



# Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

72 | Spring 2019

Special Issue: Elizabeth Spencer

---

## Return Trip with a Wolfean Spirit

Amélie Moisy

---



### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/2563>

ISSN: 1969-6108

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2019

Number of pages: 233-250

ISSN: 0294-04442

### Electronic reference

Amélie Moisy, "Return Trip with a Wolfean Spirit", *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 72 | Spring 2019, Online since 01 June 2021, connection on 02 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/2563>

---

This text was automatically generated on 2 June 2021.

© All rights reserved

---

# Return Trip with a Wolfean Spirit

Amélie Moisy

---

- 1 Elizabeth Spencer's "Return Trip" (2009) shows the different characters effecting different types of return—spatial and psychological—as Gérald Préher has pointed out in "Edward Glenn: L'homme-mystère d'Elizabeth Spencer" (101). The story describes forms of return, whose dynamics entail shuttling back and forth or looking back in order to move forward, and Spencer's "indirection" befits the return of her mystery man, Edward Glenn. "Return Trip" also raises the question of return in literature: set near Asheville, the native town of Thomas Wolfe, featuring his mother's boarding house and evoking "Thomas Wolfe's ghost" (33), it testifies to Spencer's return to Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*, which had moved her as a young woman. In an address to the South Atlantic Modern Language Association meeting for the Wolfe centennial in 2000, Spencer said that she had reread and still "loved" the novel (79).
- 2 "Return Trip" has a Wolfean spirit: the Old Kentucky Home, where Wolfe grew up, and its ghostly inhabitants, haunt Patricia Stewart's car as she and Edward contemplate the old house. On the one hand, like Wolfe, Spencer embeds her protagonists' recollections of the past in a narrative whose organizing principle seems to be back and forth return. At the level of form, both writers alternate between the comical and the serious, between a quasi-theatrical rendering of the action and the tracing of thought processes, between evoking the past and depicting the present, between describing the ordinary and giving glimpses of the supernatural, while shuttling in contrasting symbols. And in their mutual treatment of the themes of family and loss, both rework the restorative fantasies of the family romance. On the other hand, Spencer, like Wolfe, also envisages return as looking back in order to move forward: their visions of home impacted by both "unhomeliness" and the *unheimlich*, and common taste for open endings, are instances of return that leads to progress. Finally, Spencer and Wolfe refer to a body of other texts. This Edward Glenn story can stand alone as Patricia's story, but the reader's appreciation is enriched by perceiving the echoes with other stories and the Wolfean spirit alluded to. In "Return Trip" Spencer proves, like Wolfe, that return abets creation.

## Returns Back and Forth: Shuttling Between Discrete Elements

- 3 Spencer's narrative, like Wolfe's, weaves together strands of different nature. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe blends humor with gravity, theatrical showing and insight in the account of the Gants' departure for Saint Louis, for example (Ch. 5), where the scene alternates between descriptions of the characters from the outside, with adverbs reminiscent of stage directions, and inclusions of thoughts. These thoughts are occasionally humorous, like Eliza's worries about the half fare leading to her admonition to "scrooch up"; others are poignant, as at the tongue-tied instant before parting: "the monstrous fumbling of all life . . . held them speechless" (55). Wolfe's characters are often confronted to thoughts too deep for words. They are occasionally plunged back into the past: when W.O. Gant hears Bacchus Pentland in Altamont, he is taken twenty years back to their encounter (9), and when he marries Bacchus' sister, he has a vision of his boyhood home, resulting in disorientation: "Why here? O lost!" (15).
- 4 The characters have a buried life—for example, Eugene longs for the great world, hiding his thoughts from his family. Wolfe alternates between everyday reality and the supernatural, describing the furnishings of a shack in "Niggertown" (305) and suggesting that Ben's "dark angel" weeps over Eugene (113), for instance, or that he punctually sighs "O lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again" (2, 58, 296...). And Wolfe repeatedly uses symbols such as W.O. Gant's blazes and costly stone angel, Eliza's saving string and bottles (48-49), or the train's whistle—Eugene hearing it as a boy (301), and as he prepares to leave Altamont at the end. Spencer emulates Wolfe's shuttling between discrete elements. She, Spencer too, makes return trips from humor to seriousness. The narrator of *Look Homeward, Angel* comments upon Helen Gant's ruined honeymoon, synthesizing the appeal of the novel: "It was funny. It was ugly. It was terrible" (387). And Spencer's story, based on a vaudeville situation in which the wrong man sleeps in the bride's bed, reveals serious dysfunctions in the characters. Ann Beattie sums up the story as a family's willful self-delusion: "The story is psychologically predicated on denial: A married woman had a brief sexual encounter long ago with a man and became pregnant, giving birth to a son her husband raised as his. . . . [W]hen Edward returns, the old litany of self-deception is invoked." The tone of the story can be humorous, maintaining Patricia's total blackout: "And ohmigod, it was Edward . . . straightening up from where he was sprawled out next to her" (26). Again, it can be grave, recalling Wolfe's characters groping to express themselves or to come to terms with a situation:
- "I do love you, Pat." [Boyd] sounded angry. "Why honey," she said, "of course you do."  
 Something was happening, but where it was happening, they didn't know. The first thunder rumbled. (33)
- 5 Like Wolfe, Spencer moves from theatrical showing to recounting the characters' thoughts and back again. The long dialogue between Patricia and Boyd serves as exposition:
- "Maybe he just wants to see us," she offered.  
 "Why not a dozen other people?"  
 "Those, too. He has affections. And God knows after what's happened he needs to find some. . . . [h]is wife died."

