



Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

67 | Autumn 2016

Special Issue: Representation and Rewriting of Myths
in Southern Short Fiction

Ron Rash's *Burning Bright* (2010): Rewriting the Debacle of the South in the Present

Frédérique Spill



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1810>

ISSN: 1969-6108

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2016

Number of pages: 243-260

ISBN: 0294-0442

ISSN: 0294-04442

Electronic reference

Frédérique Spill, « Ron Rash's *Burning Bright* (2010): Rewriting the Debacle of the South in the Present », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 67 | Autumn 2016, Online since 01 December 2018, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1810>

This text was automatically generated on 10 December 2020.

© All rights reserved

Ron Rash's *Burning Bright* (2010): Rewriting the Debacle of the South in the Present

Frédérique Spill

The song was wistful as the ballads Slidell and the Clayton brothers played, except words weren't needed to feel the yearning. That made the music all the more sorrowful, because this song wasn't about one lost love or one dead child or parent. It was as if the music was about every loss that had ever been.

(Ron Rash, *The Cove* 21)

- 1 Published in 2010, *Burning Bright* is the fourth collection of short stories written by American novelist, short-story writer and poet Ron Rash, whose work exclusively stages Appalachia. A 2010 Frank O'Connor award winner, *Burning Bright* collects twelve short stories about the South. The stories range from autodiegetic narration to third-person narration, usually focusing on a single character. The collection is made up of tales of bleak realism ("Hard Times") and cold violence ("Lincolmites"), poetic sketches ("Return"), and burlesque farces ("Dead Confederates" or "Waiting for the End of the World"). Though not organized chronologically, the stories cover a long time span—nearly a century-and-a-half—from the Civil War to the twenty-first century. *Burning Bright* thus evokes a plurality of conflicting emotions from a great variety of perspectives.
- 2 Despite their surface distinctiveness and diversity, the stories in *Burning Bright* are all intimately connected by a series of recurring topics and motifs ensuring the gripping consistency of the collection: Civil War reminiscences; the characteristic remoteness, let alone backwardness, of the Appalachian mountains. This can be felt in the evocation of the overwhelming presence of nature; the unfailing importance of ancestry and family bonds; an all-enduring sense of honor and an innate sense of hospitality. These

are but a few of the themes that contribute to making Rash's South very recognizable and familiar to the reader of American Southern literature. What emerges is yet another set of literary representations of what W. J. Cash once described as "the mind of the South":

a fairly definite mental pattern, associated with a fairly definite social pattern—a complex of established relationships and habits of thought, sentiments, prejudices, standards and values, and associations of ideas, which, if it is not common strictly to every group of white people in the South, is still common in one appreciable measure or another, and in some part or another, to all but relatively negligible ones. (viii)

- 3 As suggested by Cash himself (we can remark his own cautious insistence on the modifying adverb "fairly" and his endeavors to qualify the simplifying impact of his words), this definition of "the mind of the South" should undoubtedly be taken with a grain of salt. The very combination of conflicting, if not irreconcilable, approaches—social constructs and fleeting impressions—should make one wary of such plain generalizations. Yet it seems that the very definition of a geographic and cultural region in terms of mind, or myth, inevitably involves or generates such oversimplifications.¹ In *Outside The Southern Myth*, Noel Polk vehemently criticizes the harmful consequences of the elaboration of such Southern myths. A Mississippian, Polk devoted a whole book to the denunciation of how such constructions tend to imprison Southerners into caricature-like definitions in which they can hardly recognize themselves: "The radical difference between my experience of the South and what my reading and all the culture have told me 'The South' was—and which has therefore defined me as a Southerner—has over the past several years provided the grist for my intellectual and personal mills" (xii). Yet, though Rash similarly fights against the nefarious consequences of this kind of pigeonholing, unwittingly fostered by long-lasting stereotypes about Southerners and their culture,² there is such a thing as a Southern flair in his work which brings us to ask the question—how does a twenty-first century (Southern) writer deal with Southern myths?
- 4 In most cases, Rash's stories are brief and the time of action is quite short: most plots develop over the course of a few hours (usually in a single day), at most a few days, building up toward a climactic moment of revelation or reversal. This ascending motion, which generally precedes or announces an inexorable sense of collapse, is metaphorically encapsulated in the title of the story "The Ascent," which was selected for the 2010 volume of *The Best American Short Stories*. Temporal condensation certainly contributes to the dramatic impact of the collection; so does the fact that most plots in *Burning Bright* revolve around a crucial decision which is either the cause or the consequence of the critical experience made by the characters at the moment Rash chooses to shed light on them.
- 5 Focusing on Rash's approach to Southern myths in light of the traumatic experience of the American Civil War, this paper will demonstrate how Appalachia, as depicted in *Burning Bright*, appears to be the most fertile ground for the rewriting of the South's essential trauma. It will finally show how figures of loss pervade Rash's work.

Mythmaking, or the Indigenous Trauma of the South

- 6 In their wide-ranging variety, Rash's stories are undeniably Southern. They share what Faulkner defined in one of his famous "Introduction[s]" to *The Sound and the Fury* as

“the indigenous dream of any given collection of men having something in common, be it only geography and climate, which shape their economic and spiritual aspirations into cities, into a pattern of house or behavior” (229). Rash certainly confirms the assertive power of “the indigenous dream,”—or nightmare for that matter—of the South. At the same time, he makes light of the expectations and stereotypes traditionally associated with the South by suggesting that what is known as *the* South is made of several particular Souths. His notion of what is the South is mainly located in the mountains of western North Carolina which was certainly shaped, as in the case of most ex-members of the Confederacy, by the Civil War.³ However what makes Rash’s South remarkable lies in the fact it experienced small-scale, yet equally dramatic, divisions within the larger conflict. In his 2007 interview, “The Natural World is the most universal language,” Thomas Bjerre asked Rash why, about 150 years after the war, “Southern fiction [was] still haunted by that war” (218). This is Rash’s very enlightening answer:

[A]most all the battles were fought in the South, so I think that had something to do with it. And the losers tend to remember longer than the winners. [...] For me, one of the interesting things about writing that book was that I could show a side of that war that is not as well known: the fact that, particularly in the mountains, you had many Union sympathizers. A lot of times people think the South was monolithic as far as the Civil War goes, but that really wasn’t the case, particularly up there, and in my own family. A lot of my family fought the Union. (218-19)

- 7 Rash is referring to *The World Made Straight*, but his reflections about the divided sympathies of his specific region at the time of the war certainly apply to the other stories he has written about, or around, the Civil War. Those words also shed light on his writing choices from a more general perspective. Though the incomparable singularity of its history and identity encourages mythmaking, the South is not a monolith; there are cracks in the rock, and Rash’s creative inspiration, which highlights the perpetuity of Southern myths while insisting on their indigenous variations, is somehow rooted in such cracks.
- 8 Whether directly or obliquely, Rash’s stories evoke some of the traumatic repercussions the Civil War had on the South: failure, loss, an all-encompassing sense of debacle, the violence of everyday life, the estrangement caused by dramatic changes, the questions of trust and distrust, division and the awareness of irreconcilable choices and, more generally, the sometime terrible difficulty of making a decision. More specifically, they also illustrate the double trauma people experienced in the Appalachian Mountains—located far from the plantation South—, as trouble from without ricocheted much like trouble from within. While being at war in their own country, the people Rash describes were also at war with those who had been their neighbors and friends before they had to make the most dramatic choice and endure its consequences—joining the Confederacy, as most did, or flying off on a tangent and siding with the Union.⁴
- 9 Such existential considerations resonate throughout Rash’s writing; their very repetition through different time periods and circulation within his work⁵ certainly expose the signification of their traumatic impact, which is best exemplified by one of the recurring stylistic features in his short story collections. These are all built upon a similar principle: the continuity between past and present is sometimes so tight that, from one story to the next, it can be difficult for the reader to distinguish then from now.⁶ As they almost imperceptibly slip from one historical period to the next through incursions into a present that is hardly ever datable, Rash’s short stories (and this is

somehow equally true of his poems) are indeed imbued with a sense of timelessness. Rash is quite eager to acknowledge the fact that this general sense of blurring is deliberate: "In the story collections, I want the reader to be, at times, uncertain of the era. That uncertainty creates an effect that I want" (interview with Spill). The overall impression of changelessness thus conveyed by Rash's stories is ambivalently worrying and reassuring at the same time. It points to the radical seclusion of Appalachia, which somehow appears to be permanently enmeshed in the repetition of the same patterns; yet, it also conveys the comforting feeling that in the forever quickening pace of the world, some things may resist change and remain true to themselves. Meanwhile, repetition and unadulteratedness certainly are two aspects Rash's stories share with myths.

- 10 Structurally, *Burning Bright* splits into two sections, each of which contains six stories.⁷ While the first section opens with a story set during the Great Depression—"Hard Times"—, the second section opens with the "Return" home of a World War II veteran who fought in the Pacific. In between, though set in what is, just this once, a clearly identifiable present time, "Dead Confederates" takes the reader back to the Civil War:

'Lieutenant Gerald Ross Witherspoon. North Carolina Twenty-fifth. Born November 12, 1820. Died January 20, 1890.'

'Dug up October 23, 2007,' Wesley adds, and gives a good snort. (54)

- 11 While the gothic motif of digging up corpses—which keeps reappearing in Rash's writing in various forms and circumstances—, reasserts, if humorously, the continuity between present and past and the long-lasting effects of past events upon the present, "Dead Confederates" definitely conveys the most provocative subversion of the myth of the noble cause, the lost cause, of the South in Rash's work.⁸ As small-time grave robbers dig up the graves of Civil War Generals, satire is particularly palpable when chuckling Wesley strives to justify his greedy transgression by evoking the respect owed to his Confederate ancestors: "He unknots the bedsheet and hands the buckle to the old man. 'I'll polish it up real good and wear it proud, wear it not just for my great-great-grand-daddy but all them that fought for a noble cause" (62). The devotees of Civil War nostalgia—"that Confederate stuff" (46)—are clearly ridiculed in this burlesque vignette and black humor reaches a peak in the description of Wesley's demise, the sudden victim of a heart attack while digging up a grave that is about to become his own. While contemplating his inert body, the cemetery keeper—who allowed the sacrilegious pillage because "[his] folks sided Union" (62)—coolly remarks: "I don't reckon he'll be strutting around and playing Johnny Reb with his sword and belt buckle" (68). As the cemetery keeper derides Wesley's mock-heroic death, his resorting to a stereotypical representation of the common Confederate soldier further suggests that the antagonism between Johnny Reb and Billy Yank is a long-lasting one, indeed.
- 12 Somehow reversing time, the collection concludes with the only actual Civil War story it contains: "Lincolnites"⁹ evokes the painful, iconoclastic fate of Unionists in the South through the description of nineteen-year-old Lily's killing of a prowling Confederate—a previous acquaintance of her family¹⁰—who threatens to rob her of her horse. Deeply rooted in the intricacies of history, the conclusive story sheds an ambivalent light on the whole collection. As Lang suggests, "Lincolnites" is "among the book's best stories" (115) and certainly draws the portrait of an extremely effective woman, who retrospectively outshines the other female characters in the collection; a young mother suddenly empowered with great ingenuity to protect her children, Lily probably is the

one that burns the brighter. Yet, “touch[ing] again upon the hostility that can pit neighbor against neighbor in wartime” (Lang 115), “Lincolmites” is also an extremely violent story: therefore, *Burning Bright* concludes with the complex idea that in extreme cases no compromise can be reached and that violence may be inevitable when one’s security is at stake. Another myth, which is more American than typically Southern, thus burns through Lily’s example. In his introduction to *The Ron Rash Reader*, Randall Wilhelm remarks: “In ‘Lincolmites’ [...], Rash rewrites this ‘lost cause’ response to life’s vicissitudes by ironically using a ‘Lost Cause’ character to stage a scene of violence and victory” (21). With Lily’s story in mind, it suddenly appears that most characters in *Burning Bright* somehow adopt similar survival strategies against an overwhelming sense of loss—strategies that often, if not always, entail one form of violence or another.

