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Frédérique Spill

Some writers invent their new terrains; I preferred to go and look for mine. First and last, for me it was Italy. One after another, scenes I remember from that abundant Mediterranean world have wound up in my work, a sojourner's baggage getting itself unpacked and shared. There's a second country for everybody, one way or another.
(Spencer, Preface ix)

- 1 Elizabeth Spencer's *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*, published in 1981, marked a turning point in her career as a writer, reviving the readers' interest in her work. In her preface, which allowed her to take a backward glance at decades of short story writing, Spencer makes a few remarks and establishes a few distinctions that certainly shed light on what she perceives as her own "terrains." First, she uses that word in the plural, thus immediately suggesting that the question of a writer's sense of place and dealings with place can by no means be approached simply, let alone univocally. Secondly, she suggests that, in order to find her "terrains"—a word that is striking for its dense materiality, as opposed to more intangible terms like "landscape," "environment" or even "territory,"—it was necessary for her to leave the comforts of home and embark on some kind of a quest. In the meantime, she admits that she could have proceeded differently, but that "go[ing] and look[ing] for" her "terrains" was the expression of a preference, the manifestation of her freedom and willpower. This implies that, as she herself put it variously on diverse occasions, she did not consider the South in which she was born and raised (in Carrollton, Mississippi), at a time (the

1920s and 1930s) not particularly reputed for its permissiveness, as binding her—a sure sign of the “cool deliberateness” (xv) that Eudora Welty emphasizes in her “Foreword” to the same collection. Characteristically, Spencer does not even mention the South in that quotation. In her presentation of Spencer in a volume entitled *Southern Women Writers*, Elsa Nettles confirms how decisive a step it was for Spencer to leave her native South:

So long as she was writing Southern novels in the South . . . , she felt no need to question the ultimate purpose of her work; her sense of purpose and identity came from knowing that “she was simply a part of the Southern tradition.” Departure from the South impelled her to seek her subjects outside the “mystic community” of her Southern past, to write fiction that would “come to terms with, not the Southern world, but the world of modern experience.” (86)¹

- 2 Departure from the South, which was also a departure from family and from a whole set of shaping values, undoubtedly oriented Spencer’s life as a woman and as a writer in unanticipated directions. The writer’s strong-minded assertion that she “preferred to go” makes it clear that leaving home was not accidental: whether consciously or not, it was quite on the contrary part and parcel of her whole project. Her urge to leave is reflected in more than a few of her female characters who, probably as she did, find in “that abundant Mediterranean world,” a “terrain” that allows them to evolve. The adjective “abundant” refers to a sense of plenty and evokes versatile experiences, together with the possibility of self-fulfillment.
- 3 As noted by Robert Phillips in his introduction to Spencer’s *The Light in the Piazza and Other Tales*, Spencer first felt the appeal of Italy in the summer of 1949, at which time she was twenty-eight:

Having received an invitation to visit a friend in Germany, she went abroad on the proceeds of [her] first novel. Apparently, Germany did not capture her imagination; she admits that she has no feeling for the Rhine. But when she moved on to Milan, Verona, Venice, Florence, Siena, and Rome, she fell under a spell, and she resolved to return whenever she could. (ix-x)
- 4 The occasion for Spencer to settle there for a longer period was offered her a few years later as, in 1953, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship that enabled her to pursue her writing career. As she met her future husband, John Rusher, “an Englishman” (Spencer, Preface x), her year in Italy turned into five years there. At that time Spencer wrote her third and last Mississippi novel, *The Voice at the Back Door*; at that time, probably unbeknownst to her, she gathered the contents of her “sojourner’s baggage,” made of remembered scenes and sensations that she would spend her upcoming life as a writer “unpack[ing]” and “shar[ing].”
- 5 What is particularly touching in Spencer’s 1981 “Preface” to the ambitious compilation of her own stories is that, though only five of the thirty-three selected stories are part of her so-called Italian work, Italy should be foremost in her mind as she looks back upon her work as a short story writer over more than three decades: “First and last,” she writes, “for me it was Italy.” The force of that statement derives from its unhesitating simplicity and strong assertiveness: though Spencer kept traveling through and living in many different places, no place superseded Italy in her heart and imagination. What she found there is no less than “her second country,” the one you choose as opposed to the one that was imposed upon you by the mere chances of life.
- 6 In her first Marilee Summerall story, published in 1960, Spencer sketched her own personal landscape of the American South. “A Southern Landscape” is, indeed, a

multifaceted depiction of a fictional town, Port Claiborne, located near Vicksburg, in Spencer's native Mississippi—an occasion for her to unearth the vestiges of both individual stories and regional history. Sketching typically Southern figures and atmospheres, her young first-person female narrator also evokes a poetic mindscape, let alone a landscape of the heart. In her 2001 collection of “New and Selected Fiction,” *The Southern Woman*, that short story is part of the opening part entitled “The South.” Representative of “Italy” in the same volume, one of Spencer's best-known novellas, “The Light in the Piazza,”² initially published in *The New Yorker* the same year as “A Southern Landscape.” Staging a much more mature female character, who also operates as a focalizer, it concurrently reveals an altogether different aspect of the writer's imagination, as well as her attraction for another, Mediterranean, South. The (mostly) female American characters Spencer created in her Italian work³ are all similarly prey to the place's allure, echoing with variation the writer's deep attraction to Italy or, in the words of her friend Robert Phillips, “her lifelong love affair with the art of fiction as well as with Italy” (xvii).

Departures

- 7 The division of *The Southern Woman* into four parts, the three first of which introduce mischievous geographical distinctions, is certainly worth a few comments. The first part, which contains fourteen stories, among which figure the three Marilee stories,⁴ is entitled “The South.” The second one, which includes the four Italian stories at the center of the present article—“The White Azalea,” “The Visit,” “The Cousins” and “The Light in the Piazza”—is simply entitled “Italy.”⁵ The third section, which contains three stories, is called “Up North.” As for the last section, it markedly stands out as its six “New Stories” defy the sense of place imposed on the first three sections.⁶ The first three “geographical” parts of *The Southern Woman* echo the writer's personal wanderings, starting with her origins in “The South,” then moving “Up North” (Spencer spent a great part of her lifetime in Canada) through Italy which, in many respects, represents landmark years for her. Though a tempting interpretation, that there is a correlation between how those different places impacted Spencer's imagination and the number of stories related to each place in the collection may be questionable.⁷ What is doubtless striking is the heading of the last and fourth section: “New Stories” indeed points to a movement forward, a progression toward novelty, and an unending capacity for renewal. In her life as a woman, Spencer went back to live in the South; *The Southern Woman* concludes on a biographical note about the author, whose demure last sentence goes, “Elizabeth Spencer currently resides in Chapel Hill” (462). Yet this homecoming is not registered in the collection's subparts that therefore, unlike the three major phases in the writer's life, escape the very notion of returning. In that light, the shape of the volume is quite in keeping with the title of Spencer's 2014 collection of short stories, *Starting Over*. It also reverberates the trajectories of the female characters of her Italian tales.
- 8 Significantly, Spencer's female characters are either departing or moving: the Italian tales therefore contain numerous references to movements and transportations. Characters in “The Cousins” are constantly on trains, first from the South to New York, then across Europe and in Italy (so are Mrs. Johnson and her daughter in “The Light in the Piazza”); they reach the old continent on a boat. Displaying her privileged self,

Mayfred comes home by plane, a rare enough occasion for ordinary people in the 1950s. In "The Visit," Judy and her husband experience a reckless drive in a taxi up the Genoan hills. In "The White Azalea," Miss Theresa Stubblefield has just reached Rome; the short tale focusing on her evokes the "frightening" traffic in the streets and shows her mounting, then descending the staircases of the Piazza di Spagna. Likewise, a great deal of walking is evoked in all the stories, as befits "tourists" (204) visiting places they are unfamiliar with, whereas the most well-off of them are likely to move around Italian towns in a "carozza" (274, 275). If characters are ever shown returning to the United States, some of them end up leaving again, as in the case of Ella Mason in "The Cousins."