. . . Boyd apologized. “He’s your cousin,” he allowed, adding, “certainly not mine.”  
(16)

- 6 Elsewhere, thought flashes interrupt the action, as when Patricia recognizes her son coming up the road: “Oh Lord, thought Patricia. Why now?” (17). The reader assumes she is impatient because she is busy with Edward’s visit, but as her thoughts dwell on “their son looking so much like Edward,” it becomes clear that is the key to what is troubling her, “the mystery [that] could possibly come up again” (17).
- 7 Scenes from the past and the present alternate as in *Look Homeward, Angel*, when Patricia goes over “the mystery” linked to Edward’s presence in her bridal chamber, and over her life since the subsequent birth of her only son, Mark. While the conversation around the drinks table goes back and forth, she recollects the whole of “that one last evening” (24). At the end, hearing Boyd and Mark quarreling, she returns to it once more:
- They could say it was about school, but it was really about Edward.  
There was no way possible she and Edward could have done anything at all that long-ago night, both drunk as coots. No, it wasn’t possible. (35)
- 8 Like Wolfe, Spencer shuttles between ordinary reality, the *Heimlich*, literally, the “homelike,” and the supernatural, or uncanny, the *Unheimlich*, or “unhomely” (Freud, “The Uncanny” 219), showing Patricia at the airport heading for the “ladies’ room,” wanting “to look her pretty best” after the heat, but not having time before Edward comes up to her with “[s]cruffy shoes, wilted jacket, tee shirt open” and “plant[s] a sidewise kiss” (17-18); but at the Wolfe House Patricia imagines “the family’s torments . . . speaking in their ears” (23), just as at the end she will hear voices that “had died years ago” (35).
- 9 Another noteworthy similarity is Spencer and Wolfe’s repeated use of contrasting symbols to enrich their texts. Storms occur on the night of the Edward and Patricia imbroglio, and are also raging when Edward leaves, giving an elemental undertone to the feelings at play, while Boyd’s fussing with the fishpond shows his need for mastery. And the New River, which runs by the house, implicitly contrasts with the Mississippi of Patricia and Edward’s youth—“Old Man River.”

## (Re)Turning Over Loss: The Family Romance

- 10 Wolfe and Spencer’s back and forth work on the family situates their texts within the genre of the family romance—and they show the fantasy at work. According to Freud, the family romance is a compensatory fantasy that children weave when they lose the state of blissful love and unity with their parents in their earliest years. They dream that they are foundlings, or not their father’s children, and that their real parents are nicer or more powerful—thus returning to the idealized parental figures of their early years, whom they still love, and allaying the pangs of loss (see Freud, “Family Romances”).
- 11 Richard King has identified a specific “Southern family romance” which inspires Southern writers—I touch upon it in the next part, bearing on “visions of home.” More generally, in literature, this basic fantasy is reworked into plots of affairs, incest, or bastard children. In *Look Homeward, Angel*, the Gant parents have their “partner-children,” Eliza sleeping with Eugene, Gant having a special bond with Helen—and as it “was a cause more and more of annoyance to Eliza . . . he was inclined to exaggerate

and emphasize it” (67). The Gant children vie to be the worthy heirs of an idealized father, the Pentland mother being associated with degeneracy. Helen tells Eugene, “You haven’t a drop of Gant blood in you . . . Pentland queerness sticking out all over you” (143). Eugene feels the loss of original unity to ambivalence, as he sees the faults of his family; he grieves over two brothers’ deaths and the decline of his heroic father due to illness. Besides showing complicated family ties, like Wolfe, Spencer creates a recurring sense of loss and “lostness,” which she responded to in his novel (“Of Ghosts” 80).

- 12 Edward’s loss takes him back and forth. We are apprised of his grief quite early: “he needs to find some [affection] . . . his wife died” (16). Later, “Edward was grieving over his loss” (27). The lostness that follows his bereavement for the terminally ill lover he had met on his travels in Mexico becomes apparent from the “plan” he exposes to Patricia, just to keep moving wherever he may be “at all welcome” (18, 15). His first wife Aline’s presence at home in Mississippi rules out a return there, and any attempt at making further plans brings him back to his loss.

“So what will you do next?” Patricia asked Edward.

“When my round of visits are over, you mean? I’ll have to sit down and think about it.”

Boyd regarded him as though he might be half-wit. For a grown man just not to know what to do next seemed hard to believe. (28)

. . .

“Maybe I’ll go abroad,” Edward mused. “. . . It might be nice just to find some place and sit in it.”

. . .