Rash’s Topography of Appalachia: The “Back of Beyond”

- 13 The stories making up *Burning Bright* are peppered with names of actual communities like “Tuckasegee” (26) and “Marshall” (53), of towns—“Boone”¹¹ (9, 127, 194, 197), “Asheville” (51), “Bryson City” (76), “Sylva” (37)—and faraway cities like “Charlotte” (93, 127) and “Atlanta” (91, 94), which merely loom in the background of the deeply rural world evoked by Rash. Only two of the twelve stories making up the collection take place outside the western North Carolina mountains: both are set in Raleigh, the state capital of North Carolina. But strikingly (and paradoxically) enough, the titles of the two “urban” stories revolve around the evocation of wild animals: the jaguar in “The Woman Who Believed in Jaguars” is emblematic of species that are imperiled by extensive urbanization; the eponymous bird in “The Corpse Bird” points to the obsolescence of traditional beliefs. City life is therefore intimately associated with a sense of loss.
- 14 This device imbues the collection with verisimilitude and allows the reader to draw, imaginatively at least, the map of Rash’s South, which is rooted in “Western Carolina” (189). It is a rocky region, where mountains, coves and creeks are given proper names like “Goshen Mountain” (128), “Brushy Mountain” (26), “Bluff Mountain” (71), “Sawmill Ridge” (75), “Goshen Cove” (5), “Chestnut Cove” (26) and “Middlefork Creek” (195). While nature operates as an everyday landmark allowing characters to find their bearings, it somehow turns into an omnipresent, full-fledged character.¹² Whether they are set in small towns or in the mountains, in the past or in the present, the short stories collected in *Burning Bright* all evoke isolated or forsaken places: “the truck disappeared back into the folds of the higher mountains, headed up into Chestnut Cove, what Parson’s father had called the back of beyond” (26). The expression “back of beyond” provides the collection’s second short story with its title, evoking the nooks and recesses of forlorn places, where nature literally engulfs those who venture there. This sense of remoteness from modern times is also materialized by the dirt roads that the characters travel as in the title story, “Burning Bright”: “As she drove down the half-mile dirt road, red dust rose in the car’s wake” (110). The presence of dirt instead of asphalt clearly marks the limits of civilization; the numerous occurrences of mountain dialect in dialogues reinforce this sense of seclusion. Many of Rash’s plots are actually set “where the map ends,” to borrow the title of a story to be found in his

latest collection. Few families and individuals inhabit such remote places, sticking to traditional ways of life. In “Back of Beyond” their living conditions are described as rudimentary and miserable:

Parson slowed as the road began a long curve around Brushy Mountain. The road soon forked and he went left. Another left and he was on a county road, poorly maintained because no wealthy Floridians had second homes on it. No guardrails. He met no other vehicle, because only a few people lived in the cove, had ever lived up here. (26-27)

- 15 The singular topographical environment of the cove (a sheltered recess in the side of a mountain) encapsulates utmost isolation.¹³ The remoteness of the place is marked by the exceptionality of cars, while an impending sense of danger is suggested by the absence of guardrails. The pace of the driver is, consequently, characterized by a constrained, metaphorical slowness. The area’s landlocked geographical situation takes the form of meandering roads that keep merging into still smaller, disaffected roads that even the Floridian vacationists, sarcastically characterized by their taste for adventure in a tamed wilderness, have failed to conquer. This idea reoccurs in “Burning Bright”: “Five miles from town on a dead-end dirt road, with not even the Floridians’ houses in sight” (120).
- 16 Generating a sense of entrapment, the dead ends evoked also foreshadow the metaphorical traps more than a few characters in the collection are ushered into.¹⁴ In the course of his drive to the family homestead, which he willingly abandoned in order to live in town, Parson—who operates as the center of consciousness—takes stock of the desertion of such places: “Parson had never regretted leaving, and never more so than now as his gaze moved from the rusting tractor and bailer to the sagging fences that held nothing in, settled on the shambling farmhouse itself, then turned toward the land between the barn and house” (“Back of Beyond” 27). Parson’s panoramic vision reveals how seclusion goes hand in hand with dereliction: the succession of gerunds (*rusting, sagging, shambling*) evokes a dilapidating environment where objects, unused, are abandoned to their slow decay. This description takes the form of a striking moment of revelation:¹⁵ indeed, it seems that Parson actually sees the circumstances of his own upbringing for the very first time. At the same time, he becomes aware of the reasons for his own irrepressible urge to “leave.” But, ironically he did not go very far: he actually found the semblance of a community in Tuckasegee, a few dozen miles from home. In that place, he set up to exploit the neediness of his peers—a likely consequence of the seclusion of the place—in order to make a cynical living as a pawnbroker, the owner of “PARSON’S BUY AND SELL” (20). The underlying notion (and indictment) is, of course, that money can buy pretty much everything in modern capitalistic America.
- 17 The austerity of the Appalachian Mountains is reinforced by Rash’s aesthetic taste for extreme weather, the consequences of which the short stories register. While “Burning Bright” evokes the stifling heat of Southern summers: “She looked at the sky and nothing belied the prediction of more hot dry weather. The worst drought in a decade, the weatherman had said, showing a ten-year chart of August rainfalls” (107), “Back of Beyond” and “The Ascent” delineate frozen landscapes: “Even more snow in the higher mountains, enough to make many roads impassable” (19). The extremities of climate highlight the grim beauty of the most secluded places in Appalachia, while showing how natural elements combine their efforts to tighten the sense of isolation and make life up there exceptionally hard.

