gold " (43) so that in the long run "all the property in his hands is one Eben Beck's" (44). His once thriving commercial activities went downhill fast and things went from bad to worse: having made a last attempt to restore his past wealth, it eventually "appeared that Beck's ship had performed a prosperous voyage, and that Natterstrom's was a desperate concern" (45). Once again, Austin manages to create suspense in a mesmerized world by basing the plot of his story on paradox.

However, the mystery of Natterstrom's misfortune is never unveiled. Although unquestionably linked to Ebn Beg's will to try his proverbial honesty, nothing in the narrative hints at the former's supernatural powers, so that what happens to him seems *in fine* only to be the outcome of the questioning by a foreigner of his intrinsic paradoxical nature.

Old Grindall also appears to be a man of paradoxes. From the very beginning of "The Man with the Cloaks," he expresses himself in a series of paradoxical assertions. Of the innkeeper who sent him the unfortunate traveler, he said that his "neighbor is one of the most generous men in the world ; for the simple reason that he has nothing to give" (66). To his visitor who begs him a coat so that he would not die of cold, he answers meanly: "you have one advantage, a threadbare coat is armor-proof against a highwayman" (66), to which the traveler

replies, tit for tat, with an other paradox : "'And perhaps . . . another advantage, the greatest wealth is contentment with a little'" (66). Indeed, resorting to paradoxes seems to be the rule throughout their conversation and from his comfortable position, Grindall does not hesitate to preach at his visitor: "'many talk like philosophers and live like fools'" (66), to which the traveler proposes a higher bid, equally based on paradox: "'Still, sir, you make a good purchase when you relieve the necessitous'" (66).

However, Grindall pays dearly his indulgence in paradoxes. If he used them to protect himself from intrusions into his cozy life, he has soon to resort to more material devices to protect himself from the assaults of winter. Here the paradox changes in nature, and Grindall has to experience it "in the real." Although he puts on a new cloak every day, "all availed nothing ; he grew colder every day. Every new cloak was but a wreath of snow" (67). His whole existence is ruled by paradoxical manifestations: "the coldness of Grindall's head was such that a gallon of warm water, poured on his head in July, ran down to his shoulders in icicles" (70). When the mysterious traveler eventually comes back, though he confusedly saw him as the person responsible for his sufferings, Grindall welcomes him as a possible savior: "there came over Grindall a sudden feeling that this same man was connected with his fate, and was the harbinger of a good result" (71). Indeed, the latter brings him the solution to his curse in the form of one more paradoxical formula: "It is not the clothes that keeps the body warm, it is the body that keeps the clothes warm ; and in your case it must be the heart that keeps the body warm" (*sic* 72). When he begins to apply the traveler's piece of advice, he still hints at his uncomfortable condition with another paradox: "You almost naked, in the extremity of winter, are comfortable, while I, by my fireside, clad in three hundred and sixty-five cloaks, am suffering with cold" (74).

All this is convincing evidence that Grindall's life is fundamentally governed by paradoxes which he has to solve and integrate if he wants to be cured at all. Here again, Austin resorts to breaches of logic to generate disorder in his protagonist's existence, and the return

to normal life can only be obtained by solving the paradox feeding the malediction.

Even Martha Gardner, in her modest simplicity, appears as a paradoxical character. First of all, although her story is that of a simple woman, it is remembered as a legendary episode:

> 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)

It can be noticed here that Austin makes it clear that, by challenging ordinary logic, the paradox must be subtended by the marvelous to become credible, establishing unquestionably a link between paradox and the supernatural. The author is even more specific for Martha's humble, very earthly voice has the character of some divine pronouncement: "The prophetic imprecation of Martha Gardner, which we are about to relate, was but a woman's voice sighing in the tempest and dying away among the billows ; but it was a voice charged with an awful decree" (85). Even if her ordeal seems to be of earthly origin, its psychological fallout makes her life paradoxical as "and in her old age she enjoyed a morning view" (89) and "her setting sun seemed to renew her youth" (89). In turn, she also resorts to a paradoxical formula when she announces the brewing storm: "'This is a deceitful calm,' said Martha. 'These sea gulls so near my door denote an approaching storm'" (88). The tempest itself is of contradictory essence: the narrative implies that it is the outcome of her "moral reaction" but its violence and unnatural destructive power sharply contrasts with Martha's apparent weakness, so that once again, the solution to her torments lies in paradoxical manifestations.

Seen from this same angle, all these texts corroborate the fact that Austin resorts to paradox to weave his stories into allegorical dramas, more or less explicitly tinged with supernatural determinants. However, the author's use of paradoxes reaches a climax in his most esoteric piece of literature: "The Origin of Chemistry." In this text, Austin redefines retrospectively some major historical facts by making

them determined by some mysterious subversive agents of evil. Starting with Europe, Austin reveals the paradoxical nature of a few great figures:

> I will raise up in France, a little stripling, who shall reverse the whole order of nature, who shall drink blood like water, and who shall bury the sons before the fathers have grown old. (54)

Napoleon appears here as the archetype of the paradoxical figure "who shall reverse the whole order of nature," only matched by another bloodthirsty historical character: "so long as [Robespierre] shall drink the blood of the earth, and seize the plunder of all nations, he shall be glorious, and honored, and obeyed ; but when plunder shall fail, and the issues of blood close, his own slaves will have no further use for him ; and his fall will be terrible, and more mean than that of a felon" (54). Considering the general tone of the text, it is no wonder if these two statesmen appear in the limelight for the people they belong to is seen as a paradoxical one: "the French nestle in their sleep, and sleep with their eyes open" (54). But other dreadful measures are to be taken by the three agents of evil to subvert the normal laws of nature:

