



## Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

72 | Spring 2019

Special Issue: Elizabeth Spencer

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### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/2491>

ISSN: 1969-6108

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 June 2019

Number of pages: 177-187

ISSN: 0294-04442

### Electronic reference

Terry Roberts, “Weaving Then and Now: The Artistry of “The Cousins””, *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/2491>

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# Weaving Then and Now: The Artistry of “The Cousins”

Terry Roberts

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- 1 Elizabeth Spencer’s 1985 short story “The Cousins” is, in many ways, a classic mystery story. It concerns the narrator’s search for a missing person—someone who has defied her understanding for thirty years. The narrator is the fifty-year old Ella Mason and the missing person her distant cousin Eric, a man she has not seen for three decades. The opening paragraph both sets the stage for the events of the story and captures the essence of the mystery:

I could say that on the train from Milan to Florence I recalled the events of thirty summers ago and the curious affair of my cousin Eric. But it wouldn’t be true. I had Eric somewhere in my mind all the time, a constant. But he was never quite definable, and like a puzzle no one could ever solve, he bothered me. More recently, I had felt a restlessness I kept trying without success to lose, and I had begun to see Eric as its source. (29)

- 2 Ella Mason has returned to Italy to visit her cousin and in so doing recalls for the reader another trip she made to Europe thirty years before with Eric and other young cousins. During that trip, she fell in love with Eric; however, they were forced apart by the jarring news that he had flunked out of law school during his last year. As the story develops, the clues that Spencer has dropped in this first paragraph come to fruition: even thirty years later Ella Mason cannot find *herself* until she finds Eric—both literally in the present and figuratively in the past—and so this story is a tale of an internal as well as external journey of discovery.

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- 3 “The Cousins” contains most of Spencer’s characteristic themes: individual evolution within a stifling family or community environment; the shock of familiar versus exotic settings; the often painful mysteries of intimacy; the powerful influence of the past over the present. In addition, Spencer has offered other Southern female narrators as solvers of mysteries—mysteries in the past as well as the present (notably Marilee

Summerall of the "Marilee" stories). As Ella Mason moves across Italy from Milan and arrives in Florence, however, Spencer skillfully shifts the narrative point of view back and forth between past and present and between an internal setting within Ella Mason's memory and an external setting in the dramatized present. "The Cousins" is arguably Spencer's greatest short story because here she most skillfully weaves the past into the present and the internal reality of her narrator into more objective external drama. It contains so much time and space within its forty-three pages that it reads, as several commentators have noted, more like a novel than a story.

- 4 There are two key points in the past that concern Ella Mason. One is the time period in her life prior to the summer trip that she took to Europe when she was nineteen years old. Although her memory ranges back and forth over ten years during which her relationship with her cousins Eric and Ben developed, the locus of this part of the past is the spring prior to the trip when the group that eventually traveled together crystallized. The second and most important part of Ella Mason's past is the European trip itself: a coming of age to tour with her magical cousins Ben and Eric, a younger cousin Jamie, and a more distant relation, Mayfred. Three young men and two young women whose lives are bound up by that mysterious web of connection, the extended Southern family.

We'd been brought up together back in Martinsville, Alabama, not far from Birmingham. There was our connection and not much else in that little town of seven thousand and something. Or so we thought. . . . There were three leading families, in some way "connected." Eric and I had had the same great-grandfather. His mother's side were distant cousins, too. Families who had gone on living around there, through the centuries. . . . As a way of living, I always told myself, it might have gone on for us, too, right through the present and into an endless future, except for that trip we took that summer. (32-33)