“Try Mexico. That’s summer all year round.”

“I did try Mexico. It’s where I met Joclyn.”

“Oh.” (30)

- 13 Despite Boyd’s disapproval, Edward’s mourning is socially acceptable. However, the apparently efficient hostess Patricia’s loss cannot be admitted. As she and Edward look at the Old Kentucky Home, their own past surges up, inadmissible—although, as Beattie argues, the characters’ words and deeds point back to their involvement. “Edward: ‘Tricia, *nothing did happen.*’ Tricia: ‘Right.’ We’re cued to understand the opposite of what we hear” (Beattie).
- 14 Yet Spencer’s indirect approach leaves the reader in doubt as to whether or not Patricia and Edward did have a sexual encounter. They could simply have slept off their drunkenness together on the night of Patricia and Boyd’s wedding celebration in the old family home: Patricia cannot remember. “‘You’d have to see he hadn’t even undressed,’ she kept saying to Boyd” (26). Yet she might be deluding herself—“why she had to maintain it was the real question” (26); Patricia’s son Mark “looks at lot like [Edward]” (22) and “[i]n spite of efforts, she had never conceived again” (30). Spencer gives glimpses onto whole modes of living with loss: she shows that there are porous lines between knowing “nothing happened,” not knowing if anything did, denying to oneself that something did, and suffering from traumatic events.
- 15 When Patricia’s husband would not discuss the episode after it took place, “it dawned on her that the reason he shut her up was that he didn’t care for any of them, especially Edward. *He wants to get rid of all of us!* Such was the thought that kept hanging around like a bad child or a smelly stray dog, no matter how many times she told it to go away” (27). Her night with Edward is a marker triggering back and forth repetition: “She was bound to remember that one last evening. And so was Boyd. And so was Edward. . . .

scene by scene, like a rented movie, its sequence never varied” (24). What does return is loss. Boyd did not accept her for who she was, leaving her alone out of anger as a newlywed. Shamed at being caught with Edward, made to feel guilty, Patricia feels a further affective rift with Boyd. The incident marks her loss of Edward, first (to prevent justifying Boyd’s hostility, Patricia buries her youthful wild streak and “all the running around during those years that she and Edward had done” [32]), then the loss of her family.

- 16 While Edward is with them, Patricia’s recollections build up to a sense of lostness in his and Boyd’s company: “Patricia was so annoyed she actually considered leaving them before dinner, with nothing to eat. But staying, she had to face it that the only really difficult person was Boyd” (27). Her lostness is reinforced by her traumatic erasure of facts. As Cathy Caruth explains, “The language of trauma is the language of absolute erasure, not imaginable in the past or present, but, always, as something missed, and about to return, a possibility, always, of trauma in the future.” Patricia is disoriented when what she has erased typically returns as “something other . . . [a] singular and new event” (Caruth 87). The moment when “boy and newcomer” shake hands and stand together is “stunning” (23), and Edward’s unplanned departure is another shock: “Patricia felt the breath go out of her, permanently, it seemed” (34). She jokingly pictures him going back to the house where they were on the eve—“back to ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ . . . look[ing] for Thomas Wolfe’s ghost” (33). Of course, Patricia can tell no-one of the fullness of her loss. Her overenthusiastic response to Edward’s chaste kiss on retiring debouches on loss, for she and Edward do not interact again in the story: “Edward, finally rising, crossed to Patricia and kissed her on the forehead. She threw her arms up to him, and he was gone” (31).
- 17 In this way, Spencer elaborates a family romance. Doing so, she builds on the fantasy identified by Freud, an apparent departure that is a return, prompted by loss. At the beginning, Patricia had associated the word “family” with “Boyd’s family,” so ambivalent had she become about her own (21). Spencer shows that the family romance, enabling a return to love and unity, restores the characters’ spirits and compensates for loss: Patricia and Edward experience renewed kinship, Edward “echo[es] her own thoughts exactly,” she guesses his; “On they went, laughing and remembering” (31). They exalt their Aunt Sadie, returning to love and grandeur in their Mississippi past. They make their relative a distinguished personage, whereas she is “dotty” to Boyd: “Aunt Sadie was wonderful at [keeping up a big property],” “She did her best . . . [r]ight to the last,” “It was a pretty place.” They find her eccentricities charming, even keeping a pig as a pet in the house (29-35). In Wolfe’s novel, W.O. Gant’s loud, ranting tirades are seen as proof of his superiority by his children, who “shriek exultantly” at his inventions (64); even “the negresses chuckl[e] . . . ‘Dat man sho’ can tawk!’” (132). As for Mark, Patricia’s son, Spencer shows him to have found in Edward the idealized, all powerful parental figure of childhood, perhaps putting two and two together: “‘Didn’t Mama date him or something?’” (20); at table, he cuts off his remark about problems with fathers, understanding his *faux pas* (28). In a humorous passage, he chatters on about his hero Edward, to Boyd’s annoyance (34).
- 18 Although Edward recalls Patricia to her loss, together they have made a return that the Greeks might call *nostos*, a journey back to a faraway home, and they have been again part of a great whole through memory and fantasy. Still, Spencer makes the point that their complicated family relations are not to be easily forgotten: “Always at Aunt

Sadie's,' Boyd said with a shading of contempt, but maybe he was only recognizing their nostalgia for those youthful days. Patricia doubted it. She was bound to remember that one last evening. And so was Boyd. And so was Edward" (24).