> By a popular tariff you can dispense a quart of poison cheaper than a quart of milk, so that the parent shall substitute the one for the other, and change the beverage of nature, for a burning internal fury. (55)

What is generally considered harmless will become the most dangerous thing and "a little strip of white paper, with a name written thereon, shall do more in one day than contending armies could do in a year" (55). The universally admitted values will be subverted as "the time will come when it will be more dangerous to detect, than to commit, a crime" (55). Moreover, the merits of good and evil will be inverted so that "he who can throw the broadest mantle over corruption will be the idol of the day ; and a man shall be estimated, not by the good he has done, but by the evil he can do" (56). The three evil agents have substantial reasons to be optimistic: "We never gained a better point, when in England we reared the principle, that the greater the truth the greater the libel" (59). Consequently "the innocent and the just shall tremble, and the guilty sleep in quiet" (56).

The paradox will spread to the United States in which "[t]he most mad will be considered the most sober" (56). As an example, Austin gibes at illustrious figures of the Reform and the Great Awakening: "Swedenborg will soon be reckoned a sound man among them, and Calvin and Edwards moderate" [3] (56). Even the most sacred things will be the target of paradoxical derision: Like in Europe where "[t]he funeral of a child shall be the most gratifying sight in the universe — to a parent" (58), the Americans are doomed to indulge in the same morbid liking: "like one risen from his grave" (71). History and the greatest founding texts of the American Revolution are equally parodied; indeed, Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" [4] is ironically parodied by the French agent: "I tell you, the United States shall be the grand asylum of the *debris* of the world" (58). Indeed, the plan of the three devilish agents is to turn the New World upside down: "With little management you will shortly see the best men treated like the worst, and the reverse" (57), so that "when an honest man shall tell the truth, he shall be more strongly suspected of deceit, and pure simplicity shall have the credit of the deepest subtlety" (57). Pointing even at some established historical facts, Austin obliquely evokes the excesses of the society of his time and more outspokenly those induced by "the peculiar institution: "I perceive that toleration, in the United States, will be the parent of all intolerable things" (57) and "in the United States it shall be thought worthy of death to enlighten the mind, or to teach a child to read : and, in the most moral state of the Union, it shall be penal, even to imprisonment, to teach a black child that he has a white soul" (58). It must be noticed here that Austin no longer resorts to fictitious facts to

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[3] Swedenborg (1688-1772): A Swedish scientist, philosopher, and theologian who interpreted the Scriptures as the immediate word of God.
John Calvin (1509-1564), the father of Calvinism, on the edicts of which the first Puritan immigrants of New England based their lives. Years later, Jonathan Edward (1703-1758) contributed to the revival of religious fundamentalism during the Great Awakening; though, his philosophy tried to reconcile the strictness of Calvinism and the progress inspired by 18th century "philosophes" and "encyclopédistes".

[4] The famous irreverent pamphlet was largely distributed during the months preceding the first military confrontations (1776) between the patriots and the British redcoats, contributing to stir up the brewing revolt. It allegorically depicted America as "an asylum for mankind."

express his critical look on the society of his time: he quite straightforwardly questions his country's official history, putting into practice the opinion he expressed in his first tale, according to which "uncertain are all things called historical facts" (*Rugg* 35).

As far as economic matters are concerned, what he foresees is no less paradoxical: "With respect to trade, it will require all our ingenuity to establish the principle of *All's fair* ; but once established, the people of this world will do our business at their own expense" (58). This actually sounds like a warning addressed to the author's fellow citizens, exhorting them to be vigilant and keep a critical ear to the sirens of progress and political discourses secretly protecting specific interests. Finally, the malevolent intentions of the three evil agents are symbolized by the dangers of chemistry, and more particularly the invention of new poisons: "bread and wine, the staff of life and token of peace, shall poison the body and corrupt the blood" (60). Once again the paradox lies in the subversion of the most natural facts of life: "A man shall then more surely eat to die, than eat to live" (59). In other words, the world shall be ruled by paradoxical laws and ordinary logic will be banned from human societies.

The recurrence of numerous breaches of logic in all of Austin's short stories, forces us to admit that he uses them as reliable literary devices to subvert the ordinary march of events. By thus transgressing "natural" laws, he defines his personal conception of evil whose nature it is to be paradoxical. For the modern reader at least, this paradoxical world appears as not devoid of supernatural tones which manifest themselves to various degrees in Austin's successive narratives. Of all his tales, "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" is undoubtedly the most supernatural one, although "The Man with the Cloaks" and to a lesser extent "Martha Gardner" could not stand without a touch of the marvelous having to perturb the ordinary course of life. Even in "The Sufferings of a Country Schoolmaster," in "The Late Joseph Natterstrom" or in "The Origin of Chemistry," the supernatural implicitly subtends the narratives and more or less visibly permeates the atmosphere of these somewhat weird tales. In that sense, Austin can be read as a precursor of the supernatural genre, whose specificity it is to make the

impossible simply happen: in his tales indeed, what should not happen, happens nevertheless. This paradox undeniably generates and inspires all Austin's works of fiction and make them quite original in the history of American literature.

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