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# The Ineluctable Modalities<sup>1</sup> of the Visible in Daniel Corkery's "The Stones": Eye, Gaze and Voice

Claude Maisonnat

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For Jean Brihault

- 1 As an active writer and cultural theorist of the Irish Revival in literature, Daniel Corkery earned for himself a reputation for intransigent dogmatism in the promotion of Irish culture, which has frequently led critics to attack him for his alleged narrow-minded nationalism, an accusation that undoubtedly damaged the reception of his short stories. In keeping with the Irish Ireland ideology of the period, his short stories, set in rural Munster in the 1920s, focus on the emotional attachment of small farmers to their farm as they struggle to wrest a living from the land. The social and historical background of "The Stones" is no exception to this rule. John Redney's strong and exclusive attachment to his land urges him to seek revenge on a neighbour for what he considers to be a major breach of solidarity. In the context of a local superstition according to which the stones of the aptly named Kilclaw<sup>2</sup> forewarn the local people of their imminent death if they form the appearance of any of them, Redney eventually turns out to be the victim of his own curse. Yet, for all their strong local attachment, Corkery's stories may prove to be more ambiguous and sophisticated than they are usually made out to be. It is certainly the case with "The Stones" owing to a complex use of the image understood as a process of representation that ranges from the mental picture the subjects construct of themselves to the aesthetics of representation through art as implemented in the text of the short story.
- 2 Not surprisingly, the motif of the stone effigy<sup>2</sup> is a very ancient one that can be found in Irish and Scottish oral traditions, and one of its most famous literary avatars is Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Great Stone Face" (1850). However, the treatments of the ancient theme are radically different. Where Hawthorne's stone face is a benevolent figure, visible to all, a tourist's attraction, shedding peace and wisdom over the village, Corkery's effigies are lost on a remote hillside, and bode death for the unlucky villager.

If the well-meaning moralizing message in "The Great Stone Face" is plain to see, it seems that "The Stones" calls for a more ambiguous and problematic interpretation. Both nevertheless provide evidence that the powers of the image are central to the universal need for identification and representation because they result from archaic drives, and the power of such images may prove either apotropaic or destructive.

- 3 In the following remarks, the word image is not to be understood as a form of iconographic representation or even as a textualised entity, as is the case with *ekphrasis*, but rather as an imaginary reconstruction beyond words. It is therefore a narrativised version of the image, invisible like the unconscious, but whose existence is predicated on its effects through the mediation of the signifying chain. As French writer Pascal Quignard aptly remarked: "Man is a desiring gaze that is looking for another image beyond everything he actually sees."<sup>3</sup>To simplify the point, this type of image is very much like a projection space on which each subject imagines he is represented, but this representation remains invisible, the nature of what the inner eye sees being somewhat problematic.

## I - John Redney's vacillating self-image

- 4 To start with, Redney's process of identification appears to be closely linked with his location. His sense of identity is contained in a narcissistic framework. He has inherited the farm and he has no other interest or horizon than the farm. To a large extent, he *is* the farm, and in the social game of distribution of symbolic places within his community, he needs the recognition of his neighbours. This is precisely what Con Jer denies him when he refuses to lend him his horse to save the year's crop of turf from the flood. As a consequence, what triggers off the plot is a difference between neighbours as to the real cause of the conflict. The story remains highly ambiguous in that respect. On the one hand, Redney blames the Nyhans and Con Jer for his misfortune as he might have saved his turf had he been lent a horse on time; on the other hand, Con Jer finds Redney's demands on him exorbitant as he should have known that Con Jer needed the horse for his own purposes. There is no small amount of dramatic irony when Pat Early, the village smith, accuses Redney of lack of Christian compassion: "If you knew he was going to meet his end, sudden, and without preparation, you might have warned him: 'twould be a neighbourly act." (85), because the reader remembers that the refusal of the initial loan could hardly be said to be a neighbourly act.
- 5 This ludicrous game of "he started it first" would be mere child's play if it did not reach deep into the question of idealised self image and identity. If Redney is beset by images in more ways than one, it is because Con Jer's refusal is felt as a blow to his dignity, a threat to his integrity and a denial of his status as one of them. In other words, by considering himself as the excluded third party, the innocent victim of a misunderstanding with unforeseen consequences, he gets involved in a self-centered process of victimization. The result is that it is the very foundation of his being that is shaken because his whole identity is encapsulated in that shattered self-image. As all human beings, he is constantly under the gaze of the other, but this other has now turned into an enemy, hence the desire for revenge that overwhelms his better judgement. It is manifested by a great surge of anger against his neighbours that is the emotional transposition of the flood that destroyed his crop. The cause of this

exaggerated emotional response is made explicit by the text. It is the direct consequence of a Con Jer's words to the effect that Redney himself could well be the very cause of his own mishaps:

... he knew quite well that all down the valley, and on the heights as well, the farmers were shaking their heads over what had befallen him, were by adding this to that, proverb to proverb, memory to memory, strengthening one another's beliefs that such disasters did not overtake a man without cause. And the *picture*<sup>4</sup> he made himself of them so grouped was a pain that almost overwhelmed the pain of his actual loss. (78)

6 The mere expression "without cause" testifies that Redney is destabilised, that is to say removed from the unconscious imaginary identification that bolsters his ego. His anger is all the stronger as he resents the judgement of his fellow farmers and, most of all, as their judgement bears on the question of the relation to what is the apple of his eye: his farm. His sudden anger is therefore a bid to restore the unity of the shattered image of a worthy farmer. In this perspective, the cunning sleight of hands of the narrative consists in shifting the focus of the short story from Redney's problematic self image to the actualisation of his image in stone, in a process of literalisation of the signified, that takes shape in the stone, the stone being at the same time the image and the object it represents.

7 What Redney experiences is a form of anger that is generated by what he considers to be unacceptable, as if a limit had been crossed. The injustice of his loss suddenly seems unbearable to him, and his anger overflows exactly as the stream that carried away his turf. What makes things worse is the implication that he himself is responsible for his loss. In the economy of his representations, his anger is a response to the destabilisation of his image, as if it were the consequence of words that ought not to have been spoken:

... he could not help recalling the very words the boy had brought back in his mouth from Con Jer, nor how they had set him on fire, maddened him until he had told him angrily that it might be a good thing for Con Jer to go up to Carrigavawring and have a look at his own effigy there. (79)

8 The complex relationship that connects words and images in a literary text is further exemplified by the causality that is established between Con Jer's words and their destructive effect on Redney's self-image. One of the many ironies of the story is that Redney's means of retaliation is also a linguistic instrument, e.g. the curse that he brings upon him by telling him that he has seen his image in stone. This information was bound to upset Con Jer, as Redney had rightly anticipated:

Let them now come together, the farmers of the valley, stick their noses into one another's faces, make out that his turf had not been swept without reason – it was all one to him. Con Jer would toss and turn on his pillow for many a night to come wondering if what the boy had reported was true, and if true, what would come of it. (79)

9 Furthermore, it is striking that the short story closely links the channel he chose for his vengeance - a peculiar performative use of language - with the function of images that it can produce: "He felt quite certain that Con Jer did not laugh in his heart when he laid his head on the pillow in the darkness." (81) What Redney could not foresee is that no one can master language and discourse to the point of instrumentalising them, without resistance. The same holds true for images, and the price he has to pay for this demiurge-like attempt is his symbolic death. By highlighting in this way the question of the powers of language, it seems that Corkery introduces a metafictional and self-

reflexive dimension to his story that is even more minutely explored through the problematics of the gaze it exemplifies.

- 10 Ultimately, Redney's predicament must not only be read as the singular fate of an unlucky and particularly hot-tempered individual, but it can be endowed with a more universal import, if he is to be considered as the archetypal Irish farmer threatened by the suicidal logic of a collective form of image building. In this perspective, I would suggest that, as a highly suggestive illustration of D.H. Lawrence's famous claim that one should never trust the artist but the tale, the story - contrary to all expectations - can be read as a warning against the evils of the misguided autistic logic that underpins the temptation of a self-enclosed nationalistic and narcissistic construction based on an excessive emotional attachment to the land. The conclusion of Corkery's story clearly images the fact that the fear of the other and the attempt to silence him inevitably lead to exclusion from the community of civilized men, the irony being that Redney is the very agent of his downfall, in a way that is reminiscent of the Lacanian distinction between the two deaths, the biological one and the symbolic one, the gap between the two being filled in the story by the monstrous stone images. It is thus perfectly fitting that the excipit of the story, suggesting the image of the living dead, should read: "Only after weeks and weeks the men of the valley learned her husband had taken to his bed, awaiting his doom. In tongue tied silence still he awaits it, his eyes starting out straight before him." (90)

