NOTHING LIKE THE SOUTH:
AURORA GREENWAY – A BELLE IN EXILE

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Larry McMurtry's *Terms of Endearment* has been better known as a 1983 successful silver-screen story than as a 1975 best-selling novel, rather as a multiplereceiver of Academy Awards than as a most accomplished book by a prolific author and Pulitzer Prize winner.

My return to it is justified by some recently read essays – neither on the film, nor on the book – but on *the Belle* and *the South* (indeed, an archetypal coupling somehow echoing *Beauty and the Beast*).

As for my title here – it oscillates between two Shakesperean sonnets: Sonnet 130 and Sonnet 3. Both poems appeal particularly to the sense of *sight*; they are versions of that type of painting (also fiction) known as a *portrait of a lady* – who stays *the lady* even if she defies any canon of lady-likelihood – both as Shakespeare's (image of the) lover and as McMurtry's *Southern Belle* – from

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun…
> Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee
> Calls back the lovely April of her prime;
> So thou through windows of thine age shalt see,
> Despight of wrinkles, this thy golden time…

The latter quote opens Larry McMurtry's novel, as a necessary motto. It evokes a specific traditional relationship: mother-daughter, by the classic symbol of *the mirror*. It could send us – via Larry McMurtry's novel – to Katherine Henninger's astute study of the impact of *photography* on the Visual Legacies of the South:

> *Picture a southern woman*. If not a personal memory of your grandmother, chances are that what springs to mind is an image based on a *photograph.* "Southern belle", "mammy", "jezebel", "trash", "brown sugar", "lady" – southern women have been represented in prescribed ways, carefully stilled and silenced within cultural images, literally transformed into black and white. (1)

(Our imaginary) eyes can grasp and enjoy such visions: Shakespeare's rough *portrait* of an enigmatic mistress whose "eyes are nothing like the sun", Shakespeare's *mirror* placed midway between mother and daughter, McMurtry's *novel* about a (modern) Southern Belle facing middle-age crisis and her daughter's disasters and death, last but not least, the *film* about the two of them, as faces of (the same) *southern woman.*

This *southern woman* – if not downright fond of photographs and films – seems pretty free from inhibitions of (what we call) the male gaze. She does not fear (various means of achieving) a good honest portrait. She can look *us* in the eye – from up there, in her picture. As a good *survivor*, she stays *fit* in her *exile*.

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Since the book obviously provides the stamina for the film, my concern here will be particularly related to the written fiction. What I will highlight here only reveals itself in the novel, most of the things I discuss are *not* for the show – as moving pictures (usually) are. It is for this reason that I tend to appreciate books turned into feature films even better after I have seen and enjoyed the movies. *As a lot remains unsaid in a good book, a lot can never show in a good film.*

One of these things that never show is the author's preface. The novelist added it to his book in 1989, i.e. six years after the film *Terms of Endearment* was released and at the time when *Steel Magnolias* – another great movie of the Southern Belle exiled in (melo)drama – started its career.

It is always worthwhile to mind the author's opinion about his own work. In this case, particularly, I have been rewarded with a confirmation of my guess that the American novel *Terms of Endearment* does invite its reader to an exile-contemplating mood:

> I think of *Terms of Endearment* as my most European novel, perhaps for no better reason that I was in Europe when I wrote it. … Adding to my conviction that *Terms of Endearment* must be somehow European is the fact that I had just spent a couple of years rereading several nineteenth-century novelists – Balzac, Tolstoy, and George Eliot, in particular. All three, of course, had taken a very searching look at the fibers and textures of life; I doubt that I aspired to such profound achievement, but I did hope to search at least a little less superficially among the flea market of details which constitute human existence. (5)