- 5 Somehow that trip had done the unthinkable; it had broken the web of family connection. In order to rediscover what they had lost, Ella Mason journeys again to Europe, both the Europe of the present and that of thirty years before, the present tense experience of one recalling in vivid detail the past tense experience of the other.
- 6 There are thirteen readily identifiable shifts from past to present or present to past in the story's forty-three pages, some clearly defined breaks between obvious blocks of narration, some subtle to the point of ambiguity. Ella Mason meets the mysterious Eric again after their thirty-year separation only three pages into the story, and it immediately becomes obvious that their physical reunion is not Spencer's goal. Rather she is interested in what they must together *do*: recreate their shared past in a way that they can understand it. And, in a way, overcome it. Spencer's real topic is their emotional and spiritual reunion after their long separation. This event requires a different sort of journey, an internal opening up that neither Eric nor Ella Mason had been capable of thirty years prior. Thus, "The Cousins" is a fascinating narrative blend of internal and external realities and, as such, a powerful dramatization of the coexistence of the past with the present.
- 7 Read in this light, "The Cousins" also provides a valuable context for reading two earlier Spencer novellas set in Italy: "The Light in the Piazza," a charming but simple-minded (in more ways than one) love story that takes place almost without reference to the characters' inner lives, and "Knights and Dragons," a dark and frightening portrayal of psychological torment. In many ways "The Cousins" balances these two

strands in Spencer's art, weaving light and dark, internal and external, past and present, male and female elements together seamlessly.

- 8 Perhaps either narrative, the present tense story of Ella Mason's journey to find the lost Eric or the past tense story of five young Southerners juxtaposed against ancient Europe, would have satisfied Spencer earlier in her career. The external tale of Ella Mason's journey to find Eric might have had the narrative simplicity not only of "The Light in the Piazza" but of a book like *The Voice at the Back Door*, a rich novel that can seem almost melodramatic because it works primarily on the surface of its characters' lives. The present tense strand of "The Cousins," if it stood alone, would have the tension generated by a mysterious antagonist combined with the exotic setting of Florence, which "could seem the town . . . the way it must have been in . . . Browning's time, narrow streets and the light that way and the same flowers and gravel walks in the gardens" (31). And the Spencer who wrote the early Italian stories would have artfully postponed the actual reunion until late in the story when the mystery of the missing man would have become almost unbearable. However, like many of the early Italian stories, Ella Mason's search for Eric would have been a story composed of beautiful surfaces and the final reunion might have been the result more of clever plotting than of the internal development of character.
- 9 On the other hand, imagine this story if it consisted only in Ella Mason's memories of a journey, an unsettling journey that destroyed the characters' potential for intimacy and set them adrift in a fractured world. In fact, Ella Mason's life after the ill-fated European tour, her restlessness and multiple marriages, remind the reader of a Spencer novel, the aptly titled *No Place for an Angel*, in which characters drift aimlessly, having all but given up the search for meaning. In addition, the inside of a single character's mind can become a claustrophobic narrative space, witness not only the dark Italian passageways of "Knights and Dragons" but late stories like "I, Maureen" and "The Skater." It is not hard to imagine the mature Ella Mason's "restlessness" becoming much more painful if she did not have the mystery of Eric to give her both motivation and direction. Thus, neither strand in "The Cousins" is complete without the other. External reality yields up its meaning only in the context of the searcher's internal growth; an individual's internal evolution requires external confirmation. Ella Mason needs cousin Eric to help her complete the intertwined story of their lives; thus, she searches for him internally as well as externally.
- 10 For the attentive reader, there remains one last question about Ella Mason's memories: are they fundamentally true or did she create them? She herself raises the issue on only the second page of the story:
- For a while in Milan, spending a day or so to get over jet lag, I wondered if the country existed anymore in the way I remembered it. Maybe, even back then, I had invented the feelings I had, the magic I had wanted to see. But on the train to Florence, riding through the June morning, I saw a little town from the window, in the bright, slightly hazy distance. I don't know what town it was. It seemed built all of a whitish stone, with a church, part of a wall cupping around one side and a piazza with a few people moving across it. With that sight and its stillness in the distance and its sudden vanishing as the train whisked past, I caught my breath and knew it had all been real. So it still was, and would remain. I hadn't invented anything. (30)
- 11 Spencer is careful to reassure her readers that Ella Mason is a fundamentally trustworthy narrator, even as she recalls long-ago events.