## II – Image and gaze: the reader's response

- 11 One of the most significant narrative features of the story is that it shows a strange reluctance to be specific about the contents of the images it refers to, so that in almost all cases they seem to remain out of focus, or even empty, as if they were meant to function as projection screens rather than representations. Indeed, such pictorial references provide only the vaguest outline of an image, as we can see in the following instance where the unidentified narrative agency recounts the villagers' discovery of Pat Nyhan's effigy: "Even if, with his stick, he had not pointed out the particular group of stones in that long-deserted mountain farm, they would have known it for Pat Nyhan. It was set up in a listening attitude, Pat Nyhan's attitude;" (88) It cannot be stated more clearly that the image is already present in the viewer's gaze even before the villagers come upon it. Similarly, when they discuss the threatening powers of such images the villagers admit that they "wouldn't like to *picture* it." (84), and the narrator comments: "Lambert and Redney might by dint of searching come on the *images* of the whole countryside and they would not lift an arm to prevent it." (84) This inchoate description of the images is the very condition of their fascination for the viewer, and it is this power which Redney mistakenly thought could serve his private revenge: "See what? A couple of stones! Do you think I believe old Redney has power over us?" (85)
- 12 But things do not stop at that, because images do not exist independently of the gaze that supports them, and I wish to show that the real interest of the short story lies in the original way it articulates their relationship, as it means introducing the mediation of a subjective agency that is, here, split between the characters and the reader.
- 13 Thus, imperceptibly but surely, the short story moves from an illustration of how language can be used through the performative and supernatural mediation of the curse, to a questioning of the power of the image through the function of the gaze, not

only as regards the characters (intradiegetic gaze), but also as regards the readers (viewer's gaze). The following remarks are predicated on the assumption that gazing at a picture is somehow, and *mutatis mutandis*, not so different from reading a text. To that effect, the methodological prerequisites of my analysis will be Barthes' distinction between *studium* and *punctum* re-visited by the Lacanian theory of the gaze, or more accurately of the object-gaze.<sup>5</sup>

- 14 If we now move from the fatal intratextual gaze of Redney to the enjoying gaze of the reader, that literary version of the viewer, it is easy to see that they are treated in diametrically opposed ways. The image as distinct from the picture can be defined as an incarnation of the visible and definitely shifts the thematic concerns of the story to the question of the gaze. Philosophers like Jacques Rancière<sup>6</sup> long ago recognized that the visible is predicated on the verbal, i.e. that, as Conrad memorably put it<sup>7</sup>, the essence of language and discourse is to make you see what pertains to the realm of the visible but also the invisible. But what is the reader really expected to see? It is important in this respect to remember that according to the pictorial turn, if a picture refers to the material object, the image is what exceeds it. Language and painting are two ways of constructing the visible, but their modalities are specific since they obey two different semiotic codes. When the reader follows the signifying chain, he doesn't build a picture (however mental it may be), but constructs an image on a backcloth of the invisible, as the text is not a screen (there is nothing behind it but a void). However, the crucial point is that this image is constructed through the mediation of a gaze, and the part of the gaze is played by language, by his words themselves or more accurately by the act of their enunciation.
- 15 It follows that an image does not always belong to the order of the visible, because words and speech make the subject see through narration and description what is of necessity absent. The case of Redney is proof enough of that; what he sees in the stones does not exist. The image of his enemy that he forms is a virtual one, a production of his desire to see Con Jer dead, but the stones remain stones. It goes to show that some modalities of the visible do not appear through images and that images can be words, and it implies that all images are narrativised, constructed through the mediation of the symbolic code of language. The conclusion is that the visible in an image is set upon a background of invisibility.
- 16 The best way to account for the pregnancy of the scopic drive is to rely on the split between the seeing eye and the gaze. The eye may be the visual device through which reality is allegedly apprehended, but the gaze is another matter altogether. In fact, the gaze does not belong to the subject, it pre-exists the act of vision, because when the subject looks at an object, the object is already looking at him from a point that he cannot see. Consequently, the gaze is not a property of the subject, it is rather the object of the scopic drive, an invisibility at the very heart of the visible, and it stresses the dependence of the visible on the gaze that precedes it. The object-gaze is the only image that the subject cannot see, and this is exactly what the character of Redney unwittingly experiences when he is eventually confronted with his own effigy in stone. When he points out the image of his enemy in stone to the villagers, he is in return confronted with his own gaze. His stone effigy returns the gaze but the effect is devastating. The opposition between *punctum* and *studium* might come in handy here. The *studium* is the literal, factual content of the picture, it is culturally coded and corresponds to what the viewer brings into the image, but which is already there,

whereas the *punctum* is an unpredictable element that perturbs the *studium*, and introduces a blind spot in the image, which is the very location of the subject's gaze. The stones represent such a blot as well as the gaze of the Other, but this gaze must remain invisible to the viewer, hence its threatening impact.