- 18 Harsh life is captured by the title of the opening short story, “Hard Times,” which is contextually related to *Serena*. Its Dickensian title soon turns into a set phrase which, as it is repeated with variations from one narrative to the next—“hard as times were” (5), “times were rough everywhere” (6), “these troubled times” (23), “in these times” (196, 199)—relevantly sets the tone of the whole collection. The South sketched in *Burning Bright* is neither prosperous nor particularly healthy. Lang persuasively suggests that “[a]lthough set on a farm in the 1930s during the Great Depression, ‘Hard Time’ speaks powerfully to the economic problems of the Great Recession in the twenty-first century, especially those of unemployment, foreclosure, and hunger” (Lang 105). The very fact that several characters in *Burning Bright* should live in trailers (49, 183)¹⁶ testifies to a general state of precariousness, which is resourcefully exemplified by “Dead Confederates,” whose autodiegetic narrator ends up digging up the graves of dead confederates for valuables (antique swords and belts) that might be auctioned. The temptation to live off past splendors points to the limitations of the present; yet Rash the writer commenting on his work refuses to endorse the simplistic illusion of good old times: “There never was an Edenic time” (interview with Spill), he says. To a certain extent, Rash turns the very notion of nostalgia upside down. Indeed, “Dead Confederates” suggests that Civil War nostalgia is just another consumer fad, as some people are prone to spend fortunes in order to lay hands on a piece of wartime memorabilia: “It’s filled with buttons that fetch two hundred to a thousand dollars apiece” (47), and others to take advantage of their gullibility. So goes the world. Yet, as often with Rash’s characters, things turn out to be a bit more complex than they first seemed. The character-narrator of “Dead Confederates” turns out to be less motivated by greed than by the pressing need to pay for his sick mother’s hospital bills: “I think about how Daddy worked himself to death before he was sixty and Momma hanging on long enough to be taught that fifty years of working first light to bedtime can’t get you enough ahead to afford an operation and a two-week stay in a hospital” (49). Such comments reveal the narrator’s awareness of a sense of self-generating absurdity. Rash’s stories convey the feeling that the sorry faces hardened by adversity that were immortalized by the photographers of the Farm Security Administration have outlived the 1930s and perpetuated themselves in 21st-century America.
- 19 “Hard Times” begins with an ominous saying which also introduces the privileged metaphor in *The Cove*: “This cove’s so damn dark a man about has to break light with a crowbar, his daddy used to say” (3). Darkness is overwhelming in the cradle formed by the mountains: it is both literal in the shade of the cliffs threateningly hanging above isolated lives and symbolic when synonymous both with backwardness and hopelessness. Viewed by the urbanites as “hillbillies” (130), the inhabitants of the mountains treasure beliefs which, setting great store by the powers of nature, verge on superstitions. While city life, the realm of educated people,¹⁷ is evoked as “a world where the sky did not matter” and where whatever nature has to say is considered “irrelevant and mute” (“The Corpse Bird” 169), backwoods Appalachia is both a sanctuary of folklore¹⁸ and a myth-generating environment:
- He’d watched the old man live his life “by the signs.” Whether a moon waxed or waned decided when the crops were planted and harvested, the hogs slaughtered, and the timber cut, even when a hole was best dug. A red sunrise meant coming rain, as did the call of a raincrow. Other signs that were harbingers of a new life, and a life about to end. (“The Corpse Bird” 166)

- 20 In the “Corpse Bird,” Boyd, a trueborn Appalachian who educated himself out of his milieu into suburban upper-middle class, embodies the unsolvable conflict between the irrationality of myth and lore and the pragmatic urges of modern life. The unexpected appearance of an owl in his everyday environment saturated with comfort and gadgets¹⁹ unwittingly brings forth the beliefs with which he was brought up and that his scientific education methodically stifled: “The owl called again from the scarlet oak behind the Colemans’ house, and Boyd knew with utter certainty that if the bird stayed in the tree another night someone would die” (166). In this quote the character’s essential ambivalence is highlighted by the contrast between the assertive jargon of science and the irrational conclusion drawn from the bird’s third call, which—as typified by its portentous name—he believes heralds a corpse. For Boyd, the “bird’s low plaintive call” (165) thus operates as an eerie manifestation of the return of the repressed.

***Burning Bright*: An Inventory of Lost Things**

- 21 The ability to read through nature and decipher its signs, this openness to a level of significance that is not strictly limited to the laws of cold rationalism, is the first of many things that numerous characters in *Burning Bright* have either lost or sacrificed as a result of the widening gap between their everyday lives and traditional Appalachia. The formula “*Rational. Educated. Enlightened*” (170), which Boyd was taught in college, clearly operates as the holy trinity of city life, at the cost of the ageless lore and beliefs that escape reason. It is tempting to believe that part of the singularity of Ron Rash’s writing emerges from that breach and to envision his fiction as an aesthetic reconciliation of two irreconcilables: myth and modern times. “What he had learned in the North Carolina mountains,” concludes Boyd in “The Corpse Bird,” “was untranslatable to the Colemans” (175). Somehow, Rash’s fiction strives to build bridges between two alien worlds that often have trouble finding a common ground, a common language.
- 22 *Burning Bright* actually develops in the form of a scattered inventory of lost things. Most stories appear to be built around essential losses: disappearing eggs and a lost truck in “Hard Times”; a lost plane (which turns out to be “a crashed airplane,” 77) in “The Ascent;” a deceased mother, a lost infant—that temporarily metamorphoses into “a missing child” (93)—and an extinct animal in “The Woman Who Believed in Jaguars,” a story that mostly takes place in a zoo in the vicinity of a “lost-and-found booth” (98, 100), which metaphorically echoes one of the purposes of the book. Memory and a homestead are lost in “Into the Gorge”:
- His great-aunt had been born on this land, lived on it eight decades, and *knew* it as well as she *knew* her husband and children. That was what she’d always claimed, and could tell you to the week when the first dogwood blossom would brighten the ridge, the first blackberry darken and swell enough to harvest. Then her mind had wandered into a place she could not follow, taking with it all the people she *knew*, their names and connections, whether they still lived or whether they’d died. But her body lingered, shed of an inner being, empty as a cicada husk. (133; my emphasis)
- 23 As the verb *to know* is gradually, but inexorably, drained from its contents, Alzheimer’s conveys the ultimate, and probably most heart-rending, representation of loss in the collection. Some characters are losing their footing: “One night I dream I’m falling.

