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From the Scopic Drive to Empowerment in Elizabeth Spencer's "First Dark"

Claude Maisonnat

- 1 "First Dark" appeared in *The New Yorker* in June 1959, eleven years after Mississippi born Elizabeth Spencer published her first novel *Fire in the Morning* and exactly one year before *The Light in the Piazza*—her most successful book, which was widely popularized by the 1962 film adapted from the novella and by the 2003 musical that won several awards. Contrary to the novella in which the action takes place in Italy, as does that of a few other stories later collected in a volume appropriately titled *The Light in the Piazza and Other Italian Stories*, the setting of the short story under consideration is Spencer's native Mississippi and it portrays the rural South of the Southern tradition not eschewing the race question that lurks behind the amorous plot and the gothic atmosphere. Showing that "First Dark" showcases Spencer's art and craft as a storyteller, Catherine Seltzer notes that this particular text has "uniquely 'Spencerian' qualities: its controlled voice, its perfect use of detail, and significantly, its subtle manipulations of the recognizable forms we associate with southern literature" (1-2).
- 2 "One Saturday morning in early October, Tom Beavers sat at the counter in the drugstore and reminded Totsie Poteet, the drugstore clerk, of a ghost story" (24). In such a way the narrative voice signals a shift from the iterative, which was the mode on which the story opened, to the singulative, which will remain the predominant feature of the narrative strategy throughout the whole story. This rather conventional device is however doubly effective in "First Dark." First, it makes it explicit that the story will focus on a crisis in the life of the protagonists, a momentous change in their destinies. Secondly, in so far as the element that triggers off this change is a ghost story, as if it meant to acknowledge that it was ghost story *about* a ghost story, it suggests the possibility of a reflexive or metafictional dimension.
- 3 Moreover, an ironical note is introduced from the very outset since the agent that brings about the transformation is Tom Beavers whose return to his hometown,

Richton, is ambivalent as he came back precisely to re-establish connections with the past to counterbalance the anonymity of urban modern life in Jackson where he happens to work. No wonder then that the first paragraphs of the story all concentrate on the figure of Tom, albeit not without some misunderstandings. He is first considered as the centre of attraction of "the town" under whose gaze his slightest actions are scrutinized and immediately (mis)interpreted. The phrase "the town" turns out to be a meaningful synecdoche as it refers to the residents, including Mrs. Harvey with her obsession concerning the past status of Richton.

- 4 They would like the sleepy town locked in its prestigious history, or so they think, to be put back on the map, as a tourist attraction (the Pilgrimage), and seem to think that Tom came back for the town itself and not for the old aunt that raised him: "There was not much left in Richton for him to call family—just his aunt . . . So he must be fond of the town; certainly it was pretty old place. Far too many young men had left it and never come back at all" (23). Their self-serving wishful thinking will be disappointed at the end when Tom runs away from the town—and from the Harvey house—with Frances, thus giving the lie to their idle talk implying that Tom had set his sights on the rich heiress and her mansion, possibly as a form of social revenge for the humiliations of his childhood.
- 5 However, what strikes the reader is the predominance of the scopic drive foregrounded by the problematics of the gaze. Everything revolves around the issue of what is seen and what is not seen, already introduced in the very first paragraph thereby suggesting that "the town" functions more or less as a micro society of control, of which Mrs. Harvey is the main beneficiary, as she is scrupulously informed of the development of the relationship between Frances and Tom by her network of gossips and thus strives to impose her will on the both of them. Yet there is more to it than meets the eye in the supremacy of vision, gaze and image in the story, as it will be the key factor in Mrs. Harvey's defeat and the concomitant liberation of Frances. For this reason, the following remarks will rely on the notion of reversibility of the gaze as it has been revisited and expanded by Jacques Lacan in his chapter entitled "The Split between the Eye and the Gaze" in his seminar XI: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* published in France in 1973.