- 9 Departure refers to the action of leaving, especially to start a journey. Evocatively, it also designates a deviation from an accepted, prescribed, or usual course of action: as the female characters of Spencer's Italian tales undertake to depart for Europe and eventually Italy, they also run counter to what their Southern families expect from them; they consequently depart from more usual courses of action, allowing themselves a taste of freedom that often upsets the order established by their Southern families. Meanwhile, they also unburden themselves, at least temporarily, from cumbersome obligations. As in the following instance, Spencer has often expressed herself about the potentially detrimental influence of families upon individuals, even more so in the South, where the authority of traditions has long remained extremely powerful:

Someone much wiser than I once told me that Southern families were cannibals. He was an enthusiastic Southerner himself, so I felt even more the weight of that judgment. The family assigns unfair roles, and never forgives the one who does not fulfill them. Of course, a sense of freedom is a large part of my own nature. I can't be straitjacketed. Maybe they ask no more than all traditional societies do, one way or another. ("The Art of Fiction" 116)

- 10 Symbolically enough, the term departure also is a nautical term designating the amount of a ship's change of longitude.
- 11 "The White Azalea," which was first published in *The Texas Quarterly* in 1961, takes place on a June day in Rome. While the place where the brief scene occurs, merging time of action with time of narration (and reading), is gradually made identifiable through the slow aggregation of details, the reader is made to share in the perceptions of Miss Theresa Stubblefield on what actually is "her first day in Rome" (203). The focalizer is a Miss, an immediate indication about her unmarried status; soon enough, she is also described, though indirectly, as "portly" and "well-bred."⁸ The place is an Italian piazza, thus repeating with variation the central motif of Spencer's best-known novella, "The Light in the Piazza." References to "The Spanish Steps" (imposing staircases whose majesty is highlighted by a brief nominal clause that somehow mimics Miss Stubblefield's sense of wonder at being there) and to "the annual display of azalea plants" (204) allow the reader to identify it as Piazza di Spagna, which is soon confirmed. As, after ascending the famous stairs, Miss Theresa Stubblefield "quickly" (209) descends them again with a strong sense of achievement, evocations of "the swarming square, down toward the fountain and all the racket" (209) further contribute to the overall *effet de réel*⁹ that dominates Spencer's depiction of the place. Meanwhile, the freshness of the focalizer's perception, not yet dulled by familiarity, is suggested as early as the story's second paragraph, which indicates how things will be seen throughout the story:

An enormous sky of the most delicate *blue* arched overhead. In her mind's eye—her imagination responding fully, almost exhaustingly, to these shores' peculiar powers of stimulation—she saw the city as from above, telescoped on its great bare plains that the ruins marked, aqueducts and tombs, here a cypress, there a pine, and all around the low *blue* hills. Pictures in old Latin books returned to her: the Appian Way Today, the Colosseum, the Arch of Constantine. She would see them, looking just as they had in the books, and this would make up a part of her delight. (203; emphasis added)

- 12 Miss Theresa Stubblefield is keenly aware of the place around her: the way her imagination is stimulated suggests that she experiences some kind of awakening as after a long slumber. While the blueness of her observations is fraught with a sense of hope, her vision of her immediate whereabouts is somehow expanded by that of “her mind's eye,” which encompasses both the Latium's countryside and images of the best-known Roman monuments she has nourished herself with through history books.
- 13 “The White Azalea” intertwines Miss Theresa Stubblefield's visual observations with her thoughts, which are clearly tagged by markers like “Theresa thought” (207) or “Theresa realized” (209). Similarly, her contemplation of Roman life around her in the present of narration merges with remembrances of her more or less recent past in the South of the United States as names of places like “Tuxapoka, Alabama” and Montgomery (205) come to the surface of the text.¹⁰ It soon turns out that Miss Theresa Stubblefield's life there was mostly devoted to “nursing various Stubblefields—her aunt, then her mother, then her father—through their lengthy illnesses” (203), which eventually led most of them to the cemetery. Hence her life home mostly consisted in the administration of “pills and tonics” (203), dealing with her relatives' sicknesses and funerals (the word somehow operates as a refrain through the short story). Miss Theresa Stubblefield has so far mostly lived her life by proxy, either making plans for her ineffectual brother¹¹ or reading: “Theresa had had a chance to read quite a lot” (203). Indeed, the freedom that Theresa fully enjoys for the first time slowly burgeoned through her reading by the sick she attended. She therefore rejoices in the fact that her trip to Italy will be the occasion for her to make the real world connect with the conjectural existence she has lived amidst the sick reading books, unbeknownst to most—to actually “see” what, up to that point, she has only known through books:

The trouble is, Theresa thought, that while everything that happens there is supposed to matter supremely, nothing here is supposed even to exist. They would not care if all of Europe were to sink into the ocean tomorrow. It never registered with them that I had time to read all of Balzac, Dickens and Stendhal while Papa was dying, not to mention everything in the city library after Mother's operation. It would have been exactly the same to them if I had read through all twenty-six volumes of Elsie Dinsmore. (207)

- 14 Theresa's thoughts reveal her people's self-centered indifference to the greater world. She describes them as being so self-absorbed that they are actually unaware of the rich world to which she has had access through books. Her resentment toward their narrow-mindedness emerges though the opposition between the classical European authors she has read (and that undoubtedly fostered her curiosity about Europe) and the American children's book series *Elsie Dinsmore*, known for its mawkish, and potentially harmful, stereotypes. This is not the kind of distinction her people are able to make—a good enough reason for her to be willing to “escape.”
- 15 The sense of relief Theresa experienced when the last Stubblefield in her charge died is conveyed through the first of several occurrences of indirect speech in the short story: “Now I can go. *There's nothing to stop me now*” (204). All such occurrences are in italics;

each of them allows the reader access to the focalizer's most suppressed, hence guilty, thoughts. In this specific instance, Theresa's thrill at having a chance to live in the present and for herself is suggested by the way the adverb "now," framing that first assertion of freedom, is charged with emotion. The whole story is similarly scattered with small signs of defiance, whether gestures or words, starting with the nonchalant way Theresa is made to think of the relatives in her care as "various Stubblefields" in one of the preceding quotes, as if they were interchangeable objects. Likewise, for a "nice rich American tourist lady" (209) to be sitting on the steps of a staircase, be it "The Spanish Steps," appears to be a pleasurable impropriety: as she "breath[es] Mediterranean air," the way "the sun warmed her, as it seemed to be warming everything, perhaps even the underside of stones or the chill inside churches" (204) evokes a rather sensuous "warming" of her body, propagating to the world around and thus suggesting the renewal of earthly sensations that sharply contrast with the coldness of the sickroom and her years there.¹² She both admires the place around her and wallows in her unfamiliar solitude—"Glad to be alone" (204): positively connoted adjectives like "marvellous," "content," "excited" emerge from her observations, as she defiantly smokes a morning cigarette (204). Yet, her new sense of freedom is soon endangered as "the letters in her lap" (204) remind her of the family away from which she departed.