Therefore, in the good tradition of nineteenth century novel-writing, Larry McMurtry's book faces its readership with a nice collection of most

subtly nuanced portraits. In the spirit of such masters as the above mentioned: Balzac, Tolstoy, George Eliot – the standards impose a fine sense of the absurd and a sound reaction to challenges of reality. How can a convincing contemporary protagonist ever feel *at home* in its reality? *Exile* seems to be the answer – so, as a proof, Aurora Greenway *is* and *is not* the typical Southern Belle, since this is how her author meant her to be:

> I suppose at the time I was hoping that Aurora, nothing if not impetuous, would plunge into a moral dilemma worthy of Anna Karenina or Dorothea Brooke, but no such dilemma arose. Aurora was, after all, operating in Houston, a town where anything goes. I tried to give her access to a New England conscience by having her born in New Haven, but the New England conscience didn't really function as a New England conscience should, and no great moral crisis presented itself. Aurora merely had to choose between a number of grossly inadequate suitors, which, eventually, she did. (6)

The Aurora Greenway of the book chooses General Hector Scott, her neighbor in the novel. Sharing the filmscript with the film director, James L. Brooks, Larry McMurtry replaces (formerly) four-star General Hector Scott with the (also retired) astronaut Garret Breedlove – a move in tune with the setting of Houston, Texas. It may be funny, but, although the astronaut never turns up in the book, Jack Nicholson's character somehow insinuates himself in a second reading of the novel, enhancing Aurora's consistency as its *leading lady* – which Shirley Mac Laine played so memorably in the film.

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Aurora Greenway – whether in the book or in the film – marks her territory as that American South of the anti-heroic tradition of unladylike ladies – whether we choose to call them *Belles* or not. In the first place, Aurora Greenway will always remind us of (archetypal) Scarlett O'Hara: it is like both of them to say *"I'll think of it tomorrow; tomorrow is another day"* and cope with challenges as they come – one (or more) at a time. It is from Scarlett also that Aurora has inherited a *sound sense of duty* – accomplishing her tasks despite her own feelings. Hence: for all the conventional claim that these two unladylike *Belles* stand for a rather cynical attitude towards matters of life (and death, all right) – what better morality could we recommend than doing things "*as one has got to do them",* and not as one may choose to deal with them?

For instance, Aurora's first reaction when Emma breaks the news about her first pregnancy has hardly anything (grand)motherly in it. On the

contrary, Aurora gets alarmed lest she should lose the *beaux* she calls her suitors – once she becomes a grandmother. This is so much like Scarlett, that I have to reconsider Larry McMurtry's claim that *Terms of Endearment* be his *"most European novel"*. Therefore: what place of (imaginary) *exile* are we left with? Are Tara and/or Houston any better *home-places* than old wicked Europe? Where are the *Belles* of our most beloved novels more likely to get *exiled*?

But Aurora Greenway also belongs with Joanna Burden of William Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932) – beside Scarlett O'Hara of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) – and Sadie Burke in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946). Like Aurora Greenway, the latter two: Scarlett O'Hara and Sadie Burke, have enjoyed their glamorous double careers on the silver screen (the film *Gone with the Wind* was released in 1939; *All the King's Men* first became a movie in 1949 and then, quite recently, in 2006) – even more glorious than their original written scores. All these films got "Oscarized". Moreover, we have come to identify Sadie Burke with either Mercedes McCambridge or Patricia Clarkson; whereas Scarlett O'Hara will stay with us as Vivien Leigh for quite a while now.

Likewise, "little Aurora" would be deprived of much of her imposing stance if we were to give up her image as enacted by Shirley MacLaine, who also got the Oscar for the best actress in a main role on the occasion. Among other things, it is that spirit of the (un)tamed shrew that brings them together: both Scarlett O'Hara and Aurora Greenway – on the one hand, as well as Vivien Leigh and Shirley MacLaine in their respective roles – on the other hand. As luck would have it, Shirley MacLaine was born in Richmond, Virginia – therefore we can say that she herself belongs to the Southern Belle typology.