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- 6 Although there is a wide consensus concerning the gothic dimension of the story, I wish to argue that its gothic components are not so much meant to illustrate its generic affiliation as they are the instrument, and literary device, used by Elizabeth Spencer to highlight the process at the end of which the heroine, Frances, acquires her independence from her domineering mother's clutches and from the weight of a burdensome past. The originality of the author's approach lies in the fact that it is precisely the ghost story, as Peggy W. Prenshaw also suggests (138), that is the medium of redemption and simultaneously the vehicle of a social, not to say political, statement that exposes the oppression of women caught in the nets of still predominantly patriarchal stereotypes of family and social life.
- 7 To be sure, the usual trappings of the gothic are present (see Seltzer 1). However, they appear to be deflated as it were, at any rate they are never used to their maximum power in order to create horror and terror, neither in the characters' minds nor in the

readers'. The ghost theme is first introduced not as an apparition but as a story told by the drugstore clerk at Tom's request, and it soon turns out that Tom's interest is motivated by his own encounter with the ghost the night before. The fact that it is a story widely circulated in the Richton community already suggests that it could be an instance of the local folklore and that its truthfulness is somewhat dubious. Yet, the new development is that Tom claims he has actually seen the very ghost of the local tradition and it soon appears that he shares this uncommon experience with Frances. This will constitute the first bond between the prospective lovers.

- 8 It is also important to note that this ghost is a far cry from the frightening ones that are traditionally encountered in haunted castles. In "First Dark," it is a familiar presence that hardly disrupts the conventions of mimetic representation as the ghost is the perfectly credible figure of a poor black man that is not unexpected in a southern landscape. In such a way, the gap is narrowed between the rational and the irrational because, as a hallucination, the apparition is not out of place. Far from arousing dread and horror, it is really part of everyday life in Richton.
- 9 This ghost has nothing threatening either in appearance or in attitude. It is remarkable that he is conventionally dressed and does not mean to frighten people. He does not seem to harbor any grievance against anybody. He politely addresses the people he meets, expresses no anger or desire for vengeance; instead, he asks for freedom of movement as he wants to be able to pass through with his wagon. A small detail should perhaps attract the attention of the cautious reader: on two occasions the narrative insists pointedly on the uncertainty of the color of the ghost's skin, as if to entertain the confusion about his being black or white. The drugstore clerk is the first to make the point: "Totsie kept on talking. 'But whether he was a white man or a real light-colored nigger they couldn't say. Some said one and some said another'" (24-25). And, later, an analogous comment is made by the narrator who describes Frances's own encounter with the ghostly figure: "As she returned to the car from the two parallel graves, she met a thin, elderly, very light-skinned Negro man in the road" (36).
- 10 Such an ambiguity in the description of the ghost ties in with the amphibological constructions used by Totsie when he warms up to his subject in evoking the ghost: "I could see him plain as I can see you, the way he used to tell it" (24). On account of the syntactic structure of the sentence, one cannot decide for sure if what he claims to see by proxy is the ghost of the story or the teller of the story himself—Old Cud'n Jimmy Wiltshire. The same holds water for his remark on the fact that this friendly ghost addresses people as if there were nothing surprising in the act: "I never heard of *our* ghost *saying* nothing. Did you Tom?" (25). The double negation makes it unclear whether he means that what is strange is that the ghost actually speaks or, on the contrary, never speaks.
- 11 On top of that, it can be assumed that the black man's demand is probably not devoid of any allusion to the plight of black citizens in the fifties and to their legitimate desire for freedom and recognition. Symbolically; the apparition on the scene of the black people can be interpreted as an oblique way of saying something like "Please see us but not as ghosts, and consider us not as ancillary members of the community but as fellow human beings." The possibility of guilt is even hinted at by Frances who tells herself: "No wonder they talk about us up North" (36). Elizabeth Spencer has admitted that she was engaged in the process of rethinking her prerequisites on the issue of race around the time she wrote the story: "I was under some sort of pressure within myself to

clarify my own thinking about racial matters; many of my attitudes had been simply inherited, taken on good faith from those of good faith whom I loved. It seemed like blasphemy to question *them*, so I had to question myself" ("The Art of Fiction" 115). From this angle, the subdued form of the fantastic Spencer relies on in "First Dark" can be seen as a way of tracing the unsaid and the unseen of Southern culture concerning the racial issue exactly as if this "invisible man" were suddenly made visible through this delusion and the story that reports it, because he plays a key role in it.