16 Indeed, as Theresa starts reading the letter "her Cousin Emma Carraway had written" (204), "anxiety and dismay" start competing with her ebullience. Meanwhile, the garish "[s]hoals of tourists" (204) in the present echoes the crowd of relatives at home, as their names are scattered through Theresa's thoughts. No matter how much distance now separates Theresa from her relatives, family ties and duties still have a strong hold over her. That it is not easy for Theresa to escape her family's grip is confirmed by the story's beginning *in medias res* as, as unlikely as it seems, "[t]wo letters had arrived for Miss Theresa Stubblefield" (203). Even before any sense of time and place is established, anonymity is evoked as an impossible quest. Soon, Theresa justifiably wonders, "*how on earth did I ever get this letter anyway?*" (204) since one of the envelopes merely contains her name together with the mention "American Express, Piazza di Spagna" (205), followed by a disbelieving question mark. Yet, the letters reached her "as easily as if she had been the President of the Republic or the Pope" (205), a humorous simile that contrasts with her unimportance at home—except as a nurse—and indicates that Theresa is denied a space of her own, even away from home. Yet, she progresses; the way she manages to get rid of an annoying peddler reveals her ability to say no: "Theresa turned away to *escape*, and climbed to a higher landing where the steps divided in two" (207; emphasis added). Not only does this brief encounter suggest that she will not be hassled anymore, it also reveals that, as she literally takes more distance and elevation, she is now conscious of possible alternatives.

17 There are numerous echoes between "The White Azalea" and the mood and atmosphere that characterize the beginning of "The Light in the Piazza":

Margaret Johnson, lighting a cigarette, relaxed over her aperitif and regarded the scene that she preferred before any other, anywhere. She never got enough of it, and now in the clear evening light that all the shadows had gone from—the sun being blocked away by the tight bulk of the city—she looked at the splendid old palace and forgot her feet hurt. More than that: here she could almost lose her sorrow that for so many years had been a constant of her life. (258; emphasis added)

- 18 As the story starts, Margaret Johnson is depicted “relaxing” from a source of tension that is not yet identified by having a drink and a smoke—again: small acts of defiance—in a place that is particularly pleasant to her for various reasons: first because the exceptional light—a symbol that runs through the story—and the refined architecture objectively make the Piazza della Signoria an imposing place (though there is a Roman excursion, an escape within the escape, the story mostly takes place in Florence). Indeed, the “splendid old palace” in whose contemplation Margaret revels probably is the Palazzo Vecchio, a jewel of Tuscan architecture. Secondly, as highlighted by the verb forms “forget” and “lose,” if the contemplation of the piazza is so meaningful to her, it is also because it allows her to transcend her worries, both immediate (her hurting feet) and enduring (her sorrow),¹³ making it “a place propitious to oblivion” (Préher, “Southern Belle” 24). Quoting from Deleuze, Gérald Préher suggests that escape, especially in “The Light in the Piazza,” should be interpreted as an “action” involving resoluteness and courage; therefore, it is by no means an easy way out of a situation.¹⁴ His remark that “‘The Light in the Piazza’ appeals to readers because it dramatizes a desire experienced by many: to escape conventions, cast aside one’s fetters, and live life to the full” (Préher, “Southern Belle” 22) can certainly be extended to “The White Azalea,” and other Italian tales.¹⁵ Indeed, their readiness to escape from oppressive families expresses Spencer’s female characters’ determination to find pleasurable moments of respite from overwhelming constraints and, possibly, to live a better life.
- 19 In “The White Azalea,” Theresa’s bookish culture includes the memory of “the statue of some heroic classical woman whose dagger dripped with stony blood” (209), probably a vision of Lucretia whose rape and suicide incidentally played a major role in Rome’s transition from being a monarchy to becoming a republic. Theresa seems fascinated with Lucretia’s holding a dagger that probably drips with her own blood (though the fact that Lucretia took her life is actually omitted by Theresa), as suggested by the fact the same vision reoccurs in the last paragraph of the story: “recalling the stone giantess with her dagger and the gouts of blood hanging thick and gravid upon it” (210). Theresa’s admiring identification with the heroic Roman woman echoes her growing appeal to strong figures of femininity and willpower. She expresses her own resolve to emancipate herself by tearing up the letters that reached her in Rome “with a motion so suddenly violent that she amazed herself” (208), then burying them into an azalea pot. She herself grows aware of the obvious symbolism of her gesture: “Then Theresa realized, straightening up and rubbing dirt off her hand with a piece of Kleenex from her bag, that it was not the letters but the Stubblefields that she had torn apart and consigned to the earth. This was certainly the only explanation of why the whole curious sequence, now that it was complete, had made her feel so marvelously much better” (209). The fact that azaleas should be “a Southern flower” (209) makes that burial particularly “considerate” (210); meanwhile, this specific choice of flower imagery elicits the hope that some kind of continuity between *here* and *there* (207) may be possible, allowing Theresa to flourish in new ways, away from home, yet with a relenting sense of home.

The Allure of Italy

- 20 Exoticism imbues Spencer's writing as her Italian tales contain numerous intrusions of Italian, a language with which Spencer appears to be perfectly conversant. Because the American mother and daughter spend a great deal of their time dealing with the Nacarellis in Florence, "The Light of the Piazza" is the story that contains the most numerous occurrences of Italian in the text. These occurrences include usual greetings: "'Buon giorno, signor principe,' returned the driver" (215), "'Ciao,' she said finally, 'come stai?'" (289) or interjections: "Attenzione!" (274), which make sense thanks to the context. In some cases, Italian words are immediately followed by their English translation: "Va bene. All right" (268). The names of places are regularly designated in Italian, as in the case of "the pensione" (214) or "entering his salotto" (237). Likewise, habits are directly conveyed in Italian, as in: "In Italy you went to riposarsi, and this was exactly what the great man had done" (211)¹⁶ or in "[s]he sat over her caffè latte" (293).
- 21 The stories are also scattered with longer fragments of conversations in Italian that compellingly contribute to creating a strong sense of place. In "The Cousins," the Italian manager of the boarding house registers Ella Mason's transformation as a result of her romance with Eric: "He'd solemnly bowed to us and kissed my hand. 'Bella ragazza,' he remarked. 'The way life ought to be,' said Eric" (248); his compliment is a way for him to give the young lovers his broad-minded blessing, as suggested by Eric's conclusive remark. In "The Visit," Judy catches bits of conversations between the princess and her children, which she immediately interprets for the reader's sake: "Judy made out 'Che hai?' 'Cattivo, tu!' and 'Dammelo!' which meant, she reasoned, that the children had something they shouldn't have which now was to be given to their mother" (220). In "The Light in the Piazza," the matron-like Signora Nacarelli articulates her warning in her mother tongue: "'Mio figlio,' she pronounced slowly, 'è buono. Capisce?'" (272). Her beloved youngest son is not to be trifled with. Therefore, "[s]he received with approval the news that the piccola signorina americana was not allowed to so much as mail a postcard without her mother along" (266). In "The White Azalea," a brief scene encapsulates the small, mostly inconsequential, confusions that may result from miscommunication:
- "Signora?"
- She became aware that two Italian workmen, carrying a large azalea pot, were standing before her and wanted her to move so that they could begin arranging a new row of the display.
- "My dispiace, signora, ma... insomma..."
- "Oh... put it there!" She indicated a spot a little distance away. They did not understand. "Ponere... la." A little Latin, a little French. How one got along! The workmen exchanged a glance, a shrug. Then they obeyed her. "Va bene, signora." They laughed as they returned down the steps in the sun. (208)
- 22 The good-humored Italian workmen do not undermine Theresa's slightly conceited confidence that she can rely on the "little Latin" and the "little French" she learnt at school or in books to be understood in Italy, as they do exactly what she expects them to do. Overall, this exchange confirms an easy-goingness, which is part of the revel—"How one got along!," muses Theresa—inasmuch as it sharply contrasts with the complexities of home.¹⁷
- 23 The musicality of the Italian language with its singsong vowels merges with Spencer's English, conveying an appealing sense of otherness. Clara is particularly responsive to