In other words – the typology of the "*spunky little woman"*, as Sue Bridewell Beckham chooses to refer to it. Indeed, Sue Bridewell Beckham's substantial study of Depression post office murals in terms of "race, gender, and a little bit of class" draws our attention on some specifically *visual* renderings of Southern femininity – just like Katherine Henninger's book on "photography and contemporary Southern women's writing". And, last but not least, just like the above-mentioned moving pictures:

> Sadie Burke, the executive secretary, prime mover, and sometimes lover of Willie Stark in *All the King's Men*, is a *plucky little woman*. So are Joanna Burden, the activist daughter of a transplanted Yankee in *Light in August*, and Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*. And so is the female farmer in Carson Davenport's design for Chatham, Virginia, post office mural, who seems to dance across the surface as she literally "plucks" the corn in her abundantly producing field. In an age when *plucky little women were a favorite of popular culture,*

> *all four of these women were rejected by Americans as unfit for southern living.* (100; emphasis added)

Sue Bridewell Beckham demonstrates not only that "white women in the mural South are insignificant either because of their function or because of their size and position on the picture plane" (124), but also that

> Black women, on the other hand, have a greater dignity if not always a greater prominence when they appear in murals. Almost universally, they are, like Faulkner's Dilsey and Margaret Mitchell's Dilsey and Mammy, accorded at least the dignity of hard work and a bit of self-determination. (124)

Therefore, despite their popularity, Southern "*spunky little women*" fail to adjust to the day's standards of *political correctness*. Odd as it may seem, they are regarded as *idle, self-centered* and *self-complacent*. Their Southern feminine vanity requires a row of *beaux* (or "suitors", as Aurora chooses to refer to hers). And this is how these ladies stay alive and keep old-age at an arm's length:

> "Why do you see him if you don't like him?" Emma asked, following her mother, who had drifted out on her second-floor patio. "That's what I can never understand about you. Why do you see all these people if you don't really like them?"
> "Luckily for you, you aren't old enough to understand that", Aurora said. "I have to do something with myself. If I don't, old age will set in next week." (80)

Still, it is due to the excellent vitality, reliable commonsense and sound irony of such *"spunky little women"* like Aurora Greenway and Scarlett O'Hara that the world they inhabit survives. And not only does it survive: it also remains meaningful and consistent with itself.

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> I grant I never saw a goddess go;
> My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground…

says Shakespeare in his Sonnet 130. Indeed, Aurora Greenway is fond of feeling the ground beneath her own feet and prefers walking barefooted to wearing her pretty shoes – whenever she gets a chance. Likewise, Aurora enjoys her exquisite Southern seafood meals wholeheartedly, as the true connoisseur she is:

> Halfway through lunch Aurora realized she was being too nice, but the food was so delicious that she couldn't stop. *Excellent food had been her undoing more than once in life.* The thing that had attracted her to Rud [Aurora's late husband], aside from his height, was that he had known the whereabouts of every good restaurant on the East Coast; though, unhappilly, as soon as they married he forgot them all and developed a fondness for pimento cheese sandwiches that was to prove lifelong. *Excellent food swept away her defenses – she could not eat well and bristle too – and by the time she had lapped up every drop of her lobster bisque and started on her pompano she was feeling extremely gay.*
>
> With the seafood so excellent, it was necessary for both of them to consume quite a lot of white wine, and by the time Aurora had worked her way into a salad and had begun to think in vague terms of the problem of getting home, the General was feeling even gayer and had begun to reach across the table every two minutes to squeeze her arm and compliment her on her dress and her complexion. *Nothing was more apt to bring out her best lights than a fine meal, and long before this one was over her best lights were flashing so brilliantly that the General was just short of being in a state.* (112-113; emphasis added)

There seems to be hardly anything as important as fine food in Aurora's life. She is herself a most accomplished cook, delighted to offer her Southern culinary masterpieces to her guests for dinner. Of course, they are mainly her suitors; but, after such an obsolete symposium, it is with Emma, her daughter, that Aurora shares her contentment, expressed in *"complete sentences"* and *"good grammar"* – even if with some mildly cynical turns. For instance, when the twenty-two year old, married, pregnant daughter asks her forty-nine year old widowed mother about the latter's "true feelings" for the lost husband and – respectively – father – Aurora says:

> For all I know, my dear, *good grammar* provides a more lasting basis for *sound character* than *quote real feeling unquote.* I would not presume to claim that definitively, but I must say that I suspect it. I also suspect, if you must know, *that it was lucky for your father and me that none of my admirers had much capacity for kicking.* The difference between the saved and the fallen, I have always maintained, boils down to adequate temptation. (94; emphasis added)

Aurora's concern with "*sound character"* is nothing if not Southern: it pertains to (what has been left from) the Southern code of honor, sense of decency and decorum. It is one of the things that make Aurora "*feel faintly ridiculous"* – as Emma her daughter and Hector her favorite suitor both scold her. And yet – were it not for this awareness that she truly is "*faintly ridiculous"* and acts *"like a goddamn queen"* – "Little Aurora" might miss a much more important awareness: that she is actually *happy* the way she is, and that it takes some wisdom to realize and enjoy this. In other words: it takes the moral balance (plus the sense of humor) of *middle age.*

Aurora Greenway gracefully cherishes her middle age: "It occurred to her, thinking of Emma, that she had *no real wish to be younger. Few enough of the rewards of life seemed to belong to youth, when one considered.* (95; emphasis added)

In her deep merciless *sense of self-awareness*, Aurora Greenway somehow evokes one of the most enigmatic and – at the same time – most humorous feminine protagonists of the classic 20th century Southern saga on Faulkner's map of Yoknapatawpha: Addie Bundren. And this parallel sustains itself by what we have already discovered in Aurora as specifically Southern. With the difference that, while Aurora's humor is – to some extent – benign and harmless, Addie's irony approaches the tragic dimension.

Here is a piece of Aurora's mind: "Few things gave her quite the same *sense of serenity* as knowing that *her food had been well prepared and well received*, and that *her dishes were done and her kitchen clean.* In such a mood nothing could vex her deeply" (91; emphasis added). Addie, saying good-bye to this world, justifies her sense of peace with herself:

> My father said that the reason for living is getting ready to stay dead. I knew at last what he meant and that he could not have known what he meant himself, *because a man cannot know anything about cleaning up the house afterward. And so I have cleaned my house.* (Faulkner 175-176; emphasis added)

Faulkner's sarcastic Addie provides the highest stylized tragicomic mask of *the Belle in exile*. And, indeed, she makes us see there's "nothing like the South". There is hardly any other place under the sun – or is there? maybe in some sonnet by Shakespeare… – where we are so insistently reminded that *"words are no good"* , as (here where) Addie lay dying; or where – on the contrary – "*good grammar"* and *"complete sentences"* acknowledge a sense of maturity and self-reliance – as (here where) Aurora shared an evening's peaceful moment with her daughter. Both Addie and Aurora must give up their only daughters: Addie dies, leaving Dewey Dell to her obscure fate; Aurora sees Emma dying of cancer, standing by to take care of her grandchildren.

Food and the mysterious *art of cooking* – as something not quite remote from witchcraft – bear a lot of symbolism and can run deep as quiet home-metaphors in both books. We have just seen it with Aurora. In Addie's case, food and cooking relate to (what lies beyond) the significance of (treacherous) *words*:

> And so, when Cora Tull would tell me I was *not a true mother,* I would think how *words go straight up in a thin line, quick and harmless,* and how terribly *doing goes along the earth, clinging to it,* so that after a while *the two lines are too far apart for the same person to straddle from one to the other;* and that *sin* and *love* and *fear* are just *sounds* that people who *never sinned nor loved nor feared* have for what they never had and cannot have *until they forget the words*. Like Cora, *who could never even cook*. (173-174; emphasis added)