- 12 As for the avatar of the haunted castle, it is harmless enough, being in fact equated with that of a fairy-tale one, at least as Tom perceived it from the outside. "With its graceful rooms and big lawn, its camellias and magnolia trees, the house had been one of the enchanted castles of his childhood and Frances and Regina Harvey had been two princesses running about the lawn . . ." (34). It is far from being the scene of horrendous crimes and is no house of Usher or Castle of Otranto. Similarly for its residents, it seems a place of peace and enjoyment. It is described as "a house with a lawn that moonlight fell on and that was often lit by Japanese lanterns hung for parties" (29). Retrospectively, however, the only ghost that could be said to haunt the castle is the mother in the guise of her cumbersome quantity of clothes that Frances cannot resign herself to dispose of.
- 13 The potential damsel in distress, Frances, is a surprisingly strong-willed and self-reliant girl who cannot be said to be pursued by the arch villain, Tom, bent on appropriating the house. She is merely a woman in love who is trying to resist the desires of her overbearing and overprotecting mother while her lover is a hard-working successful young man who regularly travels from Jackson to visit the deaf aged aunt who raised him.
- 14 Ultimately, it appears that one key element of the Southern gothic is missing, namely the grotesque but, since the main issue concerns not the ghost but feminine desire, the short story, it could be argued, belongs to the subgenre of the Female gothic. However minimal the gothic dimension of the story may be, it nevertheless plays an important role in so far as it paves the way to the problematization of the main thematic of the story namely the predominance of the scopic field.

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- 15 To clarify this complex issue, it is perhaps best to rely on the Lacanian notion of the split between the eye and the gaze in their relation to the vision of the ghost by the protagonists. What structures the scopic field is the scopic drive that is based on the notion of the reversibility of the gaze, as the seeing subject (Frances) apparently becomes the object¹ that is seen (the ghost) as it looks back at her. Moreover, in the specific case of Frances, the three modalities of the scopic drive fulfil their appointed role in her successful progression towards liberation.
- 16 The first phase is the everyday banal act of seeing which can sometimes border on voyeurism as in the case of the people of Richton spying on Tom's activities to keep Mrs. Harvey informed. Frances's interest in the ghost is first sparked off by the rumors spread by the servants, her aunt and various inhabitants of the small town so that when she actually sees the ghost he is, in a way, familiar to her even if she cannot relate him to her own predicament.

- 17 The second phase is that of being seen by the ghost himself who even addresses her by name on their second encounter, which makes her wonder about the purpose of her involvement. The difference here with the conventional object-gaze is that the object that sees her (the ghost) is not really frightening because he is so close to everyone in her everyday life. The ghost appears on the mode of Plato's *mimesis phantastikè* in so far as it reproduces—in an imaginary way—not reality but an illusion.
- 18 The third phase introduces a third agency that sees Frances being seen: Tom. Everything happens as if Tom Beavers acted as mediation between Frances's fascination for the ghost—that is potentially destructive—and the distancing process performed by the interpretation of the vision that Frances is eventually able to make for herself.
- 19 In "First Dark," the gaze magnetizes the eye that challenges Frances's control over her sense of vision as it dominates her as a hallucinating subject. The result is that to all intents and purposes Frances is no longer distinct from the image. Herein lies the sleight of hand that Spencer performs beautifully and which confirms that the story does not really belong to the fantastic mode, because of the way in which Frances is represented in the vision of the ghost. The object-gaze in this case is not the ghost but the little girl or the pregnant woman that is always missing in the reports on the vision. It takes the shape of a blank. Nobody has ever seen the sick girl and she is thus a vacant space in the picture and in the story, so that Frances herself begins to suspect that *she* might be this invisible girl: "And exactly as though the recovery of the Negro girl in the wagon had been her own recovery, she felt the return of a quiet breath and a steady pulse, and sensed the blessed stirring of a morning breeze. Up in her room, she had barely time to draw an old quilt over her before she fell asleep" (38). The blank in the vision of the ghost functions like a projection space on which Frances's picture will eventually appear. To start with, the scenario of Frances's encounter with the black man is but an appropriation of the story told by the customers at Totsie Poteet's drugstore. It follows the same outline: the old man asks her exactly the same question and, like the road menders, she readily complies with his demand exactly as if they had exchanged roles.
- 20 However, to fully understand the implications of the scene, it is best to consider the contents of the hallucination. Four elements stand out and correspond to Frances's predicament, which makes it easy for the reader to interpret the dream. They are the house, the wagon, the black man and the invisible sick girl. Let us note in passing that if the nature of the black girl's sickness remains a mystery, the psychological nature of Frances's, on the contrary, is quite identifiable and cannot be reduced to a conventional work of mourning because of what prevents it. She is full of unrest, unsettled, and at a loss to solve the problem of deciding what to do with the house after her mother's death. It seems difficult to argue that she suffers from a trauma as she is able to carry on her life as best she can. At any rate, the text makes it clear that she is going through a stint of neurosis threatening to develop into a sort of breakdown. It is further illustrated by the fact that she does perceive that she herself feels on the verge of a crack-up. Indeed, Peggy W. Prenshaw writes that Frances "seems to live in a state of perpetual reverie, in which ghosts of the past are friendlier than prospects for the future" (138). As Frances blames herself for failing to drive the sick black girl to the hospital, the narrative voice cannot help suggesting that: "She became conscience-stricken about it—foolishly so, she realized, but if you start worrying about something in a house like the one Frances Harvey lived in, in the dead of night, alone, you will go