it: her mother repeatedly remarks how her Italian improves. Twice in "The Light in the Piazza" she is described displaying her pleasure (and knowingly annoying her mother at the same time) by enumerating the names of famous Italians who played key roles in the development of Italian arts, letters and history: "Galileo, Dante Alighieri, Boccaccio, Machiavelli, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Donatello, Amerigo Vespucci..." Clara chanted, reading the names off the rows of statues of illustrious Tuscans that flanked the street" (272, see also 279). Together with the attractiveness of foreign values and language, the overwhelming presence of history is undoubtedly part and parcel of the strong allure of Italy. Italy's being a country fraught with history is actually contrasted with what Signor Nacarelli ingeniously refers to as America's sense of freedom: "In Florence we have too much history. In America you are so free, free—oh, it is wonderful!" (271). This statement is doubtless fraught with irony since it is precisely in the excesses of Italy that Spencer's female characters find the kind of freedom they do not enjoy in their home country. Speaking in a foreign tongue somehow operates as a pretext for them to act in a way that is foreign to them—a rarely enjoyable pleasure that, Margaret knows, is totally alien to her husband at home: "It would seem unbelievable to Noel Johnson that she or anyone related to him in any way would have learned to communicate in any language but English" (291). Through the distant figure of Margaret's husband, the American freedom of spirit is thus deviously associated with a self-satisfied absence of curiosity toward anything not American.

- 24 Though, as pointed out by Eudora Welty, Spencer "can faultlessly set the social scene" (xiv), it seems that, unlike Henry James, her theme is not quite "the social scene." Though very much aware of social codes, Spencer's approach of Americans in Europe primarily focuses on American women's perceptions of life there and of small differences that make life abroad particularly enticing. That their awareness of those differences should repeatedly focus on the way Italian men look and behave is quite revealing. Indeed, while more often than not, American patriarchs are left home, the female focalizers' eyes turn to their local counterparts. Miss Theresa Stubblefield's spinster's glance is drawn toward "a group of young men," whom she describes as follows: "They wore shoes with pointed toes, odd to American eyes, and narrow trousers, and their hair looked unnaturally black and slick" (207). While the paratactic syntax echoes Theresa's observations of the group from toe to head (instead of head to toe), no detail escapes her. Whereas the aside "odd to American eyes" reservedly highlights the focalizer's awareness of a certain exoticism in Italian men's appearance, she attentively registers that their trousers are tailored in a fashion that shows off the lower parts of their outlines. Theresa's mildly dismayed observation may not be devoid of a trace of attraction as the opening of "The White Azalea" already insists, also in the form of an aside, on "her imagination responding fully, almost exhaustingly, to these shores' peculiar powers of stimulation" (203). Margaret Johnson's appraisal of the young Fabrizio, who is to become her daughter's fiancé and husband in "The Light in the Piazza," echoes Theresa's stereotypical representation of Italian males' characteristic look:

His shirt was starched and white; his black hair still gleamed faintly damp at the edges; his close-cut, cuffless gray trousers ended in new black shoes of a pebbly leather with pointed toes. A faint whiff of cologne seemed to come from him. There was something too much here, and a little touching. Well, they would be leaving soon, thought Mrs. Johnson. She decided to relax and enjoy the evening. (263)¹⁸

- 25 Standing out against the colorful evening lights, Fabrizio almost looks like a black and white fashion photograph. Also aware of the young man's "close-cut" trousers, Margaret underscores his spotless elegance, noting that there is something contrived, "something too much," about how good he looks. Endearred by his efforts to look pleasing (this is Fabrizio's second appearance in the story), she briskly concludes—as she often will before actually taking action—that she'd better take her daughter away from such potential danger. Yet, as the form "relax" reoccurs, she characteristically decides to enjoy the show first.¹⁹ In the story's third section, given a chance to observe Fabrizio's uncovered body at the pool, Margaret Johnson remarks that "[l]ike most Italians, he was proud of his body and having made his appearance, lost no time in getting out of the water. He was in truth slightly bowlegged, but he concealed that flaw by standing in partial profile with one knee bent" (264). Her critical eye simultaneously encompasses the young man's confidence in his body and his body's slight imperfection, which he spontaneously compensates for by posing like a Renaissance statue. His position is actually reminiscent of that of the copy of Michelangelo's graceful sculpture of David that stands outside the Palazzo Vecchio.
- 26 Spencer's female characters' appraisal of Italian males reveals their openness to novelty at the same time as it conveys the allure of foreignness—in this case, Italianness. The noun "allure" defines the quality of being powerfully and mysteriously attractive; the verb "to allure" means to entice by charm or attraction. The form "allure" comes from the Middle English *aluren*, which derives from Medieval French *allure*; its being made of the prefix *a-* (from Latin *ad-*) added to *lure*, *leure*, implies that the beguiling may contain elements of deception. Yet, the vague sense of deceptiveness that both Theresa and Margaret point out, either in the young men's "unnaturally black and slick" (207) hair or in their posing, may be part and parcel of their charm and of the overall appeal of the place they embody. Miles away from their homes and families, let alone husbands, both women are offered seemingly all too rare opportunities to enjoy piazzas, lights, flowers, aperitifs, noises, and people that behave in a way that is completely exotic to them. The exoticism of their Italian experiences²⁰ provokes a constant stimulation of their senses that suddenly awakes their somehow hibernating selves and, from a distance, allows small-scale revelations regarding the lives they have led up to this point. As pointed out by Lisbeth Minnaard in her analysis of Dutch writer Lodewijk van Deyssel's 1894 novel *White and Yellow*,
- [E]xoticism refers to a particular practice of cultural translation. It describes the attempt to translate exotic otherness into the terms of the home culture, while at the same time maintaining a safe distance between western self and exotic other. The resulting tension between familiarity and strangeness, proximity and distance, sameness and difference is typical of exoticism. Exoticism generally oscillates between these poles, just as it oscillates between feelings of both fear and desire.
(76)
- 27 Of course, the distinction between the west and the exotic east, conceptualized by Edward Said in his groundbreaking *Orientalism*, is not quite operative in Spencer's case. Yet, from the viewpoint of Spencer's American female characters, "that abundant Mediterranean world" (Spencer, Preface ix) similarly operates as "the exotic other" that triggers off conflicting responses, while encouraging a pleasurable sense of transgression.²¹ Meanwhile, for American women in Italy, the expectations associated with genders and the subsequent role distributions fully at work in the 1950s are somehow reshuffled. Kathryn Lee Seidel emphasizes that, "[a]s a representative of her

