

CORRUPT CHILDHOOD. DOROTHEA TANNING'S *CHASM: A WEEKEND*

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Abstract: *A celebrated surrealist artist, Dorothea Tanning is also the author of a few literary publications that reveal the constant mirroring between painting and literature in her work. Her only novel, Chasm: A Weekend reflects many of the artist's predilect themes and metaphors, among which childhood stands out as a recurrent artistic obsession. This paper investigates the metamorphoses and mutations of the infantile in Dorothea Tanning's novel, focusing on the particularities of an unusual dialogue between plastic representation and literature.*
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1. Introduction

The relatively obvious mirroring between Dorothea Tanning's oeuvre as a painter and her literary work has been noted by the artist herself: "Each of my paintings are steps marked on the same path. I don't see any cuts, any deviations. The same preoccupations are manifest since the beginning. Obsessions come to the surface as marks that can't be erased. My paintings, and lastly my sculptures, are part of the same search, with the same discoveries, the same storms, the same mad laughter, suffering and rebirth" (Tanning 1974, qtd in Carruthers 2011: 134). Prolonging the image/text analogy, Tanning once declared that publishing a story is very close to "the showing of a new picture to friends" with the notable difference that "the looking eyes become the reading eyes" (Tanning qtd. in Conley 2013: 132). This analogy might seem common, yet it is particularly relevant for Tanning's case: her fiction accurately translates the surrealist vision coagulated in her plastic art.

It has been argued that Tanning's fiction has a consistent gothic dimension (Carruthers 2011, Conley 2013), with a special focus on domestic spaces – houses, hallways, rooms – that no longer preserve their traditional role of protection and shelter, but appear dark and threatening, hiding malevolent forces and evil spirits. There is a clear connection between female presences and a domestic environment, one that Tanning dismantles and subversively reinterprets: not only in her painting, but in her literature as well, girls and women take part in the creation of the strange atmosphere of interiors, abandoning their traditional role as agents of order and coherence. The artist's intention to satirize her bourgeois upbringing may be invoked here as well: "gothic fantasy was very influential in my life. It allowed the possibility of creating a new reality, one not dependant on bourgeois values but a way of showing what was actually happening under the tedium of daily life. Of course, I was always thrilled by terror and chaos also." (Tanning 1974, qtd. in Carruthers 2011: 135).

2. Dark childhood

Images of corrupt innocence, violence and trauma inhabit both worlds – painting and literature – and they are rendered with the specific means of each

artistic discourse. One of Tanning's first contacts with Surrealism dates back to 1936, when she visited the *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It was then that she realized that she was sharing the same interests with other artists, which prompted her to pursue her interests even more actively. Although she followed her surrealist calling well into the later years of her life, the universe of childhood and the infantile are especially predominant in the 1940–1950 years of her career. *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, a painting from 1943, reunites some of the most prominent motifs in Tanning's work. The invocation of infantile imagery is mediated by the presence of young girls on the cusp of adolescence, suggesting a brave and domineering demeanour; they seem to be the masters of unsettling, otherworldly dreamscapes, apparently having just participated in bizarre events, reminding of strange passage rituals; menacing presences (here, a gigantic sunflower) and out of place objects, incongruent with the context (tree branches, broken eggs) contribute to the subtle terror infiltrating the atmosphere. These elements, kept together by an invisible thread of disquietude and eeriness, suggest conflict and violence. Opposing forces seem to try to assert their primacy over the imaginary territory depicted, mimicking an almost human instinct of domination and conquest; the domestic setting is not comforting, but cold and unsettling (large, hotel-like hallways leading to hidden bedrooms, doors opening to baroque, labyrinthine interiors, bourgeois 20th century New York haunted houses), becoming the ideal scene for nightmarish visions of unseen conflicts and metamorphoses. Of this painting Tanning later wrote: "It's [the picture] about confrontation. Everyone believes he/she is his/her drama. While they don't always have giant sunflowers (most aggressive of flowers) to contend with, there are always stairways, hallways, even very private theatres where the suffocations and the finalities are being played out, the blood red carpet or cruel yellows, the attacker, the delighted victim [...]" (Tanning, qtd. in Carruthers 2011: 146).

Childhood has been a constant theme of reflection and artistic creation for Tanning, and the imagination of childhood has been a recurrent point of reference in her work: "In many ways my early paintings always represented a challenge to me. Sometimes they are wicked and full of traps and sometimes they are illustrations, if you like, of childhood fairy tales and fantasies that are of my own making. I still dream about them and get frightened by them, probably because anything, terrifying or joyful, or preferably both, can happen in them" (Tanning qtd. in Carruthers 2011: 140).