on worrying about it until dawn" (36). It is also confirmed in a typically paternalistic and condescending way, by the rural postmen who saw her early in the morning on her way to the cemetery:

"I declare . . . Miss Frances Harvey is driving herself crazy. Going back out yonder to the cemetery, and it not seven o'clock in the morning. . . . I was here and seen her. You wait there, you'll see her come back. She'll drive herself nuts. Them old maids like that, left in them old houses—crazy and sweet, or crazy and mean, or just plain crazy. They just ain't locked up like them that's down in the asylum." (37)

- 21 Both the vision and Frances are directly connected with a house. The old black man is supposed to come from a house that has disappeared: "She saw a field where a house used to be but has burned down; its cedar trees remained, and two bushes of bridal wreath marked where the front gate had swung" (36). The markers of the presence of the house turn out to be cedar trees, exactly as in old traditional family manors, and besides it is but a metaphorical hint of the fate of the Harvey house that "enter[s] with abandon the land of mourning and shadows and memory" (40) at the very end of the short story.
- 22 The second parallel between visitation and reality is the vehicle used by the protagonists. Where Frances uses her motor car, the old man mentions his wagon allegedly meant to carry the little sick girl whereas Frances has already expressed her regrets for not having had the presence of mind to give her a lift in her own car.
- 23 The third parallel concerns the black man who occupies the position of the ghost in the vision. He remains unidentified, nameless and he clearly functions on the mode of displacement, as a substitute for Tom Beavers, being the man in charge of rescuing the female character. Moreover, he is an unknown agent who actually happens to know Frances's name, as if he were familiar with her. When she asks what happened to the little sick girl, the black man, who "had removed his old felt nigger hat as she approached him," tells her: "She a whole lot better, Miss Frances. She going to be all right now.' Then he smiled at her" (38). In the end, is not Tom, that ghost from the past who opportunely reappears in Richton to save the sick Frances, even if her woes are not physical but mental?
- 24 As for the sick girl standing for the real Frances, she remains invisible because Frances is unable to see her for structural reasons. If the vision is definitely the production of an unconscious desire that takes advantage of a pre-existing story, Frances cannot quite identify the role that she plays in it. For that she requires the help of a third party who is in a position to tell her from what vantage point to interpret the vision. As in Holbein's famous painting *The Ambassador*, the stain (the object-gaze) in the foreground can only make sense when looked at from the proper angle. Tom Beavers is precisely the agent that indicates to Frances where she stands in relation to the vision. It amounts to what Lacan calls "laying down the gaze" when Tom includes himself in the picture by speaking of "our ghost" (27), which also is compatible with the fact that the ghost knows Frances by name. Thus Frances's admission that "[t]here's more than one ghost in Richton. You may turn into one yourself, like the rest of us" (28) acquires a hidden meaning. Indeed, she is aware, as Terry Roberts explains, that she "is suspended precariously between the past and any possible future and is in grave danger of herself becoming a ghost" (90).
- 25 In terms of image theory, it is widely accepted that it is strictly impossible for the viewer to stand outside his gaze and to see what he really sees because it is not only the

picture that is framed but mostly his own sense of vision. Tom Beavers is the agency that enables Frances to perform that impossible task of stepping outside the frame to discover her exact position in it—that of the rescued girl as the old man points out: “She a whole lot better, Miss Frances. She going to be all right now” (38), but if she is on the mend it is largely because she now feels free to leave her past behind and start a new life with Tom Beavers.