- 12 The brief passage that follows this long quote suggests what Ella Mason's return to Italy precipitates inside her mind:

From the point of that glimpsed white village, spreading outward through my memory, all its veins and arteries, the whole summer woke up again, like a person coming out of a trance.

Sealed, fleet, the train was rocking on. I closed my eyes with the image of the village, lying fresh and gentle against my mind's eye. I didn't have to try, to know that everything from then would start living now. (30)

- 13 As it does. Longer and longer sections of Ella Mason's story are devoted to a recreation for the reader of the events of thirty years before: the excitement and preparation for the summer tour, the sudden social scrambling when Cousin Mayfred shows up in New York with a husband that she wants to take along for the ride, plus the various and comic social pairings that evolve during the trip itself. Spencer juxtaposes past and present in long blocks of carefully prefaced narration, leaving the reader with a sense of what is going on and when, but never leaving the story in one temporal setting for more than five pages. The past is always alive in the present; the present in the past. In the early transitions between present and past, Spencer gives the reader solid clues when she changes the scenes and settings in her drama, even as the two primary characters remain constant. For example, after reaching modern-day Florence on the third page of the story and seeing Eric for the first time ("Not until I saw the stooped gray man hastening through the *pensione* door did I get slapped by change, in the face. How could Eric look like that?"), she goes up with him to his home in an old house overlooking the Arno. As she sits, drink in hand, talking with her cousin, the solid vision of his face takes her back thirty years:

. . . I was getting used to him now. His profile hadn't changed. It was firm, regular, Cousin Lucy Skinner's all over. That was his mother. We were just third cousins. Kissing kin. I sat answering questions. How long would it take, I wondered, to get around to the heart of things? To whatever had carried him away, and what had brought me here?

We'd been brought up together back in Martinsville, Alabama, not far from Birmingham. . . . (32)

- 14 And, suddenly we are inside Ella Mason's mind, and she is taking the readers deeper into the "heart of things" by recounting how that summer so long ago had begun. Spencer signals the change both with the graphic break between sections (the double space between paragraphs and the lack of indentation) and by quickly moving into description and dialogue obviously from the past. For five pages, Spencer takes the reader deeper and deeper into Ella Mason's mind, first the fateful summer itself and then into the years that led up to that summer, years that had set the stage by forming the relationships between the "cousins." And though she is working in prose, Spencer completes this scene change with the skill of any good dramatist, by maintaining the mysterious tension she has created between her two characters: "How long would it take, I wondered, to get around to the heart of things?" When she returns us to the present, five pages later, it is much more suddenly, but with deft certainty.

Papa was crazy about Mayfred. [This part of Ella Mason's reflections on the past] "You can't tell what she thinks about anything and she never misses a trick," he said. His unspoken thought was that I was always misjudging things. "Don't you see, Ella Mason," he would say. But are things all that easy to see?

"Do you remember," I said to Eric on the terrace, this long after, "much about Papa?"

"What about him?"

"He wanted me to be different, some way." . . .

"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." (37)

15 This transition between past and present is more sudden, with barely a paragraph break to warn the readers and placed between two sets of ongoing dialogue, the first between the adolescent Ella Mason and her father and the second between the mature woman and her mysterious cousin.

16 Over the next several pages the distance between past and present narrows considerably as the two continue to talk about the past even though the formal setting of the story is in the dramatized present. As they sit down to dinner in a local restaurant, they reflect on what the tides of connection and disconnection within the group thirty year before had done to their cousin Jamie.

"So that left poor Jamie out of everything, didn't it? [Ella Mason said.] He was young, another year in college to go, and nothing really outstanding about him, so he thought, and nobody he could pair with."