Another painting that correlates Tanning's surrealist vision to elements and metaphors belonging to childhood and adolescence is *Interior with Sudden Joy* (1951). Two young girls take the stage, apparently dancing arm in arm in what looks like a classroom (or a school dormitory) and wearing revealing Edwardian undergarments and red high heels. One of them gently touches a big, furry dog's head, while an adult silhouette, ghostlike and menacing, is standing in the doorway, as if she had just interrupted a small, forbidden party. The girls seem to act like typical teenagers, trying to break free from adult authority by adopting subversive behaviours – these young ladies look inebriated, shrouded in an air of decadence and depravity. The grown woman lurking in the shadows is fully dressed, in total contrast with the disheveled appearance of the girls. A fragment from Rimbaud's secret notes is written on the blackboard (Carruthers 2011: 141). But the most genuinely unreal and disturbing presence in this scene is an entity aligned with the two dancing girls, an uncanny presence resembling a large piece of white silk

blowing in the wind, contorted into a shape with multiple horse-like legs. A black child appears to be hugging the massive white body, her head resting below the creature's gigantic red breast.

Children's Games (1942) presents the same duo, consisting of two little girls performing acts of insubordination and revolt. They are tearing off wallpaper, in a gesture of frustration, rebellion and violence, possibly against the bourgeois order Tanning has known firsthand in her traditional Midwest family – there, she said, „nothing happens but the wallpaper” (Tanning 2001: 16), deploring the monotony of her childhood home. The struggle is not without casualties, as the feet of a third little girl, lying on the floor, probably defeated by the invisible enemy the other two are fighting, appear at the bottom of the painting. Katherine Coney sees a gender issue in this act of revolt: “The way these children attack wallpaper serves as a challenge to the conventions society imposes on their bodies, particularly the convention that assumes a correlation between a tidy house and a pure, inviolate feminine body” (Conley 2013: 125)

Palaestra (1947) reunites elements from previous works in an image hinting at a process of metamorphosis and change: a high tower of children's bodies, intermingled in various positions, rises up to the ceiling of a red and white room. Fiery red hairs go up, as if absorbed by an invisible tornado (the same mysterious phenomenon occurs in *Children's Games*), a girl is wearing red boots (red shoes also appear in *Interior with Sudden Joy*), humanoid creatures in the shape of unfurling bolts of silk or linen are looming in the shadows.

However, the painting that seems closest to the unreal universe of Tanning's novel *Chasm* is *The Guest Room* (1950-1952). In this painting, a naked pubescent young girl is standing in the doorway of a bedroom and, despite her apparent vulnerability, her attitude is threatening, suggesting hidden intentions and discontent. Another girl is visible in the background, lying on a bed near a life-size mannequin that eerily resembles her. A dwarfish figure with a hood over his head is standing near a table, giving the impression that he is guarding the nude girl on the threshold.

Chasm: A Weekend (begun in 1943, first published in *Zero* magazine in 1949, re-published in 1977 under the title *Abyss*, and then, in a revised form in 2004 as *Chasm: A Weekned*) might be read as a literary translation of the recurrent metaphors and themes present in Dorothea Tanning's paintings and in some of her sculptures and installations. The novel tells the story of a seven year old girl, Destina Meridian. She lives at Windcote, the Arizona desert manor of Raoul Meridian, an eccentric millionaire whom she calls “Papa”. Meridian is her protector and adoptive father, yet the real relationship between him and the girl is more complicated: Destina is the lovechild of his adoptive daughter, who had committed suicide. Moreover, Destina is the descendant of a long line of strong-willed women spanning across the centuries, all having the same name. An introductory chapter focuses on Destina's unusual, puzzling family tree, contributing to the legend of a name and character that all the Destinias in this family share. After this introductory chapter, the novel unfolds around a weekend at Windcote, where Meridian had invited a handful of select guests from the rich upper class for a few days of partying and exquisite entertainment. Two of them, Nadine Coussay and Albert Exodus would become the protagonists of a dramatic intrigue leading to a tragic denouement of violence and death.

Dorothea Tanning started working on *Chasm* in a period when she and her husband, surrealist artist Max Ernst (whom she had married in 1942), frequently

visited Sedona, a secluded small town in the Arizona desert, where they moved for a longer period in 1946. Sedona's surreal landscape, scorched by a merciless dry heat for long periods of time, has an otherworldly atmosphere that greatly impressed Tanning. The quiet threat of the desert's hidden ghosts is omnipresent in Tanning's imagination in this period, and that is reflected in both her paintings and her literature. She would later write about the time spent there: "Then as now the decibels of nature can crush an artist's brain ... So I lock the door and paint interiors. Great events ... Chilly, secretive paintings that typify my response to the diabolical landscape outside" (Tanning 1986: 82).