family's capitalist system aboard, Margaret exercises authority and takes advantage of the informal power which she has" (19). Not only does Italy allow her to handle both business and her daughter's happiness, thus taking over from her husband—like Theresa, when assessing the allure, the sex appeal, of Italian men—she also rather impishly adopts attitudes that are more readily associated with men, thus demonstrating how much she enjoys the freedom that Italy grants her. Her sense of freedom reaches a peak when Margaret lets Fabrizio's father, the imposing Signor Naccarelli, "play the Italian" (287) and kiss her—a moment that encapsulates the fear and desire inherent to experiences of exoticism: "With one finger, she touched her mouth where there lingered an Italian kiss" (305). This kiss, which makes Margaret daydream much like a teenage girl, echoes an earlier scene she witnessed at the station, as Fabrizio "had drawn Clara behind a post and kissed her" (282) right before mother and daughter left to Rome. Expressions like "playing the Italian," which is prompted by Signor Naccarelli himself, or "an Italian kiss" further emphasize the seductiveness of Italy. Italy indeed allows middle-aged Mrs. Johnson to feel like a girl again, while "the real liking" (288) she feels for Fabrizio's father can possibly be interpreted as an understated expression of desire. Meanwhile, she is allowed to bloom much in the way her daughter does, "like a fresh flower" (308), let alone a white azalea. Overall, whether it is used as a noun or as an adjective, the recurrence of the form "Italian" suggests an outgoing, sensuous and generous nature that, though it certainly is a stereotypical remark, contrasts with the cold pragmatism of Anglo-Saxons: "Her heart had occasionally quite melted to the idea—especially after a glass of wine—that the Italian nature was so warm, so immediate, so intensely personal, that they had all perceived at once that Clara was a child and had loved her anyway, for what she was" (293-94). What is for sure is that, though she is also aware of Italians' invasive exuberance, Margaret Johnson is very fond of both the country and its people—and grateful to them for renewing her hopes. Therefore, we cannot but agree with her that "[i]f Noel Johnson came to Florence, he would spoil everything" (293).

Spencer's Southern Woman, or Foreignness Within

- 28 Both Theresa Stubblefield, Margaret Johnson and her daughter Clara exemplify the way "[t]he women in Elizabeth Spencer's first three novels and in a number of the short stories seek a different kind of freedom. They desire not the fulfillment of a particular ambition but escape from the authority of the family, from its traditions, its powers of influence, and its attempts to dictate the choices and actions of its members" (Nettels 81). Spencer herself once admitted that "[m]any of my women characters crack up under the strain of bad fortune or psychic miseries they cannot sustain" ("The Art of Fiction" 120). Yet it seems that in Italy, as they are animated by a brand new sense of enfranchisement, they fare rather well. Indeed, while the rules of the patriarchal South no longer apply to female American protagonists in Italy, they do not have to comply with local models either. In that respect, the contrast between free-wheeling Margaret Johnson and the corseted Signora Nacarelli in "The Light in the Piazza" is extremely eloquent: the way both Clara and her mother evolve throughout the story suggests that their receptiveness to Italy's appeal is somehow contaminating them, finally turning both of them into particularly appealing figures in-between continents; for a while at least, they are infused with the charm of the stateless. As noted by Phillips, "[i]t was more than Italy's light which affected Spencer's work; the focus of her writing changed

while she was there. Her first three novels had featured male protagonists, grappling with their fates in Mississippi, but in writing about Italy, Spencer began to place female protagonists at the forefront" (x). As a consequence "the female's pursuit of self-possession in a male-dominated world" gradually emerged as "an important Spencer theme" (Phillips xii). More than that, as Spencer herself suggested in her "Preface" to the 1981 selection of her stories, this theme was provoked by the writer's great empathy with her female characters: "I feel a oneness, though what its nature is escapes saying, unless it is something like acceptance, the affirming of what is not an especially perfect world for those seeking girls and women, but at least is possible, livable, living" (xi).²² What the writer therefore undertook to offer her "girls and women" thanks to the powers conferred to her by her art is no less than the hope for better lives and, however fleeting, the experience of sheer moments of light.

- 29 This pattern is especially striking in "The Cousins," which like "The Light in the Piazza," is a long story, almost novella-length, which similarly splits into separate moments. "The Cousins" is a later story, which first appeared in the spring 1985 issue of *The Southern Review*.²³ In the earlier story, moments clearly divide up into fourteen numbered sections, whereas in "The Cousins" distinctions between moments or times can be established thanks to typographical blanks in the text or small single dashes.²⁴ In the form of consecutive vignettes "The Cousins" interweaves several threads, thus recreating a strongly redolent sense of the characters' past: memories of childhood and teenage "in Martinsville, Alabama" (226), where Ella Mason, the first-person homodiegetic narrator, enjoyed happy days notably with her older cousins Ben and Eric, both of whom she was in love with (240); remembrances of their organizing their summer trip to Europe, thus putting an end to a phase of tensions between them; reminiscences of their departure and stay there, following a succession of mishaps mostly related to the extremely impulsive character of Mayfred and to her success with men, then gradually focusing on Ella Mason and Eric's romance in Italy. Scenes, sensations and feelings thus slowly accumulate, as Ella Mason "pick[s] up pieces of . . . past like fragments in the street" (237). Meanwhile, in the present of narration, which can be situated about three decades later as Ella Mason is "a widow just turned fifty" (224), the character-narrator returns to Italy to meet Eric, who has actually lived most of his life in Florence, with an urge to make sense of the confusion of their feelings then and, possibly, to pick things up where they left off.
- 30 Although the story is built on a sense of chronology as both past and present events follow one another in clear succession, the present is often made to merge with reminiscences of the past. Now and again, the flow of Ella Mason's remembrances is indeed interrupted by comments made by the middle-aged adults "this long after" (229): "'Well,' said Eric, looking past me out to where the lights were brightening along the Arno, the towers standing out clearly in the dusky air, 'I liked you the way you were'" (229). Long after the events, Eric thus reassures Ella Mason about what he felt then. The sense of continuity between past and present is enhanced as Ella Mason's evocation of the first time Eric "kissed [her] on the mouth" (247) that summer long ago is immediately followed by his grabbing her hand in the present of narration: "He found my hand in the dark. 'It was a wonderful little while'" (247). From then on, the acceleration of memories of their being together is conveyed by the punctuation—a brief succession of paragraphs conspicuously starting with a colon—which both suggests and silences their growing intimacy.²⁵