## Return as Looking Backward to Move Forward: Visions of Home

- 19 Obviously, the formal and thematic returns move "Return Trip" forward so that the reader determines its meaning; and progress depends on return in other respects. Both Wolfe and Spencer render visions of home impacted by unusual experiences of "unhomeliness" and the *Unheimlich*, which work together to make progress possible.
- 20 Linked to the losses that the family romance fantasy makes up for in the characters is a cultural and historical loss. Patricia and Edward's "kinship [comes] back" as they evoke the Southern manners of "people . . . made like us" (28): "Return Trip" shows the loss of a certain South and how this loss is driven home. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha calls "unhomeliness" the new measure one must take of one's dwelling after one's personal or cultural assumptions have been challenged. Bhabha uses the term "the unhomely moment" in a postcolonial context, but he applies it to literature, stating that the feeling is rendered in other situations (14). Catherine Seltzer has studied the disorientation and reinterpretation of American domestic space in Spencer's *Jack of Diamonds* as "the unhomely moment insists upon a recalculation of 'the world-in-the-home'" (114).
- 21 In *Look Homeward, Angel*, the Northern Gant arrives in the South with the reconstruction and marries his antagonist, the Southern Eliza. And yet, it is Eliza who is most attuned to the "surging into these chosen hills [of] the strong thrust of the world" (135), buying property in view of future development. Such a conflict in values causes an "unhomely moment" at the end, when Gant is ill and the family quarrels over sharing out the money of his estate; it seems to Eugene as if his family have been taken over by "the disease of money" and turned into "curs [fighting] over a bone." Eugene agrees to sign away his share, saying "I am done with it cleanly," and believing this is a step forward; but he weeps "for all the lovely people who would not come again" (610-13). The domestic space is reinterpreted before Eugene leaves for the North, when the ghost of his brother Ben enables him to return to the past in a final anamnesis and he becomes conscious of the lasting impact of his family and town before he breaks ties with them.
- 22 When Spencer was growing up in Mississippi, "the old had been set in its ways since the Civil War, but the new was making itself felt" (*Mississippi Writers* 600). She shows this civilizational tension in "Return Trip." Patricia and Edward grew up in Mississippi when "good" families like theirs (32) owned "big properties . . . with lots of black help kowtowing and yesma'aming," as Boyd puts it (29). That has "[a]ll changed," Patricia sighs (29); it has for Edward—" "[Mama]'s gone, too, and so is the house" (19). "They drink too much" is not what Boyd means when he predicts the loss of Aunt Sadie's house; he probably feels the family to be irresponsible from a sense of entitlement, as Patricia used to be before "she minded him"— "[T]hat wild night in the cemetery. Several had got expelled. . . . [S]howing up at the Easter service in a low-cut silver dress with spangles . . ." (32-33). Aunt Sadie's family seems to have followed the roles

- described in *Ol' Man River*—"colored folks work while de white folks play," drinking and "having fun" (25), assessing others on how much "fun" they are (32).
- 23 Richard King has spoken of a Southern family romance, "a tradition . . . whose essential structure was the literal and symbolic family," which informed Southerners' values and views of the past as a glorious patriarchy. King argues that Wolfe, an Appalachian, was not burdened by the Southern tradition, and that neither he nor female writers were engaged in coming to terms with the Southern family romance (195-96, 7-9). Carol Manning has since pointed out that women have developed and enriched the theme with other figures, and Louis D. Rubin and C. Hugh Holman have stressed that there are more than one South (Manning 7-9). Indeed, both of the works under study question the Southern family romance, demystifying the Southern tradition: Wolfe presents a Southern mother who is no more genteel than the Yankee father, and Spencer shows a responsible husband's ambivalent reaction to a Southern belle, and vice-versa.
- 24 Patricia's ambivalence is shown, as were the Wolfe parents' divergent values, in the story's "unhomely moment." It is a complex one. Sitting in the car with Edward before the Old Kentucky Home, Patricia feels that the house with the quarreling Wolfe family has entered her car. Just as in Asheville, that house is the last of its kind among newer buildings, and is "half burned down" (21), Aunt Sadie's house is a casualty from Patricia's past. And when she and Edward join the others at the summer house, she has a flashback to the fight at Aunt Sadie's, and of her intuition then that "[Boyd] wants to get rid of all of us!" (27). That very thought recurs in the summer house. It seems that Boyd has disrupted a pleasant life to impose reason: "Patricia . . . didn't see . . . why they should stop having fun" (25); "the only really difficult person was Boyd" (27). Boyd, an insurance broker from Raleigh, "made money" (32), "he had a no nonsense approach" (32), as opposed to Aunt Sadie and her daughter Gladys's insistence on fun (33), and he proves right about her family losing the house. Boyd represents the New South, which Mississippi belatedly entered. Boyd was the "world-in-the-home" that brought the loss of a certain South and brought in reality, forcing Patricia to move on from spoilt, entitled belle to responsible helpmate. Nonetheless, her "settling down" with the serious Boyd appears to be a loss of a dimension of herself: when Aunt Sadie has to sell, as Boyd had predicted, the narrator notes only, "[b]y then Patricia was raising her baby and had settled down even more" (33), as if Patricia's affects had been dulled.
- 25 Yet Edward, too, acts as the "world-in-the-home" in the story. Unlike Boyd's, his behavior makes no sense. He commits himself to a dying woman for love ("That was Edward" [18]), taking the impetuosity and generosity of the mythical Southern gentleman to extremes: "Nobody in Mississippi" would believe Joclyn's legacy had come as a surprise (22). Although Patricia believed she would "love to see" Edward (15), the ghosts she imagines in the car are screens for the real ghost from the past that is in the car with her, and that so much quarreling has been about. Edward is the return of the repressed, the return of the trauma of that night and of losing the South. On the one hand, Patricia feels a "kinship" for him as their common past and his values move her, but on the other, her life with Boyd and Mark has meaning: "'I do love you, Pat.' He sounded angry. 'Why, honey,' she said, 'of course you do. . . . And we both love Mark.' Impulsively, they hugged" (33).
- 26 In Spencer's depiction of how one recalculates one's vision of home, a better adaptation to reality is possible after negotiations with the *Unheimlich*, recalling Wolfe's refrain