Although she is just a child, Destina seems to be able to master "the secretive world of the nursery as well as the vast and magical desert surrounding the house" (Carruthers 2011: 140), having been endowed with magical, shamanistic powers that allow her to strike an unusual friendship with a mountain lion. Given the complex intrigue of *Chasm* and the young girl's cardinal role in accomplishing the novel's masterful moments of aestheticized violence, Destina can be considered the ultimate embodiment of Tanning's enduring fascination with an uncanny, fantastic universe of childhood.

More than the "literary summa" of Tanning's plastic metaphors, *Chasm* is also a surrealist anti-fairytale, a dark tale of decadence and revenge detailing the dangerous secrets of an all-knowing femme-enfant (McAra 2011a,b). Destina is precociously aware of her unusual situation, hence she quickly adapts to the position of ruthless manipulator. Her glowing "aura of whiteness" (Tanning 2004: 17), best visible in the dark, is a strong element of contrast that signals her ambivalence and belonging to a dual regime – that of light and truthfulness (as the young girl is the rightful mistress of Windcote manor) and that of dark forces and untamed instincts, signaled by her friendship with the wild mountain lion.

Considered by Gaby Wood (2004: 7) "a magical Sadean nursery rhyme", *Chasm* can be read as a literary reflector of Tanning's permanent tropes, a well calibrated merger between her trademark surrealist aesthetics and the gothic tonalities of a dark fairytale. It could also be regarded as an ironic, satirical, modern version of a bizarre children's tale, a refined version of children's literature that cannot be properly integrated into its canon. Stylistically oriented towards a baroque expressive refinement, Tanning's narrative is slow, detailed and carefully directed towards a violent, unexpected climax. Once again, the house seems animated by evil spirits, becoming a distinctive character in the plot, with a role of its own. Both the house and Destina make a sudden, bold entrance in the story. Windcote stands alone in the desert, "as shocking as a fallen meteor. Ponderous, tall, defiant and truly alien, it nicks the desert like a weapon." (Tanning 2004: 13) Destina is more subtle, barely visible in the gloomy atmosphere of the dining room. Seated at the head of a large table, she is clenching her fists, tightly squeezing some mysterious matter that "oozes a viscous fluid. It bubbles up between her fingers and spins out thickly on the tablecloth" (Tanning 2004: 17). It would be later revealed that that was a human eye, one that she had probably received as a gift from her friend, the mountain lion. Albert Exodus, a Windcote guest and the protagonist of the unfortunate string of events that would forever change the fate of everyone involved, was the only adult Destina would trust to show her memory box, well hidden in the nursery. She would also watch from a distance the his brutal death and that of his fiancée Nadine.

According to Katherine Conley (2013: 125), "out of the physical heat of the Arizona desert Tanning develops sexual heat manifested as forceful energy

emanating from young girls.” Indeed, there is a great amount of sexual tension in *Chasm*, starting already with the symbolism of the title itself. Destina’s invitation to Exodus to follow her into the nursery signals some prior knowledge regarding communication with adults in social circumstances, others than those obviously familiar to a seven year old girl. Moreover, “there was nowhere anything to suggest that this was the home of a child: no dolls, no toys, no diminutive furniture of the sort that generally delights the heart of a little girl.” (Tanning 2004: 55). A Carrollian Alice-figure, “an Alice with foresight” (McAra 2011a: 19), Destina manipulates and seduces Albert Exodus, although her actions and gestures are not overtly flirtatious. She rather lures the unassuming guest into her mysterious domain by acting like a self-confident adult, a genuine mistress of the house presiding over a hidden world of ghosts and magical creatures. Her memory box, decorated with saccharine details, hiding terrible secrets, is a perverse Pandora’s box that, once opened, frees demons and evils impossible to summon back. Albert’s fate was sealed once the box was opened: “Sitting beside her, the perfume of her presence enveloping him in a haze, he watched her open the box while her words as she prattled came to his ears as unearthly music. That the objects were of a surpassing strangeness affected him not at all. While she reached into the box, pulling out bits fur, the claws and tail of gila monsters, skins of reptiles, spotted eggs, even single eyes preserved in tiny jars, nothing reached him but the eerie silver web of her voice and the superb reality of her nearness” (Tanning 2004: 58). The nursery resembles the “dollhouse architecture” (Mahon 2007: 153) of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, yet it is not the home of an innocent child, but rather that of one possessing unusual knowledge and power.

The weekend at Windcote is meant to be a time of pleasure and seduction. Raoul Meridian, famous for his perverse fetishistic tastes and solitary vices, develops an erotic obsession for Nadine, Albert Exodus’ fiancée. He also has a sadomasochistic relationship with Nelly, Destina’s governess, who is in her turn dominated by Destina, the active mistress of the entire domain and of its inhabitants. The human eyes brought to Destina by her predator friend are a symbolic prediction of the string of violent acts about to begin at Windcote. A jealous Nelly lures Meridian in an erotic game and furiously kills him, in a memorable scene of artistically calibrated violence of great surreal effect. Exodus and Nadine would find their deaths in the canyon, while curiously spying on Destina and her lion friend.