- 31 The vividness of past emotions infiltrates the present: as “everything from then would start living now” (224), what was impossible then (Ella Mason and Eric split as soon as they came back home) may still be possible now. This is further suggested by the story’s short conclusive paragraph which, after briefly stopping on the present situation of each of the cousins, envelops Ella Mason and Eric in a sensuous darkness: “And Eric and I are sitting holding hands on a terrace in far off Italy. Midnight struck long ago, and we know it. We are sitting there, talking in the pitch-black dark” (257). The use of gerunds which was quite obtrusive throughout the short story now culminates in the appearance of verbs in the present progressive, pointing to the future as the characters’ present will progress beyond that conclusion, possibly in the form of a “we.”
- 32 There is little doubt that though she only spent a couple of weeks in Italy when a young girl, Ella Mason was indelibly marked by her stay there. There is actually a slightly subversive quality to her Italian experience, which somehow conditioned her life from then and there on. Indeed, back in America, Ella Mason made two rather unconventional marriages before moving on alone, back toward Eric in Italy. The title of the short story, “The Cousins,” further conveys a mild sense of enjoyable transgression: indeed, the story is anything but a classical tale of innocent family relationships although the specter of incest is evacuated right from the first pages of the story when Ella Mason finds it necessary to mention that “[w]e were just third cousins. Kissing kin” (225). Italy certainly is the occasion for female characters to come to terms with the (sometimes) awkward realities of their drives and desires. How Italy changes them as a result to their stay there is a leitmotiv that runs through the Italian tales, which register an extended series of transformations.
- 33 Like Mayfred before her, Ella Mason ends up looking like an Italian: “As for me, I was, at least, sure that my style had changed. I had bought my little linen blouses and loose skirts, my sandals and braided silver bracelets. . . . On the streets, Italians passed me too close not to be noticed” (246). So does Clara: “Why, she looked like an Italian! . . . Stepping along now in her handwoven Italian skirt and sleeveless cotton blouse, with leather sandals, smart straw bag, dark glasses and the glint of earrings against her cheek, she would fool any tourist into thinking her a native” (278). In “The Visit,” Judy’s embarrassed self-consciousness in her formal wifely outfit in the presence of the princess, whose natural, somehow disorderly, charm she highlights, may foreshadow a similar transformation.²⁶ There is little doubt that American women, whether young or less so, benefit from the change of air. Their looking Italian can doubtless be interpreted as an external mark of their personal fulfillment, as they eventually come to terms with their sensuous feminine selves. Kathryn Lee Seidel remarks that Clara “rebels in small though important ways in terms of her own development” (20). As for Margaret, she notes that she is “a woman well beyond the fifties guardians of the home. She asserts her right to her own sexuality and acknowledges with grace her daughter’s right as well. And of course, by freeing her daughter, Margaret can enter into a delicious new realm of freedom with her husband or so she thinks” (Seidel 20-21). In Spencer’s Italian tales, Italy forcefully contributes to the (re)shaping of female identities: “‘You certainly can’t know where you are till you know where you were.’ So Marilee Summerall, who crops up here and there in these pages, might observe” (Spencer, Preface ix). Their awareness of the tensions between here and there is instrumental to their self-realization.

- 34 “The Visit,” which first appeared in *Prairie Schooner* in 1965, is a curious story. While evoking a different landscape, it displays an altogether different aspect of Italy. Like most of Spencer’s Italian tales, it focuses on the perspective of a female character, whose name is Judy Owens. Unlike most of her counterparts, Judy is a young woman—seemingly “much too young to have a nine-year-old son” (213), as an Italian waiter flatteringly observes. Instead of being separated one way or another from her husband like most of Spencer’s female characters in Italy, Judy is very much a wife, as she accompanies her scholarly husband on a six-month trip to Italy allowed by an academic grant. There, having trusted their son to the care of an aunt of his “in the *Stati Uniti*” (213), she goes about with him “looking at museums, at ancient ruins and new excavations” (212). Right from the start, the story is imbued with a mild irony that, in this specific instance, is conveyed by the nonchalant contrast between the adjectives “ancient” and “new.” Judy mostly works as her husband’s secretary, typing and proofreading his writings. While she dutifully considers his quest as theirs, “[b]ut all the time Bill and Judy did not mistake what the real thread was, nor which and-then they were working on now” (212), she nevertheless vents her impression that the way her husband accumulates degrees—“[a] dissertation, a doctorate”—and “scholarly articles” (211) is somewhat senseless. This feeling is further conveyed by the way she keeps listing her husband’s achievements and nominalizes the form “and-then” (211, 212), suggesting that she is all too aware of the fact there is no satisfying Bill’s craving ambition. In addition, it soon occurs that her husband’s brilliant academic career somehow manipulates her into a sense of subservience, as she is made to remember that “[a]s [she] had finished only two years of college, Bill often had to put her right about things” (214)—in that case, the meaning of the world “scholastic.”
- 35 Although Judy seems encouraged to disparage herself, the vanity of her husband’s obsession with “the Thrace mosaics” (214) and, even more so, with “the great man” (211) (no doubt an expression of his) whom he is craving to be allowed to mention in the book he is writing is not lost to her: “The book would get written somehow; but what prestige it would gain for Bill if only he had the right to make a personal reference to Thompson even once—and more than once would be overdoing it. Should it go in the introduction, or the preface, or the acknowledgments, or the text itself?” (212). The effectiveness of Judy’s mockery is augmented by the fact that she appears to be truly concerned with her husband’s otherworldly considerations. The dryness of Bill’s self-centered, exclusively academia-oriented, conformist concerns is also highlighted by his insistence that, against both the guidebook’s recommendation to visit the area and his wife’s desire to do so, they go “straight to the village in the mountains nearest to Thompson’s villa,” “the usual take-off point for people who went to see Thompson”: “Bill decided that this was no time for anything unorthodox” (213).
- 36 Whereas Bill is described as an unsympathetic monomaniac, Judy is shown slowly distancing herself from him and having fun on her own. Indeed, as Bill “tortur[es] himself” (213) while waiting for a sign of acknowledgment from Thompson, Judy exhibits both her fondness for Italy and an obvious form of ease there. For one thing, unlike Bill, she can speak enough Italian to converse with the locals, while—like Noel Johnson—he could not care less. Secondly “Judy loved Donatello” (213), thus showing simple inarticulate enthusiasms that contrast with her husband’s cold intellectualism. Finally, she is incomparably more responsive to the allure of the world around her than her husband, who is blinded by his ambition. While Judy marvels at the “string of

colored lights" (213) under which they have dinner in the mountains, the smell of "warm earth between the grass" or the "sweet and soft" air—"what Italians called *dolce*" (220)—, Bill is irremediably self-absorbed. His quest thus gradually becomes the occasion for Judy to experience an unfamiliar sense of emancipation. Eventually, "the visit" will be hers more than is.

- 37 As indicated by his name, Thompson, "the great man," is an American, originally "from Minnesota" (220): above all, he is an eminent scholar, apparently specialized in Byzantine and Roman art, who has long ago settled in a secluded place above Genoa, where he has been living with his German wife and the Italian aristocratic family of their daughter. As the story soon reveals, Thompson's Americanness has long faded out. Though he obviously is the pretext for the story, the focus of attention and the object of an extended quest, his actual appearance is long postponed, first by Bill's six-month wait for an invitation, then by the couple's two idle days in the neighboring village before they get the call, then by the tortuous road to his place and finally by the fact the Owens have to meet the whole family, grandchildren included, before they get to meet him. Those details contribute to enveloping the man with a sense of mystery, meanwhile sharpening Bill's nerve-racking desire to see him. The Owens' long journey toward him across numerous obstacles, including a steep road in the mountains, is reminiscent of the pattern of fairy tales. At the end of the road, there is, indeed, a castle, though derelict, a "prince," Thompson's son-in-law, as well as a "princess," the latter's wife, though she is an untypical princess. As the Owens meet her, she is indeed "wearing bracelets and smoking a cigarette" (216); she also mentions the daily swims she takes in the Mediterranean Sea thanks to a ski lift, acquired for her specific use, that takes her back up to the top of the hill. When Thompson, the king of this eccentric fairy tale, eventually appears, the Owens' world quakes:

From the opposite end of the terrace, making all turn, Thompson himself strode in. He was grizzly and vigorous, with heavy brown hands. He wore a cardigan, crumpled trousers that looked about to fall down, and carpet slippers. He advanced to the center of the group and halted, squinting in the strong sun. Judy dared not look at Bill. She had seen him at many other rungs of the ladder, looking both fearful and hopeful, both nervous and brave, in desperate proportions only Bill could concoct, and her heart had gone out to him. But now, as he confronted the Great Man at last, she looked elsewhere. She knew that he was transferring his glass to his left hand; she knew that his grasp would be damp, shaky and cold. (216)