- 26 The short story provides at least two pieces of textual evidence suggesting that the taming of the gaze has been successful. The first one is the voicing of the gaze since the ghost addresses Frances directly. It is no longer an empty gaze that frightens but a voice that makes a direct connection with her and, instead of paralyzing or perplexing her, it prompts her to act and move her car. It is important to point out that on the second encounter with the black man, it is Frances herself who addresses him and it is his answer that creates a dialogue suggesting that she is now able to interact with the world on a new basis.
- 27 Interesting also is the fact that this final encounter does not take place at “first dark” but early in the morning, in full view. It implies that there might well be a *double-entendre* in the title of the short story. It could possibly suggest that if Frances was first “in the dark” about her own situation at the outset, it is no longer the case later and the new day that begins heralds a brighter future.
- 28 As a result, the reader is confronted with an instance of autoscopy of sorts. It could be defined as an anamorphic autoscopy to the extent that Frances does not see herself as in a mirror image, but as a distorted projection of herself, the part missing in the image that she perceives. The voice is the medium through which the distinction is achieved.
- 29 The second clue is that the *excipit* of the story installs a vanishing point: “She locked the door when they left, and put the key under the mat—a last obsequy to the house. Their hearts were bounding ahead faster than they could walk down the sidewalk or drive off in the car, and, mindful, perhaps, of what happened to people who did, they did not look back” (40). This vanishing point is a way of giving a structure to the newly defined space of the picture thus retrospectively putting the story in perspective and certainly opening the possibility of a future different from the one that awaited Frances.
- 30 Such a sea change in Frances’s life is made possible by her severing, at least temporarily, the connection with her mother. The irony of it all, and it is not a small one, is that the separation is effected by the very person her mother had selected by default to save the house, which, after all, was a symbolic prison for her. In fact, the outcome turns out to be poles apart from her desires because, together with Tom, Frances abandons the house and this abandonment also symbolizes the way she escapes her mother’s deadly influence. When she brings the belated funeral wreaths to the cemetery it is not only her mother that she buries, she most of all lays the ghost of her former ascendancy. This is also suggested by the metonymy of the mother’s clothes that are not given away or destroyed but locked up out of sight and reach in cupboards.

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- 31 In his attempt to allegorize the havoc that overbearing mothers can sometimes wreak into their daughters' lives Lacan resorts to a powerful image:

The mother's role is her desire. That is of capital importance. Her desire is not something you can bear easily, as if it were a matter of indifference to you. It always leads to problems. The mother is a big crocodile, and you find yourself in her mouth. You never know what may set her off suddenly, making those jaws clamp down. That is the mother's desire. (qtd. in Fink 56)

- 32 If Elizabeth Spencer did not use such a compelling image, her portrait of Mrs. Harvey is nonetheless a devastating one. Indeed, she draws the portrait of a terrible mother whose appetite for control over her progeny is infinite. For all her pretence at playing the part of the refined Southern belle, Mrs. Harvey turns out to be a kind of devouring monster that Frances attempts with all her might to neutralize with the support of Tom Beavers.
- 33 To start with, Mrs. Harvey never ceases to flaunt her inherited class-consciousness that she takes for granted in all circumstances: "She was of the old school of Southern lady talkers" (30). It is of course materialized by the magnificent house on the hill, the future of which she wants to ensure—this leads her to the sacrifice of her own life by committing suicide. Yet the process of transmission is disturbed by the appearance on the stage of Tom, her daughter's lover, who belongs to a lower class. She makes disparaging comments on the aunt who raised him and expresses her repulsion at the prospect of having to invite her: "If you should want to marry Thomas Beavers and bring him here, I will accept it. There will be no distinctions. Next I suppose, we will be having his old deaf aunt for tea. I hope she has a hearing aid. I haven't got the strength to holler at her" (32). The final statement disproves Mrs. Harvey's assertion that she would make no difference, a good example of the kind of irony that runs through the narrative. During a particularly nasty episode, she could not conceal her supercilious attitude when she expressed a similar derogatory opinion of the son, and Tom recalls a humiliating scene in which she rebuked him for crossing her lawn and made him retrace his steps in a viciously patronising and scathing tone.
- 34 Mrs. Harvey's arrogance also shows through her systematic contempt of men on whom she exercises her powers of seduction, all the while belittling their false sense of superiority and warning her daughters against their wiles: "Of course, *he*—" she would begin later, back with the family, and the masculinity that has just been encouraged to strut and preen a little was quickly shown up as idiotic" (29). Men are like playthings to her and her scorn is even extended to members of her own family, like her son-in-law, Regina's husband. She cannot help finding something suspicious in Tom's return to Richton and in his interest in her daughter: "But nobody can make out what he's up to, coming back to Richton" (29), implicitly considering him as a potential fortune hunter: "He is the kind of man"—she paused—"who would value a wife of good family" (31). As a result, it is not the smallest irony of her perverse scheme that she persists in thinking that the house on the hill will survive only on condition that it is taken over by a man, and Tom, despite his humble origins, would do the trick for her: "Her keenest suffering as an invalid was occasioned by the absence of men. 'What is a house without a man in it?' she would often cry. From her eagerness to be charming to Frances's guest that afternoon, it seemed that she would have married Tom Beavers herself if he had asked her" (30-31).