Eager to discover that the little girl’s friendship with the mountain lion was a childish lie Destina has told him just to impress, Albert Exodus takes Nadine on a nighttime walk to the tall surroundings of Windcote. In his blind trust in Destina - “in her he believed he saw his salvation” (Tanning 2004: 116) – the naïve Exodus is led to perdition by the fatal femme-enfant. Destina’s appearance, a glowing surreal ghost floating over the dangerous arid landscape, signals her simultaneously angelic and demonic nature: “So small, white-clad, and clearly feminine, it gleamed like phosphorus in the cool night. She moved slowly, yet with seeming purpose” (Tanning 2004: 126). Accompanied by the powerful wild feline, Destina is a female character who controls her own fate and acts as a revealing agent for the true nature of those around her. The child protagonist is empowered by the author in a fairytale-like manner, yet she does not directly suppress any life, but rather catalyzes the misfortune of those already doomed by their own failures. Jealous of Destina’s ability to captivate Albert’s attention to such great extent, Nadine confronts her fiancé in an outburst of anger and frustration. There’s no trace of

their former romance as they furiously argue while walking near the edge of a precipice, and Albert accidentally falls into it. The scene could be read as a literalization of metaphoric sexual predation: while trying to avoid her hand sprung to slap him, Albert falls into a dark chasm that symbolically resembles a devouring vagina (McAra 2013: 85) and dies impaled on a stump. Wandering alone, in shock, Nadine falls into a crevice, and the sexual predation symbolism reemerges as the mountain lion closes in to devour her. Nadine's encounter with the beast creates an image of great expressivity, once again validating the plastic fluidity of Tanning's prose. Hypnotized by the lion's gaze, Nadine seems to welcome his presence as if he was a domineering secret lover: "Pale-coated in easy pose, he stood just above her, his enormous body swung at right angle to the head, as if he would give her the conscious, classic attitude of his kind, so often carved, so rarely understood" (Tanning 2004: 139). Nadine's final moments are tense and dramatic, as the lion seems to perversely suggest that he might let her live. She hopes the lion would share with her the same intimacy and friendship he shares with Destina: "The animal waited. His yellow gaze fused with her own and ignited the last wing of hope. He seemed to want her to understand. He waited patiently, like a teacher who waits for the toiling child to solve a problem" (138). Whitney Chadwick (1985: 186) concludes that the child/adult conflict is a significant dimension of the narrative in Tanning's novel, therefore "the novel can be read as a kind of revenge of the femme-enfant".

Having fulfilled a kind of terrible rite of passage that gave her new powers over Wincote and its inhabitants, Destina and her magical animal part leave at the break of dawn. The novel's succession of surrealist tableaux ends with the majestic image of child and beast walking together, side by side, on the high slopes of the canyon. The orphan little girl had fulfilled her initiation into becoming a miraculous child: "She was not alone. Beside her and a little behind walked her friend. His glide was all rhythm – of easy, multiply moving pads, proudly conscious of sinew, meek in the poetry of that rarest affinity, beast and human" (Tanning 2004: 141). Once again, in Tanning's vision, the feminine controls hidden fantastic elements: the image of Destina, accompanied by the mountain lion, echoes the artist's emblematic painting *Birthday* (1942). A surrealist portrait of the artist as a young woman, *Birthday* celebrates the beauty and magnificent presence of her imagined alter-ego, accompanied in her domestic labyrinth by a fantastic gryphon.

3. Conclusion

There's a clear confluence between the imagination of childhood and avant-garde art and literature, and, besides a consistent body of artistic creations that prove it, Dorothea Tanning invoked it in her memoir, *Between Lives*: "When I was seven I drew a figure with leaves for hair. Was I a tiny surrealist? Are all children surrealists, visually? Maybe surrealist painters were children with years, playing with the irrational. Maybe they knew that antic imagination is fun" (Tanning 2001: 16). If Philippe Ariès (1962) theorized a cultural "discovery of childhood", the avant-garde, and, implicitly surrealism, have assimilated and adapted the imagination of childhood as an integral part of their project of accessing both ultimate realities and the unreal.

Dorothea Tanning's surrealist project often dwells on the infantile and its tropes, while also operating mutations that allow connections to earlier pre-modern

writers who had represented childhood in non-canonical ways (Lewis Carroll or the Marquis de Sade being often quoted in this regard). By contaminating the imagery and archetypes of childhood with elements pertaining to adult knowledge and control, Dorothea Tanning reveals a hybrid metaphor of transformation and becoming that is strikingly modern and versatile.

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