- 38 Thompson's portrayal triggers off conflicting impressions that echo the revelation Judy experiences at that very moment. Judy is aware that Bill's unreasonable admiration for Thompson (and his excruciating wait) cannot but make the man's actual appearance a smashing disappointment. As a matter of fact, Thompson, whose appearance is not quite orthodox, hardly fits Bill's stereotypical expectations. His portrayal anticipates the great man's later avowal to Judy that "[he] was never a scholar" (221) and is therefore quite critical of, let alone indifferent to, "words like monograph and research grant, Harvard and Cambridge" (217), which encapsulate Bill's whole life and self. However, while emphasizing his "crumpled" look, which she somehow sees through the lens of her husband's expectations, Judy also notices the man's impressive vigor. At this specific moment, at the same moment her husband—as she *knows* for sure because he has become so predictable to her—faces a disillusion he may never overcome, she experiences a turning point in her life. The sheer force of Thompson's character, certainly highlighted by the surprise he embodies, supersedes her spontaneous

identification with Bill's vision: first she "dared not look at Bill," then she "looked elsewhere," hopefully toward a future in which no one dictates to her how she should behave. While the association of the conjunction "but" with the adverb "now" marks a rupture between her life up to that moment and what is looming in the future, Bill's "great man" become her "Great Man," the instrument of her emancipation and possibly of "the overturn of all her values" (275), thus recalling Margaret Johnson's radical experience in "The Light in the Piazza." Significantly, as Thompson gets up from his afternoon nap, it is Judy—not Bill—that he talks to in the park around the villa. Modestly, unexpectedly "kiss[ing] her brow" (221), he somehow magically delivers her from her bondage, as a result of which "[s]he [is] left to lose her way alone" (221).

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- 39 In her "Preface" to *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*, with which this discussion opened, the writer first evokes her own Italian experience as a loosening—" [w]ithout meaning to I had got unstuck"—, as an unintentional uprooting, opening up a radically new landscape to her, both as a woman and as a writer. The sensuous shapes, lights and sounds discovered and marveled at in Italy were part and parcel of Spencer's experience of otherness. Meanwhile, they ended up forming the "new terrains," from which stories would sprout. Together with them, characters embodying new ways of being a woman emerged. A few lines down in the same preface, the writer retraces that turning point²⁷ and its consequences through more destructive images: "My experience was now broken into pieces, no less valid, perhaps no less interesting—perhaps even more relevant, I was tempted to speculate, to the restless life of the world?" (x). While irremediably challenging her traditionally Southern values and landmarks, Italy allowed Spencer's vision of things to broaden and include infinitely complex realities; it prompted her to question both herself and her original environment and, last but not least for a writer, it contributed to keeping her alertness to the world fully awake.
- 40 *The Southern Woman* certainly is an emblematic title for a collection of "New and Selected Fiction," all the more so as Spencer then decided that it would be her last book. Though in 2014 she could not refrain from publishing yet another short story collection, *Starting Over*, with—once again—a very heartening title for a then ninety-three-year old writer, Spencer's statement that "I had been writing fiction since my first novel was published in 1948, I felt it was time to call *The Southern Woman* my last book"²⁸ is quite revealing of her overall perception of her work. At the core of that title, the singular form of the noun "woman" seemingly revokes the ongoing critical discussions about whether the South should be regarded as heterogeneous or homogeneous,²⁹ by imposing a very personal conception of Southern unity. While being one and unique, the Southern woman she is and many of her female characters represent, is also made of a plurality of experiences and includes several Souths that both echo and compete with one another.³⁰ Italy is the very experience that, in the image of Margaret Johnson, helps Spencer's female characters grasp, accept and eventually perpetuate their own duality—the other in themselves—, miles away from pre-established role models. It constitutes a priceless experience of empowerment and pleasure.

We must certainly leave for Rome tomorrow, Mrs. Johnson thought. She heard herself thinking it, at some distance, as though in a dream.

She entered thus from that day a conscious duality of existence, knowing what she

should and must do and making no motion toward doing it. The Latin temperament may thrive on such subtleties and never find it necessary to conclude them, but to Mrs. Johnson the experience was strange and new. It confused her. She believed, as most Anglo-Saxons do, that she always acted logically and to the best of her ability on whatever she knew to be true. And now she found this quality immobilized and all her actions taken over by the simple drift of the days. She had in fact come face to face with Italy. (265-66)

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NOTES

1. Nettles quotes from Spencer's interview with Bunting (30, 31, 32).
2. "The Light in the Piazza" first appeared in *The New Yorker* in June 1960. Spencer considers the novella, which remains her best-known and most celebrated story, as her "albatross": "I think that it has great charm, and it probably is the real thing, a work written under great compulsion, while I was under the spell of Italy. But it only took me, all told, about a month to write, whereas some of my other novels—the longer ones—took years. So to have people come up to me, as they do, and gush about *The Light in the Piazza*, and be totally ignorant that I ever turned a hand at anything else, is... upsetting" ("The Art of Fiction" 131).
3. "Wisteria" is an exception in the Italian tales insofar as its focalizer is a male character.
4. The Marilee stories include "A Southern Landscape," "Sharon" and "Indian Summer." They were gathered by the University Press of Mississippi in a small collection entitled *Marilee* in 1981, the same year Doubleday & Company published *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*.
5. *The Light in the Piazza and Other Italian Tales*, first published in 1996, contains "all her Italian work" "with the exception of a portion of the novel *No Place for an Angel* (1967), which is difficult to excerpt" (Phillips xi).
6. In *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*, which was published twenty years before *The Southern Woman*, both the selection and the order in which the stories appear are quite different: the earlier collection contains stories that are reprinted "in the order in which they were written (not necessarily the order of publication)" (Spencer, Preface xi), splitting into four parts corresponding to four distinct stages in Spencer's career, then spanning from 1944 to 1977. *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer* contains the two stories—"The Pincian Gate" and "Wisteria"—as well as the other Italian novella, "Knights and Dragons," that were not selected for *The Southern Woman*. Conversely, "The Light in the Piazza" is conspicuously absent from the first collection while "The White Azalea" and "The Visit" are systematically reprinted in the continuation of one another. In-text references are to *The Southern Woman*.
7. The notion that Spencer's years in Italy "removed her more or less permanently from the Southern setting which provided the material for her first three books" (Anderson 18) is questionable insofar as her most recent short stories, published in the 2000s and at the beginning of the 2010s contain quite a few stories that either take place in the South or refer to it.
8. Cunningly enough, the narrator indeed evokes Miss Theresa Stubblefield's "portly, well-bred way" (204; emphasis added).

9. See Barthes's discussion about that notion and the importance of what he calls "useless details."

10. Gérard Préher remarks that "The Cousins" operates in a similar way, as "the reader is, so to speak, invited to follow Ella Mason's train of thought . . . Italy provides Ella Mason with a view from elsewhere that enables the past to acquire meaning. Indeed, in an endeavor to make sense of her cousin Ben's comment that it is her fault they 'lost Eric' . . . , she decided to go back to Italy and clarify the situation for herself" ("Italian Tales" 86).