- 35 What she fails to understand, however, is that holding such a view of the situation amounts to betraying the sexism on which the superiority of the patriarchal order is predicated. According to her, Frances is unable to run the house without the control of a man: "Thomas Beavers has a good job with an insurance company in Jackson,' she informed her daughter, as though Frances were incapable of finding out anything for herself" (31)—as a result, she appears as the most misogynistic character in the whole short story. What is striking is that Mrs. Harvey is so adamantly bent on finding a proper man for Frances that her twisted mind leads her to resort to one of the most wicked stratagems ever devised, which she fancies is the ultimate proof of love of her daughter that she can produce. No wonder that the narrator remarks: "Terrible as her mother's meanness was, it was not half so terrible as her love. Answering nothing, explaining nothing" (33). Moreover Mrs. Harvey's misogyny is equal to her contempt for males, she is "that witty tyrant with the infallible memory for the right detail, who was at her terrible best about men" (29), ironically having to blame her daughter for her alleged contempt of men, which by the way she could only have inherited from her mother. She almost chokes when she has to sing Tom's praises in a desperate attempt to bend Frances's will: "It was this complimenting a man behind his back that was too much for her—as much out of character, and hence as much of a strain, as if she had got out of bed and tried to tap-dance" (31).
- 36 Finally, her suicide, supposed to clear the way for the arrival of Tom Beavers in the house, is doubly counter-productive. On the one hand, it is bound to produce a feeling of guilt in her daughter who is called upon to settle a debt she never contracted in the first place. On the other hand, it fails to achieve its goal as both Frances and Tom elope, leaving behind the house—Mrs. Harvey's most cherished treasure—without even looking back: "Had they done so they would have seen that the Harvey house was more beautiful than ever. All unconscious of its rejection by so mere a person as Tom Beavers, it seemed, instead, to have got rid of what did not suit it, to be free, at last, to enter with abandon the land of mourning and shadows and memory" (40). For Catherine Seltzer, "Spencer's decision to keep her characters defiantly facing forward . . . does suggest an alternative model of viewing both the South and its literature" (3), and can thus be read as a larger reflection on the need for Southerners to move on and stop dealing in myths.
- 37 Noticeably, this final act of liberation is not Frances's first attempt to escape the power of her mother, only it takes place with Tom's help for, "[l]ike Frances, he believed that the old lady had a stranglehold on life" (35). Frances's first act of rebellion against the stifling pressure of family conformity involved the ghost: it occurred when, as a child, she borrowed her father's car to visit the place where the ghost had allegedly appeared. It was later followed by her flight to France where she fell in love with a married man—and a catholic at that—perfectly incompatible with Mrs. Harvey's plans. At the verbal level, Frances realizes that closer ties with Tom require some precautions because, for him, the Harvey house is associated with unpleasant memories: "Was he afraid of the ghost or of her? She would have to stay away from talking family" (27).
- 38 It is yet another proof of Spencer's subtle mastery of the art of writing that she manages to confirm what the problematics of the gaze displays through a very simple image that acquires a symbolic meaning: that of the match folder. She paves the way for its introduction in the narrative by indicating: "Theirs was one house where the leather-bound sets were actually read. In Jane Austen, men and women seesawed back