There are tree branches all around me but I can't grab hold of one. I just keep falling and falling for forever" ("Falling Star" 156), prey to nightmares that threaten to come true. Besides, getting lost is not an uncommon thing in the mountains: "People had gotten lost in this park. Children wandered off from family picnics, hikers strayed off trails" ("The Ascent" 75).

- 24 All in all, some characters have very little left. In "Hard Times" the Hartleys are made to appear as the epitome of loss: "With their ragged clothes hanging loose on bony frames, they looked like scarecrows en route to another cornfield, their possessions in tow" (6).²⁰ The portrayal of the family actually highlights how little of them is left, their rags failing to conceal their emaciated, skeletal bodies. While, out of misery, Hartley seems to be on the verge of losing his voice: "It struck Jacob that even the man's voice had been worn down to a bare-boned flatness" (7), the compelling impression of fleshlessness conveyed by the whole family is further confirmed by the comparison of his daughter with "a rag doll" (16). The Hartleys finally represent that against which others can measure and appreciate the fact that they have not fallen so low yet: "They hadn't lost everything the way others had, but they'd lost enough" (5).
- 25 *Burning Bright* also depicts a widower in "Into the Gorge" and husbands estranged from their wives: "How each time a little less of her comes back" ("Falling Star" 153), "I look at her. I know I've lost her, known it for a while" (162), "I will not bore you with the details of lost teaching jobs, lost wife, lost child" ("Waiting for the End of the World" 184). Such examples reveal that the semantics of loss enjoys few, if any, variations in the collection: in its bare simplicity the verb *to lose* is repeated over and over again to signal deep holes and abyssal voids. "Burning Bright" portrays a wife who fears her youthful second husband will be taken from her. "The Ascent" and "Back of Beyond" are echoing stories respectively focusing on a son who is losing his parents and on parents who are losing their son to the irrepressible addiction of drugs. In one form or another, estranged families and broken bonds are countless in the collection.
- 26 Some characters have simply lost it all. In the opening short story the Hartleys merely introduce a prolonged gallery of the dispossessed, which actually expands far beyond the limits of the collection. A recurring feature in *Burning Bright* and Rash's 2013 collection of short stories, *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, is his modern time characters' addiction to drugs, whether in the form of the unexceptional anxiolytics and sedatives²¹ which are eagerly dispensed to remedy the anxieties of modern life or, even more dramatically, in that of crystal meth. Indeed, Rash's fiction evokes a twenty-first century America that is often impregnated with the nauseating odor of crystal meth: "The odor of it came in the door with them, in their hair, their clothes, a sour ammonia smell like cat piss" ("Back Beyond" 22)—an odor that immediately stigmatizes those that are ready to lose it all in order to get high.²²
- 27 Methamphetamine is a psychoactive, highly addictive drug: "That stuff, whatever you call it, has done made my boy crazy. He don't know nothing but a craving" (29). It is available in both powder and crystal form and can either be injected, snorted or inhaled in glass pipes, rituals that are alluded to in the collection, as in "The Ascent": "Jared ate as his parents sat in the front room, passing the pipe back and forth. He looked out the window and saw the sky held nothing but blue, not even a few white clouds" (84). The addicts' abandonment of the ordinary gestures of life is dramatically staged in this simple family scene, which depicts the only child eating an unelaborate meal—a bowl of cereal—on his own, while his forgetful parents indulge in their

addiction. The immaculate blue sky observed by the child, who avoids looking at his parents, functions as an ironical foil to the bleakness of the household. Yet we should note that, through the use of negative syntactic patterns (*nothing but, not even*), even the cerulean sky is negatively described in terms of loss: it seems that the clouds are conspicuously missing in the picture. "The Ascent" can consequently be interpreted as an ironic title: a poetic metaphor for getting high, either up in the mountains or away in toxic fumes, it is built upon a dramatic inversion insofar as the story narrates an irrevocable *descent* into darkness.

- 28 Because of the low cost and easy availability of crystal meth, the addicts clearly appear as a propagating species in Rash's South, as noted by the Sheriff in "Back of Beyond": "There's too many of them to keep up with. This meth, it ain't like other drugs. Even cocaine and crack, at least those were expensive and hard to get. But this stuff, it's too easy" (25). When used as a recreational drug for its euphoric properties, the physical effects of meth include withdrawal, anorexia (all the meth addicts in *Burning Bright* have indeed renounced feeding themselves), dilated pupils and blurred vision, itchy skin and dry mouth or bruxism. The expression "meth mouth" designates an abnormal and quick loss of teeth, a gruesome symptom highlighted in the first of several portrayals of characters that are literally ruined by their toxic addiction.²³

When the woman spoke Parson glimpsed the stubbed brown ruin inside her mouth.
He could see her face clearly now, sunken cheeks and eyes, skin pale and furrowed.
He saw where the bones, impatient, poked at her cheeks and chin. The eyes glossy
but alive, restless and needful. ("Back of Beyond" 21)

- 29 In a way, Hartley's earlier depiction in "Hard Times," as a Great Depression embodiment of absolute misery, is repeated and aggravated in this portrait of a woman (who merely is a bit part in the collection). Death has clearly already taken hold of her cadaverous body: the only persisting sign of life appears in her craving eyes as the manifestation of her terrible need. Physical dereliction is a chronic motif in *Burning Bright*, whose beautiful title evokes—among many other things—the intensity of "needful" eyes expressing the dramatic urge to satisfy, at any cost, an uncontrollable craving. In "Back of Beyond" Boyd contemplates the pathetic dilapidation of the family farm in which he grew up as a result of his nephew's addiction, hence need for money:

The room had been stripped of anything that could be sold, the only furnishing left
a couch pulled up by the fireplace. Even wallpaper had been torn off a wall. The
odor of meth infiltrated everything, coated the walls and floor. (32-33)

- 30 The syntax of this excerpt is dominated by the lexical fields of despoliation and pillage, as the place mirrors the dreadful physical condition of its inhabitants. The now vacant space is saturated with the smell of meth, whose ceremonials have taken over all forms of ordinary life. In that setting, Danny—Parson's nephew—appears as a mere ghost of his old powerful self: "There had been a time the boy could have made that comment formidable, for he'd been broad-shouldered and stout, an all-country tight end, but he'd shucked off fifty pounds, the muscles melted away same as his teeth" (34). Jared's parents in "The Ascent" are portrayed as gruesome walking dead: "His mother sat on the couch wrapped in a quilt, shivering. She hadn't bathed since Friday and her hair was stringy and greasy. His father looked little better, his blue eyes receding deep into his skull, his lips chapped and bleeding" (85). Such signs and symptoms of renunciation and self-neglect abound in the collection. The drug addicts, who are also to be found in "These Who Are Dead Are Only Now Forgiven" in Rash's latest collection, constitute the

epitome of loss. Their bodies, their bonds, their possessions have been sacrificed indifferently to the lost cause of their addiction.

- 31 What is particularly striking about *Burning Bright* is its treatment of the South's one recurring obsession: the mythical debacle that lies at the heart of its very frailty and precariousness—features that still paradoxically contribute to making the South of the United States such an intriguing and humane place—is repeated over and over again. The repetition with variations engenders a plurality of poetic figures revolving around deteriorating situations that can all be considered remakes of the essential scenario, revealing how hard it is for Southerners to overcome their essential trauma and heal. At the same time, the permanence of trauma also rejuvenates the myth and perpetuates the South's unquenchable thirst and talent for fiction. Rash's writing thus voices the South's persisting urge "to talk":

We need to talk, to tell, since oratory is our heritage. We seem to try in the simple furious breathing (or writing) span of the individual to draw a savage indictment of the contemporary scene or to escape from it into a make believe region of swords and magnolias and mockingbirds which perhaps never existed anywhere. Both of the courses are rooted in sentiment; perhaps the ones who write savagely and bitterly of the incest in clay floored cabins are the most sentimental. Anyway, each course is a matter of violent partisanship, in which the writer unconsciously writes into every line and phrase his violent despairs and rages and frustrations or his violent prophesies of still more violent hopes. (Faulkner 229)

- 32 Like Faulkner before him, Rash has clearly chosen his direction as a writer. In the characteristic sense of timelessness that envelops his short stories, where it is not always easy to distinguish between past(s) and present, the frontiers between time periods being voluntarily blurred, there is little place for magnolias, mockingbirds and sentimentality: profoundly wounded by its extremely violent history, Rash's South is a place that lost, a place of loss, and eventually—the haunting conclusion of *One Foot in Eden* comes to mind—"a place for the lost" (214).

The South has always been the part of the United States that's the poorest, the least educated. The part of the upper South I focus on has certainly had its share of hardship, of a failure to achieve the prosperity of the rest of America, though that failure is in large part due to the fact that more has been taken from the region, from coal and timber to soldiers for our wars, than given back. (Interview with Spill)

- 33 While make-believe takes the extreme form of escapism in drug addiction, Rash's stories develop their own violent course and the memory sustaining them is "blood-memory," a form of memory that does not "[deny] the reality of that which was lost"²⁴ and which Rash defines as follows: "part of my responsibility is to be true to lives that were often tragic and complex, to avoid sentimentalizing those lives" (interview with Brown 347).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alther, Lisa. *Blood Feud*. Guilford: Lyons Press, 2012. Print.
- Armstrong, Karen. *A Short History of Myth*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005. Print.
- Bandry, Michel. *Le Sud*. Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1992. Print.
- Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993. Print.
- Cash, W. J. *The Mind of the South*. New York: Vintage Books, 1941. Print.
- Charney, Noah. "Ron Rash: How I Write." *The Daily Beast*, 02.27.13. Web. 13/03/2016.
- Csapo, Eric. *Theories of Mythology*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Print.
- Faulkner, William. "An Introduction to *The Sound and the Fury*." *The Sound and the Fury*. 1929. Ed. David Minter. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994. Print.
- Frazier, Charles. *Cold Mountain*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997. Print.
- Gautreaux, Tim. *Same Place, Same Things*. New York: Picador, 1996. Print.
- Higgins, Anna Dunlap. "Anything but Surrender: Preserving Southern Appalachia in the Works of Ron Rash." *North Carolina Review* 13 (2004): 49-58. Print.
- Lang, John. *Understanding Ron Rash*. Columbia, U. of South Carolina P, 2014. Print.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Vintage International, 2006. Print.
- Maslin, Janet. "Rural Pride and Poverty and a Hen's Empty Nest." *The New York Times*, 8 March 2010. Web. 13/03/2016.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick; The Whale*. 1851. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Print.
- Offutt, Chris. *Kentucky Straight*. New York: Vintage, 1992. Print.
- Planchard de Cussac, Etienne de. *Le Sud américain: Histoire, mythe et réalité*. Paris: Ellipses, 2001. Print.
- Polk, Noel. *Outside The Southern Myth*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1997. Print.
- Rash, Ron. *Among the Believers*. Oak Ridge: Iris Press, 2000. Print.
- _____. *Burning Bright*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010. Print.
- _____. *The Cove*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2012. Print.
- _____. "An Interview with Ron Rash." Interview with Frédérique Spill. *Transatlantica*, 1 | 2014, July 9, 2014. Web. 13/03/2016.
- _____. "'The Natural World Is the Most Universal Languages': An Interview with Ron Rash." Interview with Thomas Ærvold Bjerre. *Appalachian Journal: A Regional Studies Review* 34.2 (2007): 216-27. Print.
- _____. *The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth*. Columbia: The Bench Tree Press, 1994. Print.
- _____. *Nothing Gold Can Stay*. New York: HarperCollins, 2013. Print.
- _____. *One Foot in Eden*. New York: Picador, 2002. Print.
- _____. *Raising the Dead*. Oak Ridge: Iris Press, 2002. Print.