"There were you and me."

"You and me," I repeated. It would take a book to describe how I said that. Half-question, half-echo, a total wondering what to say next. How, after all, did *he* mean it? It wasn't like me to say nothing. "He might just have wondered what we had?"

"He might have," said Eric. . . .

"Ben said it was my fault we 'lost' you. That's how he put it. He told me that in New York, the last time I saw him, six weeks ago. He wouldn't explain. Do you understand what he meant?"

"Lost,' am I? It's news to me."

"Well, you know, not at home. Not even in the States. Is that to do with me?"

"We'll go back and talk." He pointed to my plate. "Eat your supper, Ella Mason," he said.

My mind began wandering pleasantly. I fell to remembering . . . (38)

17 And we, along with Ella Mason, are back inside her memories, the answer to her questions, and ours, again postponed.

18 It takes another eleven pages, an eternity in the timeless maze of this story, to arrive at the point in her mind where Ella Mason is willing to address the beginning of their long-ago affair.

I stood where he wanted, by the little sculptured relief, and he took my face and turned it to look at it closer; then with a strong hand . . . he pressed my face against the stone face and held it for a moment. The stone bit into my flesh and that was the first time that Eric, bending deliberately to do so, kissed me on the mouth. (59-60)

19 The stone-cold and blood-warm sensuality of this scene—as vivid in Ella Mason's mind as in ours—precipitates a cascade of memories less than a page later. A flood of images from the past that cause the psychic and narrative energy of the story to flow back and forth between past and present in steady pulses:

: Walking by the Arno, watching a white-and-green scull stroking by into the twilight, the rower a boy or girl in white and green, growing dimmer to the rhythm of the long oars, vanishing into arrow shape, then pencil thickness, then movement without substance, on ...

: A trek the next afternoon through twisted streets to a famous chapel. Sitting quiet in a cloister, drinking in the symmetry, the silence. Holding hands. "D for Donatello," said Eric. "D for Della Robbia," I said. "M for Michelangelo," he continued. "M for Medici." "L for Leonardo." "I can't think of an L," I gave up.

"Lumbago. There's an old master." "Worse than Jamie." We were always going home again.

: Running into the manager of the *pensione* one morning in the corridor. He'd solemnly bowed to us and kissed my hand. "*Bella ragazza*," he remarked. "The way life ought to be," said Eric. I thought we might be free forever, but from what? (61)

- 20 The punctuation, the colons as well as the ellipsis, are Spencer's. The emotional high tide they represent occurs inside Ella Mason, lifting the reader into a momentary suspension of time. The distinction between past and present erodes to the point that it is impossible to tell if the conversation between Eric and Ella Mason that follows shortly after is occurring in the present or thirty years before:

"Once I wrote a love letter to you," I said. "I wrote it at night by candlelight at home one summer. I tore it up."

"You told me that," he recalled, "but you said you couldn't remember if it was to me or Ben."

"I just remembered," I said. "It was you..." (61)

- 21 Shortly thereafter in the past tense strand of the story, the young lovers are reunited with the group and the explosive news arrives that Eric has been expelled from law school.

- 22 What occurs next in the story is suggestive of so much of Spencer's art: her Southern roots, her lifelong concern with the treacherous beauty of intimate relations, her mastery of narrative, and her interest in strong men and women who are capable of taking their own fate in hand. Together, Eric and Ella Mason begin to do what neither had ever been able to accomplish alone; they reach into the heart of the matter by examining their mutual past. The ties that originally bound them as children and adolescents had been public ties, those of society and family. During what had seemed an ill-fated trip to Europe, those public ties had been knotted by more private bonds, connections emotional and sexual. As the two "cousins" begin to retell the story of their past, weaving together their two voices, what becomes obvious is that the public ties have worn away, leaving between them what may be a cleaner, more private connection. And, as is so often the case in Southern literature—haunted by the past and by the family—these two cousins can only understand their past, can only gain control of their past, by telling it:

"You and I," said Eric, smooth as silk into the deep, silent darkness that now was ours—even the towers seemed to have folded up and gone home—"we never worked it out, did we?"