“ghost, come back again” (*Look Homeward, Angel* 2) and bearing out Seltzer’s statement that for Spencer, “in-between spaces” can initiate new signs of identity (114). In “The Uncanny” (1919), Freud tries to describe “in what circumstances the familiar can become uncanny and frightening” (219). He writes that among the many meanings of the words *heimlich*, homelike, are those of a place free from ghostly influences, or withdrawn from the eyes or from knowledge. Thus “an *unheimlich* house” is often translated as “a haunted house” (240), and, for Schelling, the uncanny is what ought to have remained hidden and secret, yet comes to light (225).

- 27 When Edward resurfaces, dredging up “the mystery,” Patricia gets the eerie feeling that “The long-ago meetings, quarrels, seductions and heartaches of that big, lumbering man [Wolfe]’s life, the family’s torments, had all smoked up right out of the windows and porches to sit on the backseat of the car, leaning awkwardly over, speaking in their ears”—and ends on the conclusion that it is “time to let it out and then move on” (23). Freud believes that recurrent similarities—that remind us of our instinctual “compulsion to repeat”—are often the cause of our noticing the uncanny at work (237), though he specifies that poetic license applies in literature (248). Spencer shows that the *unheimlich* return of the repressed spurs Patricia’s desire to “move on.”
- 28 The last image of Patricia, by a river moving endlessly on like life, is of hearing the ghostly voices of the past, “the Mississippi voices . . . though they had died years ago or hadn’t been seen for ages” (35). Again, Freud mentions that the infantile belief in a world peopled by spirits is a narcissistic reaction against “the manifest prohibitions of reality” (239). Yet, Patricia’s memories of her people as she puts her feet in the river do not “excite dread and horror” (Freud 218), and may sustain her so that she situates herself in reality justly, neither with the depression caused by Boyd’s disapproval of her family or the exaltation of the family romance fantasy shared with Edward: “It was then she heard the Mississippi voices for the first time. . . . Sometimes they mentioned Edward and sometimes herself. They talked on and on about unimportant things and she knew them all, each one” (35). Returning to the place she came from, considering how it reverberates within herself as honestly as possible, she may better understand who she is, and move forward. Although Wallace Harkins in “The Boy in the Tree” shows how tempting it is to remain safely ensconced in a dreamlike past, other Spencer characters have made a psychic return and moved forward: in “First Dark,” for example, Frances Harvey manages to leave her mother’s house and her old town to start afresh with Tom Beavers.

## Looking Backward to Move Forward: Open Endings

- 29 Both Spencer and Wolfe favor open endings, which make one think back on the story and think about the global pattern, then wonder what the future holds for the characters. *Look Homeward, Angel* closes as Eugene, after reuniting with his brother’s spirit, prepares to leave Altamont, looking into the rising sun. In “Return Trip,” as in *Look Homeward, Angel*, return proves to be the first step out of lostness. The story moves from a sense of Patricia’s and Edward’s loss to one of unity, from quarreling voices and a feeling of unhomeliness to the New River and a fusional, sustaining memory of voices that will continue to return—they have come “for the first time” (35). With Boyd, Patricia “ran around closing windows” against the rain (33), but the final lines—“She sat and listened, and let the water curl around her feet. She knew she would hear them

always, from now on”—suggest she is reconnecting with her native sensuality (she finds the water “cool, silky” [35]) as she pays attention to what constitutes her identity.