- 17 In the short story, the reader, like Redney, is first confronted with the stones perceived as modalities of the *studium*. They belong to the conventional superstitious beliefs of the Irish small farmer within the cultural framework of a community easily identifiable on account of the landscapes, the characters the toponyms and patronyms, and even traces of the Gaelic language. The frightening potential of the stones is further deflated thanks to the stylistic devices of personification that pave the way for the actual transformation of the stones into effigies, which is part of the fantastic element of the story, exactly as if the stones put on a garment to become effigies. They are first described as "unclad" then become "moss-clad" and later they become "skull-like" (81), before they "looked like massive ancient long-weathered skulls" (87). It is ironically appropriate that the aforesaid personification should be systematically associated with death.
- 18 However, the turn of the fantastic screw occurs when the stones as *studium* suddenly turn out to be modalities of the *punctum*, stirring up strong affects, because it is an unwelcome manifestation of the gaze that de-subjectivises Redney, and turns him into a stone. In this narrative arrangement, in which his own stone effigy gazes back at Redney, it is exactly as if he had usurped the place of the Other, and the price he had to pay for it was his Symbolic death, illustrated by his being stuck in bed motionless and speechless, a form of petrification before his death.
- 19 Of course, no such thing applies to the reader who is, on the contrary, invited to enjoy the fantastic mode, because his relation to the textual *punctum* is quite different. The *punctum* effect is still present, but it operates at another level because, instead of the direct, dual confrontation with his gaze in the guise of a stone, which destroys Redney, the reader is confronted with the stones and Redney's fate through the mediation of the narrative which, in this particular instance functions as the well-known shield in the myth of Perseus and Medusa. The short story offers an interesting variation on the traditional myth in that, as Greimas's actantial model helps us to perceive, Redney simultaneously occupies the position of the sender and the opponent. He is at the same time the gorgon and Perseus. It is a perverse position that entails his being the victim of his own devices. For him the apotropaic function of the narrative, of the text as shield, does not work in the context of a direct, dual confrontation with the Real, as it certainly does for the reader. In the case of Redney, the stones of his everyday environment first belong to the realm of the *studium*, but then they suddenly turn into the *punctum* of fantasy and of the death drive. Since there is for him no possibility of extraction of the vanishing point of the *punctum* he is threatened by fear, silence and death. As far as the reader is concerned now, the process is reversed and the extraction of the gaze as *punctum* is achieved through the modalities of writing, since the textual stones as *punctum* become part of the aesthetic *studium* of the text for the reader, losing their potentially destructive force in the process, because they are at the same time present and absent for him, visible and invisible to his gaze in a process adequately described by Mladen Dolar: "the gaze is an object, something that cannot itself be present, although the whole notion of presence is constituted around and can be established only in its elision." (Dolar, 15)

- 20 If we now refer to the paradigmatic example of the function of the gaze in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, I would argue that the narrative, because it produces the equivalent of the lateral vision required by the enigmatic skull in the foreground of the painting, is exactly what turns a strictly realistic, mimetic, picture into an artistic image. However, it must be strongly asserted that the anamorphic dimension of the narrative is more complex than in the case of painting, because it never constrains the reader/viewer to occupy a certain fixed position in order to see the true form of the anamorphosed object or picture, but the viewing point can be endlessly displaced to allow the same readers/viewers to exercise their freedom to choose any aesthetic or ethical position towards it.
- 21 If for Redney the stones are real, or more precisely are the modalities of the Real staring back at him, on the contrary for the reader they are artefacts, parts and parcel of an aesthetic enterprise. The blind spot in the visible is no longer threatening because it is integrated into an artistic gesture. As this process of extraction of the gaze is impossible for Redney, he is bound to be confronted with his own, as Nietzsche graphically put it in his *Apophthegm* n° 146: "He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss the abyss will also gaze into thee."<sup>8</sup>
- 22 The mythological background can further be interpreted as the illustration of the Lacanian reading of a painting, which consists in arguing that the function of the painting is not only to seduce the viewer's eye, but most of all to pacify it when it is distressed by the intrusion of the gaze under the pressure of the *punctum*, or destabilising blind spot, in the picture. It amounts to saying that the reader is invited to lay down his gaze as one lays down a weapon, in order to enjoy the literary dimension of the text. In this respect, the literary shield which deflects the petrifying gaze of the stones *qua* gorgon is none other than the work of the signifier in the text, the way the agency of the letter articulates the visible and the speakable into modalities of writing which amount to the production of a textual voice. Pascal Quignard makes no different claim when, putting in a literary way Lacan's claim that there is no such thing as a meta-language, he says: "It is inherent in the structure of language to be its own tertiary element. The writer just like the thinker knows that the true narrative agent is his own linguistic expression."<sup>9</sup>
- 23 These modalities, submitted as they are to ethical and aesthetic demands, are central to the efficient, yet silent, textual voice with which the writer successfully inscribes his idiosyncratic mode of enunciation. It is to be opposed in the story to the fate of Redney, who is ineluctably reduced to silence on account of the fact that he is deprived of his own voice: a situation which Slavoj Žižek admirably sums up when he claims that: "The voice *qua* object is precisely what is stuck in the throat, what cannot burst out, unchain itself and thus enter the dimension of subjectivity." (Žižek, 127) John Redney's voice may be silenced but it is the better to allow the readers' perception of the textual voice at work in the short story.
- 24 Ultimately, I would argue that such a taming of the gaze does occur in the short story, and that it is made possible by the presence of a textual voice, albeit not without a certain amount of ambiguity, if one opposes the moralizing ending, of the "an eye for an eye" type, justifying Redney's retribution, to the remarkably relevant reflections on the power of the image. The treatment of the image in the short story may not be devoid of ethical perspectives if one remembers that the national culture usually