"I never knew if you really wanted to. I did, God knows. I wouldn't marry Howard for over a year because of you."

"I stayed undecided about everything. One thing that's not is a marrying frame of mind."

"Then you left for Europe."

"I felt I'd missed the boat for everywhere else. War service, then that law school thing. It was too late for me. And nothing was of interest. I could move but not with much conviction. I felt for you—maybe more than you know—but you were moving on already. You know, Ella Mason, you never are still."

"But you could have told me that!"

"I think I did, one way or another. You sat still and fidgeted." He laughed.

It's true that energy is my middle name.

The lights along the river were dim and so little was moving past by now they seemed fixed and distant, stars from some long-dead galaxy maybe. I think I slept.

Then I heard Eric. (66-67)

- 23 Eric, who tells Ella Mason of his own long-cherished memories of home, who for several hundred words becomes the uninterrupted narrator of their story. They have, in effect, each opened his or her heart to the other, more effectively, more powerfully than they had been able to do thirty years before.
- 24 It is also important that the intervening thirty years have effectively stripped away the veneer of public connections that had originally bound them. After Eric confesses that he had cherished their lives in Martinsville, Alabama ("love of these, my blood, and this place"), Ella Mason upbraids him. "'But you're not there,' I said, into the dark. 'You're here [in Italy] . . . You chose it'" (68). And slowly they begin to realize that they had both fled the familiar South, had fled the settled "way of living . . . [that] might have gone on" forever (33). And they begin to realize as well that it was their long-ago trip to Europe that had forever broken up the blood ties of their extended Southern family. As Ella Mason tells us, in the next to last paragraph of the story:
- Ben married his Sylvia, with her pedigree and family estate in Connecticut. He's a big professor, lecturing in literature, up East. Jamie married a Catholic girl from West Virginia. He works in her father's firm and has sired a happy lot of kids. Mayfred went to New York after she left Donald and works for a big fashion house. She's been in and out of marriages, from time to time. (72)
- 25 Eric, we know from their mutual catching up, has weathered one marriage and Ella Mason two. The original group of "cousins," bound happily together in both Eric's and Ella Mason's memories, has dissolved under the stress of social and cultural expectations. And yet, these two cousins remain, spellbound by their memories of that long-ago trip and the intimacy they had lost in the whirlwind of family and society.
- 26 In retelling their story, they seek again that original sweet beginning, "the way life ought to be." Only now, they seek that elusive human goal—intimacy, understanding, permanence—physically together and apart from the rest of the world. The ending of the story reads:
- 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. (72)
- 27 This ambiguously powerful closing juxtaposes the two storytellers and all they strive for against the somber tone of the story's closing phrase: "pitch black dark." The darkness, figurative as well as literal, represents any number of factors that work against them in the past as well as the present, internally as well as externally. The social and familial pressures that drove them apart in the first place, the complex emotional currents that threaten any human intimacy, especially one as intense as theirs; the intervening years they have by choice and fate spent apart; their very ages: all these forces gather ominously around them and threaten their ability to understand and love each other. Spencer herself commented to Peggy Prenshaw in 1990: "the sad part of 'The Cousins' . . . is that they missed the whole life span" they could have spent together ("The South and Beyond" 194). And indeed, Spencer's work from the period is full of characters driven apart by fate, by chance, by the intervention of others, by fear and insanity, and quite often by the social forces that challenge any intimacy.
- 28 And yet, as Spencer went on to remark, "there they are still . . . sitting holding hands." The hyperactive Ella Mason has herself become still in the presence of her long-lost cousin. And Eric, who in the flower of his youth had been frozen by indecision, is now the mature and successful man of the world. Significantly, they do not sit in silence but



rather "talking, in the pitch black dark." Turning over in their linked hands the puzzle of their lives and together solving it.