- 30 Both Wolfe and Spencer effectively render psychological states while highlighting moments of change, showing how we cope with loss, and how memory underlies everyday life, enriching or draining it. Spencer illustrates the return of the repressed on the personal and cultural level. Dolorès Frau-Frérôt’s definition of trauma situates it as awaiting an interpretation on the subject’s part: “Le trauma est ainsi une trace en attente d’interprétation pour un sujet, un savoir de l’inconscient en attente de déchiffrement, en attente de lecture.”<sup>1</sup> The title of the volume in which “Return Trip” was collected, *Starting Over*, suggests that the characters will take new directions. In Wolfe’s novel, one meaning of “You are your world,” the words Ben ghost’s speaks as his brother is about to head off into the world, is that the knowledge within ourselves must be heeded (624). Spencer leaves it up to the reader to imagine a future where Patricia, shown as ambivalent toward husband and cousin, might, attuned to her feelings, interpret the past that has marked her by, figuratively, listening to its voices.

## Return and Indirection

- 31 Wolfe and Spencer depend on return in the creative process but work through indirection, or vagueness as to meaning, purpose, and direction. Wolfe alternates realistic prose and poetic passages. His characters have visions. It is notably difficult to interpret Eugene’s final experience in the company of Ben’s ghost. And Patricia’s experience by the river remains mysterious as well. Still, Edward Glenn takes on his full dimension with Spencer’s indirect treatment. Both writers adapt material from life—and, although Spencer is not as systematically autobiographical as Wolfe, the South as she experienced it is a source of recurrent inspiration for her as it was for Wolfe. The two writers also return to their characters, Wolfe in his Gant and Webber cycles, and Spencer in her Marilee Summerall and Edward Glenn stories.
- 32 In “Return Trip,” Edward mentions his mother’s death, which is described in the play *For Lease or Sale* (1989), where we see him trying to save the family house from realtors and his ex-wife, Aline. He refers to meeting Joclyn in Mexico, the subject of “The Runaways” (1994)—she is already ill, and he pretends that he has killed his wife. He says he might return to Mississippi one day, which he does in “The Master of Shongalo” (1995), slipping into the old family home, riffling through the owners’ papers, sweeping the summer visitor off her feet, and absconding before the household awakens. Edward’s timeline is not straightforward, as “Return Trip,” written last, is set earlier in time than “The Master of Shongalo.” There is also a mention of Edward’s time in Mexico in *For Lease or Sale*, though it is not clear whether he is involved with Joclyn yet; he cannot have lost her and inherited her money yet as the Glenns cannot afford to keep their house. As the play ends on Edward linking up with a new woman, it would seem to cast doubt on his love for Joclyn if he had met her by then. Some of the vagueness is “a puzzle” to the author herself, as whether the house in *For Lease or Sale* is the same house as in “The Master of Shongalo.” As she wrote Gérard Préher, “these works were written at very different times and the vision of Shongalo pictured in the later story is not what I imagined the house in *For Lease or Sale* to be like” (qtd. in “Manners” 208). However, like Wolfe’s, if Spencer’s characters are to return, threads must be left hanging—the reader never knows where Edward is off to next. Moreover,

Wolfe's autobiographical characters are multifaceted—the artistic yet earthy W.O. Gant, for example, is a nurturing rampaging alcoholic. Similarly, Spencer's very involvement with the subject makes her see many contradictory aspects. She wants Edward to be the "ideal of a type [of Southern man] rather than an actual person," elusive, charming, witty and intelligent, "maybe alcoholic and maybe no good," vulnerable and intriguing, mean yet attractive because of his brilliance ("Parts of a Novel" 88). "Return Trip" shows both Edward's charm and destructiveness—he is twice a home-wrecker in 24 hours ("that long ago night" and by apparently striking Mark as preferable to Boyd as a father), but he remains a mysterious figure.

- 33 Like Wolfe, too, Spencer has an uninhibited approach to point of view and uses other focalizers,<sup>2</sup> although, like Eugene, Patricia is the character "from whose centre most of the events in this chronicle must be seen" (*Look Homeward, Angel* 35)—but the narrator never renders Edward's thoughts. When Patricia is away, the thoughts of Mark and Boyd are given in a scene which sheds light on the limited father and son relationship:

[Boyd] was not given to subtlety but he felt he was in a situation where such was required. (20)

[Mark] got on better with his father when they worked together. Quarrels came when they pulled in opposite ways. He knows that, too, thought Mark. That's why he'd brought this up. Mark knew he had to ease his father into his new plans. (20)

- 34 Edward, however, is described by the third person narrator that reveals Patricia's thoughts or takes up Mark's speech: "Edward was great to talk to! Mark could tell him things! He listened!" (34). The lack of inside information reinforces the character's "elusive" quality.