11. "Poor George! . . . Theresa had seen him through the right college, into the right fraternity, and though pursued by various girls and various mamas of girls, safely married to the right sort, however much in the early years of that match his wife, Anne, had not seemed to understand poor George. Could it just be, Theresa wondered, that Anne had understood only too well, and that George all along was extraordinary only in the degree to which he was dull?" (205). The repetition of the adjective "right" punctuates Theresa's slow awareness that her own life so far has, in the image of her brother, been dull enough.

12. Incidentally, she also suggests that the churches she is familiar with would benefit from a little warmth.

13. The critic Hilton Anderson clarifies the cause of Margaret Johnson's sorrow, while establishing an important distinction between Spencer and James, her Americans in Europe having often been compared to his: "Unlike typical Jamesian characters, the Johnsons are not in Europe seeking culture or a higher society than they could find in America; but Margaret Johnson is in Florence because she has fled there with her daughter, Clara, in order to avoid embarrassing situations brought about by Clara's mental conditions" (21). Spencer has often refuted such parallels: "On several occasions she has disclaimed any real fondness for James and denied his influence" (Phillips xvi). Spencer actually seems to have been annoyed by constant comparisons with James much in the way she resented the way "The Light in the Piazza" somehow outshined the rest of her work: "Well, right away, here came 'Henry James' in every single review. The only odd thing was that I never once thought about it. It did occur to me and still seems obvious that the correct comparison for *The Light in the Piazza* might have been Boccaccio. Here was the kind of situation outlandish enough to have delighted him" ("The Art of Fiction" 119-20).

14. It is interesting that the lexicon of escape should also appear in Spencer's own considerations about Southern subject matter: "I couldn't escape the Mississippi subject matter—I was brought up in it. When I went to Europe, as anyone might, I couldn't help loving Italy . . . I just adored it, everything, and went back as soon as I could. That is, when I was awarded a Guggenheim. I wrote about it because I loved it, and had stayed there so long that I thought I knew it well enough. But I always wrote from an outsider's point of view. I think it must be clear that one has to do that, out of honesty" ("The Art of Fiction" 119). Somehow echoing her characters' experiences, the writer's own trajectory was determined by contradictory tensions, let alone "the pull of conflicting desires" (Nettels 82), acknowledgedly under the grip of the South, while feeling an irrepressible urge to leave to Italy.

15. Both Spencer herself and Anderson emphasize that "Knights and Dragons" develops a darker, less positive, vision of departure: "*Knights and Dragons* was a kind of dark companion to *The Light in the Piazza*; someone with problems back home working free of them in Italy" ("The Art of Fiction" 120); "The impression one gets about Martha is that she has fled from America and from the memory of her ex-husband rather than to Italy" (Anderson 29).

16. The meaning of *riposarsi* is indirectly clarified for our benefit in another story, in this instance "The Cousins": "How Italy folds up and goes to sleep from two to four" (247).

17. If there are significantly fewer occurrences of Italian in "The Cousins," it is because the traveling cousins mostly evolve in a close circle. Ben, who is probably the most learned of them all, expresses their collective enthusiasm in French: "*J'ai très hâte d'y aller,*' said Ben. The little French he knew was a lot more than ours" (227). This foreshadows his role as a spokesman for

the group, let alone a father figure. Once in Europe, before they spend time in Italy, like most of Spencer's traveling Americans, the cousins first go to London, then travel south to Paris and the French Riviera, which accounts for a few noticeable occurrences of French words in the story: while "*crème caramel*" (219) and "*marrons glacés*" (234) refer to typical French sweets, the phrase "some *poule*" (219) obviously designates a loose-mannered woman rather than a fowl, thus revealing Spencer's cunning use of foreign languages and exhibiting "her capacity for cool detachment" (Welty xiv).

18. Later in the story, Margaret envisions Fabrizio's striking appearance again, this time anticipating her husband's disapproval of him: "In what frame of mind would he be cast by Fabrizio's cuffless trousers, little pointed shoes and carefully dressed hair?" (293).

19. The elegant appearances of Italian men in "The White Azalea" and "The Light in the Piazza", including Fabrizio's father and brother, contrast with Thompson's unruly appearance in "The Visit." Within the story, the old American man's careless look counterpoints the image of "The prince himself," "a dark man wearing English flannels" (215).

20. In *From Cannibals to Radicals. Figures and Limits of Exoticism*, Roger Célestin investigates exotic formations in western literature from the Renaissance onwards. He describes exoticism as "the means for certain writers to negotiate (discursive) position and (subjective) space vis-à-vis this [Home] culture and vis-à-vis the exotic simultaneously" (3). Lisbeth Minnaard argues that "[this] definition sees exoticism in literature as a practice of subject-positioning. Exoticism is not restricted to the negotiation of the other culture, the exotic outside, but it also concerns the home culture, the familiar and dominant centre" (76).

21. "As in most of Spencer's Italian tales, danger lurks just over one's shoulder" (Phillips xv).

22. The representations of women are in constant flux throughout Spencer's work; therefore Spencer's characterization of women is a process, which is confirmed by her own perception of female characters between "Ship Island" and *The Snare*, which both represent a new kind of Spencer female character: "for some reason I began to feel an affinity to kind of waiflike women that were free. They have no particular ties, or no ties that are worth holding them, and so they become subject to all kinds of encounters, influences, choices out in the world" (Spencer, "Elizabeth Spencer" 98).

23. It was inspired by a later trip Spencer took to Italy in 1983 (see Préher, "Italian Tales" 85).

24. See for instance 224, 237, 238, 242, 251, etc.

25. Ella Mason's first-person narration in "The Cousins" is a subtle *mélange* of frankness, let alone bluntness, and demureness.

26. Judy cannot help remarking that the Thompson women are extremely unsophisticated: "The princess and her mother, Judy felt certain, did not own one lipstick between them. They dressed like peasants, forgetting the whole thing" (217)—a quality she obviously admires and envies.

27. The expression actually is Spencer's as reported by Gérard Préher borrowing from his private correspondence with the writer: "I look back on all this now and see that Italy was a real turning point" ("Italian Tales" 80).

28. Those words can also be traced on Spencer's official website where Spencer mentions the fact that she is not the one who came up with that title; but she definitely approved of it. Commenting on the making of the book on her website, Spencer remarks that "My faithful editor Samuel Vaughan, who saw *Landscapes of the Heart* through to publication, suggested the title, and the Modern Library director, David Ebershoff and I worked together agreeably on the selection."

29. In that respect, see, for instance, Marcel Arbeit's discussion of the plurality and heterogeneity of the South in Spencer's work.

30. Besides, it is quite symptomatic that Spencer should have preferred the noun "woman" over the more hackneyed form "lady," especially in the context of Southern culture. This is how she responds to the *genderization* of American letters in *The Paris Review* interview: "Would you mind the term 'man writer'? 'Woman writer' is just next door to 'lady writer.' I wanted to be firm and

even tough-minded—if not ‘tough’ in the Hemingway sense—a novelist only, as distinct from a woman novelist. That was my early reaction—it had nothing to do with women’s lib, of course—but I think for me it was the right beginning” (“The Art of Fiction” 127).

ABSTRACTS

Privilégiant les quatre récits italiens sélectionnés pour *The Southern Woman*, cet article analyse l’entrelacs des représentations de l’italianité et de l’américanité, en examinant l’usage que fait Elizabeth Spencer des stéréotypes, contrastes, effets de miroir et contre-représentations, du point de vue de personnages-narratrices qui vivent et, pour la plupart, apprécient l’attrait de l’étrangeté et leur statut de résidentes temporaires dans une zone intermédiaire assez faste entre continents et cultures.

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