_____. "Ron Rash: The Power of Blood-Memory." Interview with Joyce Compton Brown. *Appalachia and Beyond: Conversations with Writers from the Mountain South*. Ed. John Lang. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 2006. 335-53. Print.

_____. *Saints at the River*. New York: Picador, 2004. Print.

_____. *Serena*. 2008. London: Canongate, 2010. Print.

_____. *The World Made Straight*. New York: Picador, 2006. Print.

_____. "Twisting the Radio Dial. An Interview with Ron Rash." Interview with Forrest Anderson. *The Southeast Review* 25.2 (2007): 104-17. Print.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Philosophie de la volonté*. Paris: Aubier, 1950. Print.

Russo, Richard, ed. *The Best American Short Stories 2010*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010. Print.

Skidelsky, William. "Burning Bright by Ron Rash—Review." *The Observer* 5 August 2012. Web. 13/03/2016.

Wilhelm, Randall. *The Ron Rash Reader*. Columbia, U of South Carolina P, 2014. Print.

NOTES

1. It is also very revealing that the only dependable certainty in Cash's definition should have to do with the whiteness of the myth. It is, indeed, quite meaningful that the myth of the South was constructed by whites—whose precursors were brought up to believe in the supremacy of their race. One of the most powerful literary statements about the many-folded fantasies attached to whiteness and its supposed supremacy is to be found in the 42nd chapter of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, entitled "The Whiteness of the Whale." The power of Melville's underlying criticism of his own race's unshakeable belief in its superiority is all the more compelling as those reflections take the form of an indirect, almost accidental, aside in the narrative of the prolonged chase of the white, emblematic whale. Similarly, the epigraph of Rash's 2006 novel *The World Made Straight*, which is significantly drawn from that chapter, may be interpreted as a roundabout indictment of the supremacy of whiteness in the reconstructions of Southernness.

2. The interview by Noah Charney in the "How I Write" section of the 02.27.2013 issue of *The Daily Beast* offers a good example of Rash's spontaneous dislike of the epithets that are likely to be associated with the word "writer": "I have mixed feelings about any adjectives in front of the word 'writer.' Chekhov has talked about this, that any designation besides writer (Russian writer, whatever) was a diminishment. I'm proud to be from the region. But sometimes it seems to me that there's an implication of 'just' an Appalachian writer or 'just' a Southern writer. That kind of diminishment is bothersome. If a writer is any good, he or she has to both evoke and transcend the region."

3. In his 1992 book devoted to the South, Michel Bandry remarks that regardless of its causes, the defeat of the South and its subsequent sufferings left an indelible mark on the region and generated a form of patriotism feeding on myths, which contributed to the century-long isolation of the South from the main part of the American population (74).

4. Charles Frazier in *Cold Mountain* (1997) and, more recently, Lisa Alther in *Blood Feud* (2012), which centers on the Hatfield-McCoy feud, also evoke the singularity of the history of Appalachia during the Civil War and the long-lasting consequences of people's political affiliation upon whole communities.

5. *Burning Bright* illustrates the recycling process that is at work in Rash's writing, as images that are haunting enough are likely to take different forms at different stages. For instance, the initial story, "Hard Times," originated in an earlier poem published in *Raising the Dead* and entitled "Madison County: 1934," in which the phrase "hard times" actually occurs. Likewise, "The Corpse Bird,"—the tenth story in the collection—also refers to a poem that appeared in *Among the Believers*. Furthermore, two stories in *Burning Bright* are related to an earlier or to a later novel, *Saints at the River* and *The Cove*.

6. This characteristic aspect of Rash's short story collections is reminiscent of Paul Ricoeur's concept of *achronie*, first developed in his *Philosophie de la volonté* (1950). Significantly, the readers of Chris Offutt's short stories are likely to experience a similar sense of temporal disorientation.

7. In his presentation of *Burning Bright* in *Understanding Ron Rash*, John Lang suggests that that "symmetrical structure [...] may owe something to the William Blake poem 'The Tyger,' from which Rash takes the book's title" (104).

8. In that respect, the story is quite reminiscent of the much earlier story that provided Rash's first collection with its title. In "The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth," the victim of such an iconoclastic treatment (literally) is Jesus Himself (See Rash, *New Jesus* 39).

9. "Lots of people don't bother to know that anymore, but there was as many in these mountains fought Union as Confederate" (62-63). Lincolnites in the South—an almost forgotten tribe of men and women Rash is eager to pay tribute to—are recurring figures in his writing; they are also to be found in the story entitled "Where the Map Ends," in *The World Made Straight* and in *The Cove*, as well as in his poetry. The juxtaposition of the titles of the two Civil War stories in *Burning Bright* is quite revealing of where Rash's sympathies lie: while Confederates are obliquely presented as a dead species, "Lincolnites" / Unionists still appear to be pretty much alive in the writer's heart and imagination.

10. The fact that Lily remembers Mr. Vaughn clerking at the store and giving her candy resonates as a timeless warning, while pointing to life's fickleness: never trust a stranger offering candy.

11. Boone is the town characters in *Burning Bright* most often refer to: it is located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina. Boone is the county seat of Watauga County and the home of Appalachian State University. The town is named for famous American pioneer and explorer Daniel Boone.