- 35 Spencer says she first created Edward from the image of two people talking in particular circumstances (*Mississippi Writers* 601), and that "a strongly-felt locale and a strongly-felt character in it are usually the starting places of [her] work" ("The Art of Fiction" 125). The cousins at the Wolfe house may have been the original image in "Return Trip." The Wolfe house brings the past back to Patricia. It also makes the character of Edward, who wants to go there "for [his] soul," more complex (21). According to Ann Beattie, when Edward says "Think of all Wolfe's talent in that one house. Busting to get out. And it did" (23), he is

conflating himself with the writer . . . not so much self-aggrandizing as seeing a whole history in his actions, including a Southern imperative to break away. He's talking, by displacement, about the past: their quick, drunken encounter; the child; Southern manhood, including passionate aspirations and ambition. (There are also sexual connotations: Talent is not the only thing 'busting to get out').

- 36 Thus Spencer builds up her "wandering character" through indirection. Although "outside the main structure of people's lives, [he] nonetheless has a very powerful effect on them" ("Parts of a Novel" 86). Edward's paradox is suggested in Préher's study of the series of short stories: he is a character who "roots" others, the summer visitor in "The Master of Shongalo" for example, but lacks rootedness ("Edward Glenn" 113). Spencer shows Patricia connecting with her roots after seeing Edward. The man who emerges in *You Can't Go Home Again*, at the end of Wolfe's Gant-Webber cycle, is one who faces the future confidently because he too has recalculated his place in the generations and in history. By having Edward view the Wolfe house in a state of loss, Spencer may be paying homage to return which gives direction. And her indirect treatment of her protagonist in what Seltzer calls a "rhetoric of unhomeliness"

“open[s] up our thinking about the South” as she contests “the fixed constructions of identity long associated with the Southern home” (148).

## A Literary Odyssey

- 37 Wolfe and Spencer’s references to past works have enhanced their own. Wolfe borrows freely from Neo-Platonic and Romantic poets for themes and refrains. The title *Look Homeward, Angel* is taken from Milton’s “Lycidas” and evokes the rest of the line, “and melt with ruth,” providing the mood of understanding the novel is to be read in. Wolfe also develops the idea of “the buried life” exposed in Matthew Arnold’s poem, which Spencer seems to have been receptive to in her telling of Patricia’s story:

But often, in the din of strife,  
There rises an unspeakable desire  
After the knowledge of our buried life;  
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force  
In tracking out our true, original course;  
A longing to inquire  
Into the mystery of this heart which beats  
So wild, so deep in us—to know  
Whence our lives come and where they go. (“The Buried Life” 45-54)

- 38 Spencer, too, uses intertextual references—to Poe in “The Cousins,” for instance, and to “Ulalume,” the lyrical expression of grief after the death of the poet’s cousin and “child bride,” giving depth to the affair between Southern cousins.<sup>3</sup> In “Return Trip,” the direct allusions to Wolfe echo the “North Carolina mountain” setting and the “awful family” situation (15-19). “Patricia thought she would read his book again. *Look Homeward, Angel*. Wasn’t that it?” (23). The half doubtful inclusion of the title may prompt Spencer readers to Google Wolfe and find out some of these parallels. Cited in italics, the verse encouraging a return home foreshadows the evening exchange between Patricia and Edward and the story’s ending, showing Patricia private “return trip.”
- 39 Spencer also interpreted the invocation “Look homeward, angel,” as “Wolfe himself, commanding his private angel to look back one final time before winging outward to his destiny” (“Of Ghosts” 83). Her character Edward, like Wolfe, had no children, which he lamented in *For Lease or Sale* (413-14). Spencer chose to make him connect with a possible son, and with Wolfe, another brilliant Southerner of many contradictory qualities, then to wing him outward to his own destiny.
- 40 Spencer and Wolfe illustrate how return makes literature perpetually young, and why people return to it. Patricia, who “felt terribly much older” than Edward (19), is restored to her youth, having “kicked off her shoes,” bare feet in water, feeling her bond to each speaker from the past (35). In literature, like Spencer’s river, the voices of writers are borne back again, even after they have died. Each reader finds sustenance, as Edward says of his reading Wolfe: “You learn something from other people’s bad times . . . How to get through your own” (22). Wolfe and Spencer, using return as a formal device and as a theme, also show that “moving on” can mean approaching one’s real self. Reading, we all share in a restorative community, as Danièle Sallenave wrote in *Le Don des morts*. For the body of literature helps us both to dream and to live an examined life.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arnold, Matthew. "The Buried Life." *Empedocles on Etna, and Other Poems*. London: B. Fellowes, 1852. U of Toronto site. Web. 14 June 2016.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Beattie, Ann. "Starting Over: Stories, by Elizabeth Spencer." *SF Gate*. 17 Jan. 2014. Web. 7 July 2016.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Literature in the Ashes of History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013. Print.
- Frau-Fr erot, Dolor es. "Survivre... au r el." *Analyse Freudienne Presse* 16 (Jan. 2009): 23-33. Cairn Info. Web. 10 Dec. 2016.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Family Romances." 1909. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906-1908): Jensen's 'Gradiva' and Other Works*. Ed. James Strachey. London: Hogarth P, 1959. 235-41. Print.
- . "The Uncanny." 1919. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*. Ed. James Strachey. London: Hogarth P, 1955. 217-56. Print.
- Hammerstein, Oscar II. "Ol' Man River" (lyrics). 1927. Wikipedia. Web. 23 Jan. 2017.
- King, Richard H. *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955*. New York: Oxford UP, 1980. Print.
- Manning, Carol S., ed. *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993. Print.
- Milton, John. "Lycidas." 1638. poetryfoundation.org. Web. 29 Jan. 2017.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "To --- Ulalume: A Ballad." 1847. poetryfoundation.org. Web. 29 Jan. 2017.
- Pr eher, G erald. "Edward Glenn: L'homme-myst ere d'Elizabeth Spencer." *Penser l'origine, vol. 1*. Ed. G erald Pr eher. Spec. issue of *R esonances* 11. Saint-Denis: Universit  Paris 8, 2010. 95-115. Print.
- . "'Manners are not intelligent, they're just automatic': Performing the South in Elizabeth Spencer's *For Lease or Sale*." *Performing South: The U.S. South as Transmedial Message*. Ed. Beata Zawadka. Szczecin: U Szczecinski, 2015. 195-216. Print.
- Sallenave, Dani le. *Le Don des morts*. Paris: Gallimard, 1991. Print.
- Seltzer, Catherine. *Elizabeth Spencer's Complicated Cartographies: Reimagining Home, the South, and Southern Literary Production*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009. Print.
- Spencer, Elizabeth. "The Art of Fiction CX: Elizabeth Spencer." Interview with Robert Phillips. 1986. *Conversations with Elizabeth Spencer*. Ed. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1991. 113-33. Print.
- . "The Boy in the Tree." *Starting Over*. New York: Liveright, 2014. 37-56. Print.
- . "The Cousins." *Jack of Diamonds*. New York: Viking, 1988. 27-72. Print.
- . "First Dark." *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer*. New York: Doubleday, 1981. 23-40. Print.
- . *For Lease or Sale. Mississippi Writers 4: Reflection of Childhood and Youth*. Ed. Dorothy Abbott. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1991. 381-435. Print.