and forth for two or three hundred pages until they struck a balance; then they got married" (28). The key word here is the word "balance" closely linked with the idea of marriage because this is actually what happens at the end of the story where it is taken up three times if in a different context but with the same intent, as it is systematically correlated with the word "match" whose polysemy allows readers to realize that what is at stake has less to do with lighting cigarettes—which they nevertheless do throughout the story—than with finding the proper partner for each other. When Frances acknowledges that the problem with her mother is that she "never knew how to express love, you see" (38-39), Tom makes a very significant gesture: "He did not reply but sat industriously balancing a match folder on the tines of an unused serving fork" (39). That they have succeeded in doing so is made clear in the second reference to balancing which states that "[t]he match folder came to balance and rested on the tines" (39). The final occurrence hammers the point by stressing the fact that this situation can only be maintained provided the two lovers leave the house behind and strike out for a new life: "He dropped the match folder into his coat pocket. 'I think we should be leaving, Frances'" (40).

- 39 Another important aspect of Spencer's expertise at crafting stories is the metafictional dimension that she unquestionably weaves into her narrative. Indeed, thanks to the omnipresent problematics of the gaze, she explores the process of writing fiction which is equated to a form of fabrication, as exposed by Mr. Harvey's accusation of the black servants: "Now you made up these stories about ghosts, didn't you?" 'Yes, sir,' said Sammie. 'We made them up.' 'Yes sir, said Jerry.' 'We sho did'" (27). In fact, the servants' story is not so much made up as taken up from the tales and conversations circulated in the Richton community. What is emphasized here is the fundamentally intertextual nature of any narrative that is always already borrowed from former ones and transformed. It is of course the case in Spencer's story which seemingly builds up on an earlier version afloat in the town: "Tom Beavers sat at the counter in the drugstore and reminded Totsie Poteet, the drugstore clerk, of a ghost story" (24).
- 40 Concurrently, through the questioning of the function of the gaze in the story, Spencer also raises the issue of representation, of the power of mimesis. In the end, what the story illustrates is how the invisible can be made visible and especially how Frances's predicament is expressed through the vision and the story that results from it. Significantly, and as mentioned earlier, the voicing of the gaze is precisely the process that makes the telling of the story possible in such a way that at the same time the narrative voice can be identified with the voices of the protagonists and it can distance itself from them. Even more importantly, Spencer's beautifully multilayered narrative demonstrates, through Frances's liberation, that the function of storytelling can be seen as a way of locating the past where it ought to be, namely in the present, but in the guise of History and in this case in Herstory. Still, the origins of History is none other than legends, which are after all nothing but narratives. In "First Dark," Spencer captures this subtle process in the making as the narrative voice acknowledges in a distinctly metafictional statement: "But it scarcely ever happens, even in Richton, that one is able to see the precise moment when fact becomes faith, when life turns into legend, and people start to bend their finest loyalties to make themselves bemused custodians of the grave" (39). To return but briefly to the race question, the parallel that the short story invites us to make between Frances Harvey and the invisible sick girl, who miraculously gets cured, suggests that the need for empowerment applies

both to women suffering under the rule of patriarchy and to black people who share the common plight of age-old subjugation.

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NOTES

1. The gaze is on the side of the object that is why Lacan speaks of the object-gaze in the sense that, because of the split, it inescapably follows that we are fundamentally looked at by what we are looking at in the world of social interconnections. Being stared at by an object is quite different from being stared at by a human eye—it is very unsettling, not to say alienating; it produces an effect of dis-location as the seeing subject is always already gazed at from a place which s/he cannot locate or identify.

ABSTRACTS

Cette analyse textuelle de "First Dark", l'une des nouvelles les plus connues d'Elizabeth Spencer, vise à mettre en lumière le rôle de la pulsion scopique dans son écriture. En effet, au-delà de l'intrigue amoureuse inattendue qui se déroule sur fond d'histoire de fantôme dans une bourgade assoupie du Sud profond se manifeste une problématique du regard qui structure et rythme le développement narratif. Pour en rendre compte les analyses s'appuient sur la notion centrale de réversibilité du regard reformulée par Lacan en termes de schize entre l'œil et le regard. Cette opposition fondamentale permet de montrer avec quel art Elizabeth Spencer réussit à transcender la problématique gothique pour accéder à la notion d'autonomisation du féminin en réaction à une domination patriarcale étouffante grâce au processus que Lacan a nommé la déposition du regard.

En

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