12. This aspect is also a constant feature of Rash's novels: the river plays a key role in *One Foot in Eden* (2002) and, as highlighted by its title, in *Saints at the River* (2004). The diminishing forest shapes and reflects the fates of characters in *Serena* (2008). *The Cove* (2012) explores the effects, both literal and symbolic, of extreme seclusion in the mountains.

13. Remoteness and darkness somehow reach a peak in Rash's *The Cove*: "Nothing but shadow land, her mother had told Laurel, and claimed there wasn't a gloamier place in the whole Blue Ridge" (17).

14. Maslin remarks "'Falling Star' describes a man who is so threatened by his wife's decision to attend a community college that he engineers his own ruin." The main character of "Into the Gorge"—a portentous title—is similarly entrapped by his own bad luck and misjudgment, failing to accept that his family's property has been sold to the government as parkland.

15. Rash himself cannot really be defined as a man of the mountains. Though his ancestors were from Appalachia, his own parents moved to Boiling Springs when he was a child: "Boiling Springs was not really my family's home. I was always taught that home was Buncombe County and Watauga County, in the mountains" (interview with Brown 342). While he considers the summers he spent in the mountains with his grandmother a decisive aspect of his development as a writer, he also makes it clear that he enjoyed a dual position that is somehow reminiscent of that of his main character in "Back of Beyond." Parson's clear-sightedness as he (re)discovers his own whereabouts verifies Rash's own hypothesis that distance allows a more effective form of vision:

“The contrast in settings also gave me a sense of what made the mountains distinctive and gave me a kind of insider/outsider identity in the mountains that enabled me to maintain a certain distance from that life. So for me as a writer having that dual perspective was very fortunate” (interview with Brown 344).

16. Though situated further north, Rash's contemporary South is not unlike Tim Gautreaux's Louisiana, as delineated in *Same Place, Same Things* (1996). Gautreaux's short stories similarly emphasize simple people in extremely modest environments and explore the influence of Southern topography on characters' destinies.

17. In “The Corpse Bird,” Boyd's wife Laura exemplifies the stereotypical discrepancy opposing the educated city-dwellers and the uneducated country-dwellers, as well as the well-established condescendence that characterizes the former's perception of the latter: “‘I know where you grew up that people, uneducated people, believed such things.’ Laura said when he'd finished. ‘But you don't live in Madison County anymore, and you are educated. Maybe there is an owl out back. I haven't heard it, but I'll concede it could be out there. But even so it's an owl, nothing more’” (176-77).

18. Folklore is etymologically defined as the knowledge of the people; by extension, the term designates the traditions and stories of a community.

19. The very fact that Boyd should resist gas logs reveals the persistence of his attachment to the real thing rather than its artificial and hygienic equivalent favored by his modern, slightly ridiculous wife: “Laura had wanted to switch to gas logs. Just like turning a TV on and off, that easy, his wife had said, and a lot less messy” (“The Corpse Bird” 173).

20. It is tempting to interpret this description as a discrete tribute to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, a novel Rash particularly appreciates (see interview with Anderson 117), and its own desolate evocation of “pilgrims en route to their several and collective deaths” (McCarthy 200).

21. It is once again Laura, the suburban “educated” wife in “The Corpse Bird,” who best embodies this resolutely pragmatic and heartless attitude towards the mind's sorrows: “I'm getting you an appointment with Doctor Harmon. He'll prescribe some Ambien so you can get some rest, maybe something else for anxiety” (“The Corpse Bird” 177).

22. An all-pervasive smell, the odor of meth also contributes to the castigation of the addicts' innocent children: Jared in “The Ascent” is mocked and humiliated for smelling bad (77).

23. More generally, dismemberment is a key motif in Rash's fiction, which is fraught with cripples of all kinds whose deformations contribute to the mythical dimension of his depiction of Appalachia.

24. This expression is borrowed from Joyce Compton Brown's 2003 interview with Ron Rash. I want to thank Gérald Préher for making the interview available to me at an early stage of my research on Rash's work, together with many other critical articles on many authors. I am deeply indebted to Gérald for his extremely efficient kindness and helpfulness.

ABSTRACTS

Burning Bright, paru en 2010, est le quatrième recueil de nouvelles du romancier, poète et nouvelliste américain Ron Rash. Les Appalaches dépeintes par Rash évoquent un Sud sombre et désolé, rongé par la misère et hanté par les figures de l'échec : en effet, bien que les Appalaches de Rash aient joué un rôle tout à fait singulier pendant la Guerre de Sécession, le scénario de l'essentielle défaite du Sud semble ici rejoué et réinterprété à l'envi. L'une après l'autre, ces

nouvelles exposent la manière dont le Sud se retrouve inmanquablement piégé dans le cercle vicieux de sa propre faillite. Cependant, malgré l'austérité du contexte qu'elles évoquent, ces nouvelles génèrent des figures poétiques saisissantes qui brûlent, littéralement, d'un vif éclat l'imaginaire du lecteur. Construit autour d'un traumatisme fondateur qui a fini par acquérir les dimensions d'un mythe, *Burning Bright* émerge d'une tension caractéristique, entre noirceur et éclat

AUTHORS

FRÉDÉRIQUE SPILL

Frédérique Spill is Associate Professor of American literature; she teaches at the University of Picardy – Jules Verne in Amiens, France. She is the author of *L'Idiotie dans l'œuvre de William Faulkner* (Presses Universitaires de la Sorbonne-Nouvelle, 2009). She recently contributed to *Critical Insights: The Sound and the Fury* (Salem Press, 2014) and to *Faulkner at Fifty: Tutors and Tyros* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014). She has also published articles in French and in English on Flannery O'Connor, Richard Ford, Cormac McCarthy, Robert Penn Warren, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, Russell Banks and Willa Cather. For the past years her research and publications have mainly been focusing on the work of novelist, short story writer and poet Ron Rash. Her contributions to *Conversations with Ron Rash* (Mississippi UP) and to *Summoning the Dead: Critical Essays on Ron Rash* (U of South Carolina P) will be published in 2017. She is currently completing a monograph on Ron Rash's work.