- . "Look Homeward, Angel: Of Ghosts, Angels and Lostness." *North Carolina Literary Review* 12 (2003): 78-86. Print.
- . "The Master of Shongalo." 1995. *The Southern Woman: New and Selected Fiction*. New York: Modern Library, 2001. 408-32. Print.
- . "Parts of a Novel That Will Probably Never Get Written: An Interview with Elizabeth Spencer." Interview with David Hammond. *The Southern Quarterly: A Journal of the Arts in the South* 33.2-3 (Winter-Spring 1995): 85-106. Print.
- . "Return Trip." 2009. *Starting Over*. New York: Liveright, 2014. 15-35. Print.
- . "The Runaways." 1994. *The Southern Woman: New and Selected Fiction*. New York: Modern Library, 2001. 433-39. Print.
- Wolfe, Thomas. *Look Homeward, Angel*. New York: Scribner's, 1929. Print.
- . *You Can't Go Home Again*. New York: Harper, 1940. Print.

## NOTES

1. "Thus, trauma is for the subject a trace waiting to be interpreted, unconscious knowledge waiting to be deciphered, waiting to be read."
2. In Wolfe's novel, Eliza's and Gant's points of view are given as well as Eugene's. The thoughts of the love interest, Laura James, are only revealed through dialogue.
3. Like "Return Trip," "The Cousins" features an instance of denial, with Ella Mason convincing herself she wrote her love letter to Eric, with whom she had an affair, not Ben (52, 61-62).

---

## ABSTRACTS

Dans "Return Trip" d'Elizabeth Spencer (2009), les personnages de Patricia, Mark et Edward effectuent divers retours, spatiaux ou psychologiques. La nouvelle, qui se déroule près d'Asheville, ville natale de Thomas Wolfe, inclut la pension de famille de sa mère, où il a grandi, et évoque le fantôme du romancier. Elle témoigne du retour de Spencer vers *Look Homeward, Angel*, qui l'avait émue dans sa jeunesse. Comme chez Wolfe, le récit de Spencer décrit des allers-retours entre humour et gravité, dialogues et introspection, alterne les symboles et revient sur le fantasme du roman familial en abordant les thèmes de la famille et de la perte. Il suggère par ailleurs qu'un retour peut permettre d'avancer malgré le sentiment d'avoir perdu ses repères, notamment grâce à l'*Unheimlich* et l'introspection. Dernière en date des nouvelles sur Edward Glenn, personnage auquel ce traitement indirect convient particulièrement, "Return Trip" appelle également une réflexion sur un autre aspect de "l'esprit wolféen" chez Spencer : le retour en littérature, vers les autres nouvelles et vers les auteurs du passé.

## AUTHORS

### AMÉLIE MOISY

Amélie Moisy is an Associate Professor (maître de conférences) in Applied Languages at the Paris Est Créteil University and is a member of the Text, Images and Sounds research group there. She is the author of a doctoral thesis, of numerous articles and a book on Thomas Wolfe (*Thomas Wolfe, L'épopée intime*, Belin, 2002). She has also written about other American writers, from Tennessee Williams to Barbara Kingsolver. Her research bears on autobiographical fiction, the literature of excess, and writers of the American South.