"Faintly ridiculous" and/but "happy" – just like a (true) *belle*, Aurora Greenway does and does not belong to the (fictive) South – just like a (true) *exile.* She makes a good example of what John Shelton Reed calls "the South's Midlife Crisis". After he dismantles such cliches about the (actual) South, as: (H. L. Mencken's) "Sahara of the Bozart", (Horace Kallen's) "melting pot", "this happy cultural gumbo" – quoting again famous *food-based* conventional phrases – the prestigious scholar in Southern Culture concludes his essay in a hopeful mood:

> I am saying that if you want to know what southerners are, you could do worse than ask them what they *think* they are. The answer, these days, for most, has little to do with ancestry, with the Civil War, with the Peculiar Institution of slavery, or with any of the South's other peculiar institutions. Instead, what we hear is that southerners share some things in the present: first, what one anthropologist has called an ethnic *style* (not the same as an ethnic tradition); second, some mistreatment at the hands, or mouths, of the rest of the country. …We could surprise the cynics yet. (Reed 264)

Cynics can only be surprised by (other) cynics. And a sense of surprise is a sign of self-assumed maturity – even if the cynics may prefer to call it just midlife crisis. We tend to identify protagonists like Aurora Greenway with the fictive American South of today – whether on the screen of a feature film or in a book that offers much more than meets the eye, i.e. a relaxing gift for witty dialog.

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The clue to the *title of both book and film* can only be found in the printed text, as it actually belongs to the *invisible* narrator:

> They looked at one another trying to know what to do. Flap's cheeks had thinned, but he still had something of his old look, part arrogant, part self-deprecating – though the arrogance had worn thin after sixteen years. Somehow that look had won her, though *she couldn't remember, looking at him, what the terms of endearment had been, or how they had been lost for so long.* He was a thoughtful but no longer an energetic man, and he had never been really hopeful. (*Terms of Endearment* 400; emphasis added)

Therefore, the noun *terms* means here *circumstances* – not *words*. I think this renders the reading even more rewarding: the omniscient narrator reads Emma's mind for us readers. What dying Emma fails to remember is *how* she happened to fall in love with her husband, not any particular words. "*Words are no good"* – anyway – as dying Addie repeats in Faulkner's book.

Dying Emma gets lost in Aurora's precious Renoir: "Sometimes she dreamed she was living in the picture, walking in Paris in a pretty hat. At times she felt herself awaking in it instead of in a bed covered with hair that had fallen out during the night" (408). The little Renoir establishes a strong bond – from Amelia Starrett to Aurora Greenway to Emma Horton to Melanie Horton, i.e. from great-grandmother to grandmother to mother to daughter – a family of *belles* – not all of them *Southern*, but then, not all of them *in exile*, either:

> It was a small Renoir, true and early, but still it was superb: a small oil of two gay women in hats standing near some tulips. Aurora's farsighted *mother*, Amelia Starrett, whose *eyes* had been a Renoir green *somewhat unsuited to Boston*, had bought the picture in Paris when she herself had been a young woman and Pierre Auguste Renoir quite unknown. *It had been the dominant painting of her mother's life, she felt quite sure, as it had been hers, and as it would be, she hoped, of Emma's.* She had resisted all pressures to hang it where others could see it. Others, if they were worthy, might come to her bedroom and see it, but her bedroom was the only place she would allow it to be. The dresses of the women were blue; the painting's colors were light blue, yellow, green, and pink. Still, after thirty years, tears sometimes came to *her eyes* when she looked at it for too long… (79-80; emphasis added)

Just as I have been (keen on) demonstrating, *Terms of Endearment* – both as a book and as a movie – tells a story appealing mostly to our *eyes*; even if they are only our imaginary eyes, there – in the eyes of the beholder – is the place to look for beauty… Even Aurora – the (anti)*belle*'s first name – plus her last name: Greenway, both point to rainbow-like images of color splendor. And even if the poet knows that "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun", no "real" Southern *belle* could compete with "little Aurora" – a fictive *belle* in exile…

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