associated with Corkery's fiction has a lot to do with the way images are constructed. Thus, I would conclude that if we move from the individual plane to that of the collective, the narrative strategy in "The Stones" succeeds in outgrowing the representations of traditional folklore, thus remotivating the story for modern readers, and by so doing enhances its poetic qualities.

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## NOTES

1. The phrase is a variation on the opening statement of Chapter III of *Ulysses*: Proteus, in which Stephen Dedalus, echoing Bishop Berkeley and Aristotle's theories of space and vision muses on the question of representation and the nature of reality. p. 42
2. It is probably not irrelevant to mention that Corkery was interested in sculpture and statues and that he expatiated at length on the status of the contemporary church statuary.
3. This is my translation of Quignard's statement in *Le Sexe et l'Effroi*, p. 10
4. My emphasis.
5. The gaze differs from the object-gaze in that the former can be compared to an optical device, whereas the latter pertains to the scopic drive. The word "object" is to be understood not in the conventional sense of a tangible thing, but in the psychoanalytical

perspective of the cause of desire. As such it implies a relation with the Real more than with reality, and most of all has to do with the ambivalent temptation/threat of *jouissance*.

6. See in particular : Jacques Rancière, *Le Destin des Images*, p.129

7. In his well-known preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, p. 5

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, chapter IV, Apophthegm 146

9. The original statement in French is to be found in: Pascal Quignard. *Les Ombres Errantes*, p. 16

## ABSTRACTS

Cette nouvelle peu connue de Daniel Corkery à la tonalité vaguement fantastique se présente comme une simple anecdote mettant en scène les effets ravageurs de la superstition dans une communauté rurale irlandaise du début du vingtième siècle. Pourtant, en focalisant l'attention du lecteur sur les visages de pierre qui sont au cœur de l'intrigue du récit, elle propose une réflexion sur le pouvoir et l'importance de la vision et du regard dans le processus de la représentation, donnant de ce fait une dimension métafictionnelle à la nouvelle. Pour rendre compte du mode de fonctionnement du regard, l'analyse se fonde sur l'opposition de Roland Barthes entre le studium et le punctum, revisitée à la lumière de la notion lacanienne d'objet regard. Il en ressort une mise en perspective de la vision étroitement nationaliste généralement attribuée aux fictions de Corkery.

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Claude Maisonnat is Emeritus professor of contemporary Anglo-saxon literature at the Université Lumière Lyon 2, France. A Conrad specialist he has published more than 30 articles on his works, and a book on *Lord Jim*. Also a specialist of the short story, he has written on contemporary writers including Bernard McLaverty, Edna O'Brien, Hemingway, Alice Munro, Antonia Byatt, Angela Carter, Dylan Thomas, Malcom Lowry, R. Carver, P. Auster, V.S. Naipaul, Thomas Pynchon, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Olive Senior, etc. With Patrick Badonnel he has also written a book on the psychoanalytical approach of the short story. He has also co-edited a volume on textual reprising and is currently completing a volume on the representation of women in short fiction entitled *Feminine Way, Female Voices*, due to be published in 2012.