- 29 A number of commentators have noted the power and significance of Ella Mason's memory and voice in the fabric of this story but have ignored the fact that, in the end, it is their collective memory and collaborative telling that solves the riddle. One senses that as they sit in defiance of the dark that they are on the threshold of a great and personal victory, internal as well as external. In a 1988 interview with Amanda Smith, Spencer said of this very story:

It seems to me that real relationships don't ever perish. My object is to bring people to a certain point—usually a spiritual point, an awareness of all the elements involved. ("PW Interview 142)

- 30 In the first paragraph of the story, Ella Mason confesses that she has "had Eric somewhere in [her] mind all the time, a constant" even through thirty years of physical separation. Theirs is, in the sense that Spencer means it, a profoundly spiritual connection but one that only now they are coming to understand. Through their final willingness to open up their minds to each other and their mature ability to do so with tact and patience, they have arrived at the end of a long journey, a shared, internal journey.

- 31 Earlier in 1988, when pressed by Irv Broughton, Spencer admitted her affinity for Ella Mason, the Southern woman who travels far under the spell of a mystery.

I think the character that may be a lot like me is . . . Ella Mason. [She] has this sense of remembering without judging too harshly the things she remembers or turns over in her mind. She wonders without making too terribly harsh judgments about anything. (169)

- 32 The clarity of sight and lack of judgment with which the mature Ella Mason considers the past is shared in the present by her cousin Eric so that together they can close the distances that have separated them. And like their creator, they close those distances with the incantatory power of their voices. Just as their linked hands represent a rediscovered physical connection, their voices remain "long past midnight," symbolizing the internal intimacy of their interwoven lives. They have together become capable of creating their own face.

- 33 "The Cousins" is a story from late in Elizabeth Spencer's career. It is undeniably the product of her mature craft, as can be seen in her seamless interweaving of external and internal realities, past and present lives, male and female sensibility. Despite the "pitch black dark" that defeated her characters for thirty years, in the end she—and so they—are triumphant.

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## ABSTRACTS

Cet article démontre que "The Cousins" est sans nul doute l'une des meilleures nouvelles d'Elizabeth Spencer car c'est dans cette longue histoire qu'elle tisse le plus habilement le passé dans le présent et la réalité interne de son narrateur dans son environnement extérieur. Elle décrit des décennies et des milliers de kilomètres de territoire dans ses quarante-trois pages de sorte que la nouvelle se lit, comme l'ont noté plusieurs commentateurs, plus comme un roman que comme une nouvelle. Les préoccupations caractéristiques de Spencer (l'évolution individuelle dans un environnement familial étouffant, le choc qui surgit de la rencontre entre le connu et l'inconnu, les mystères souvent douloureux de l'intimité, la prégnance du passé dans le présent) se retrouvent toutes dans "The Cousins" avec une subtilité remarquable et même avec un certain mystère. L'histoire est indéniablement le produit de la maturité de Spencer, comme en témoigne l'imbrication sans faille des réalités extérieures et intérieures, des vies passées et présentes, de la sensibilité masculine et féminine, et de la narration. Ce texte confirme le statut de Spencer comme l'un des maîtres incontestés de la nouvelle.

## AUTHORS

### TERRY ROBERTS

Terry Roberts is an award-winning novelist and scholar. His debut novel, *A Short Time to Stay Here*, won the Willie Morris Award for Southern Fiction, and his second novel, *That Bright Land*, won the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award as well as the James Still Award for Writing about the Appalachian South. His third novel, *The Holy Ghost Speakeasy and Revival*, was published in the fall of 2018. Roberts is also the author of the primary study on the works of Elizabeth Spencer, *Self and Community in the Fiction of Elizabeth Spencer*, as well as numerous other articles and interviews on her work.