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The (M)other as Monster: Modern Curious Cases of Naturals and Their (Birth) Stories

Keywords: *fantasy; irony; horror; mother(hood/ing); nature/natural; the Old South; (jazz)age.*

Abstract: *I have selected here two American short stories of the Roaring Twenties: a) “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” by F. Scott Fitzgerald, first published in his volume *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922);*

b) “Miss Zilphia Gant” by William Faulkner, first submitted for & rejected from publication around mid-December 1928; eventually published in a literary magazine, as late as June 1932.

Highlighted here are the particular differences between the consecrated versions and their shadow-like modern doubles, i.e. between the celebrated 2008 American film and the 1922 (hardly ever mentioned so far) original story by Fitzgerald – on the one hand; as well as those between the Faulknerian stories “A Rose for Emily” (1930) and “Miss Zilphia Gant” (1928 / 1932) – on the other hand.

*(Failed) motherhood/mothering breeds monsters, being one itself. Benjamin Button is – if not a close (fictive) relative, at least someone whose name sounds much like that of (natural) Benjy Compson in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). (Monstrous?) Otherness counterpoints the (natural?) self. (Human) Age: is it a thing of nature?*

*Miss Zilphia Gant is a somewhat earlier version of Faulkner’s *Miss Emily Grierson*. But then she is also related to Addie Bundren, in her monstrously failed motherhood/mothering. Further on, to some Macondo (m)others – definitely others than Ursula Buendia, the only true Mother of a clan doomed to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). Still further on, to Sethe, the desperate (m)other of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). Such are the influences of William Faulkner’s fiction – whether famous or barely known.*

As the world of (M)Other Nature is quite a small place. Apparently.

We like to comfort ourselves by the old truism that the world is a small place: (m)other nature included?

In this essay I will focus on two instances of celebrated pieces of fiction in both printed literary and feature film forms. In both instances, we deal with one consecrated version doubled by the version in the shadow. In both instances, again, we deal with *The American Old South* as a basic location.

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Therefore, the former (double) *curious case* is that of two short stories by William Faulkner (1897-1962):

“A Rose for Emily” (1930) – as the consecrated story; and

“Miss Zilphia Gant” (1932) – as the story in the shadow.

The latter (double) *curious case* is that of a famous Hollywood moving picture of our young century – and its source of inspiration, a most atypical short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940):

“The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” (1922; 2008).

Ironically, in both instances, the haphazard element in literary history has the reader’s (real) sensibility somehow confirm the nonlinear narrative of artistic fiction:

a) even if, *apparently*, William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” *precedes* “Miss Zilphia Gant” – this is *not* the (drab and dull) chronological reality: “Miss Zilphia Gant” is just one of those (classic) Faulkner stories *rejected* when first submitted to publishers, back in 1928⁴⁰.

b) I confess I first saw the movie with Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett, “loosely based” on Fitzgerald’s 1922 story, and only afterwards read it. I happened to be in New Orleans in 2008 when the film – using New Orleans for a setting instead of the Baltimore in the original short story – got released. Funny, this is how I got a *different* (i.e. *other, new*) meaning attached to the writer’s words, which I thought I had “known” for quite a while: his lament about the feeling of pertaining to a *generation going backward*,

a generation grown up to find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken.

Funny, also, I had the strange impression I suddenly knew what it felt like to experience this (*un?*)*natural aging backward*. Could it be just because I happened to visit New Orleans at the right time? Or rather, because my own kind of Great Depression (*life*)*experience* had found a verisimilar – if not very realistic – correspondent on the old silver screen? If this is not a most *curious case*, then it certainly is one of the *lost* (feelings of a) *generation*...

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If we were only to consider their *uncanny atmosphere*, the short stories “A Rose for Emily” and “Miss Zilphia Gant” are obviously interrelated. Moreover, in point of *narrative style* – they both adopt the same *detached* (would-be) *objective* point-of-view, of the *townspeople*, the folks of Jefferson, the county seat of Yoknapatawpha. But *this collective recounting voice* expresses rather surmise and

⁴⁰ See Joseph Blotner’s deeply documented endnotes for “Miss Zilphia Gant” closing the volume *Uncollected Stories of William Faulkner*, Edited by Joseph Blotner, p. 700. For its first version into the Romanian see the volume *William Faulkner: Povestiri inedite*, by Anca Peiu. The above-mentioned endnotes will be found in the Romanian version at pp. 545-546.

bewilderment, doubt and shock – than certainty. In point of *structure* – they both consist of *five* (classic) *sections*. They display the same *apparent accuracy* in point of *time details* (*flash-back* and *flash forward*) – rather alluring the reader into William Faulkner’s labyrinth than fixing the clear cut intervals of the story; even the *number of pages* is almost identical: the former story covers eleven, whereas the latter – thirteen pages.

Technically, they express the same stage in the development of the author. They perform the same game of *virtuosity with literary ambiguity* – so characteristic for the great American modern writer. They complete – or rather enhance the mystery of – the same Faulknerian landscape of Yoknapatawpha County. And they put Faulkner the novelist on his terrible map as a *short story writer* – likewise.

Both stories develop terrific passionate *feminine portraits*: on the one hand, Emily Grierson, the haughty recluse, the arrogant spinster sacrificed on her father’s altar of ambition and *hybris*; on the other hand, Miss Zilphia – between Mrs. Gant, her paranoid mother, and little Zilphia, the child she finally *gets* – since she herself cannot *beget* one – from the one couple she so bitterly hates and envies: her former husband, losing his life in some stupid accident, and his second wife, who dies in childbirth.

Both Emily and Zilphia must face ultimate *frustration* – each one in her own way.

Thus, they are both tributary to E. A. Poe’s looming ghost somewhere, at the back of William Faulkner’s mind. Yet in “A Rose for Emily”, this is also shaded by some echo of Charles Dickens’s Miss Havisham, from *Great Expectations*. The main source of success in the (*curious*) case of “A Rose for Emily” is its supreme *Gothic dimension*: Homer Barron, the poisoned lover held *prisoner* in his sweetheart’s bed for thirty years – at least in death if not (anymore) in life.

The confinement of the solitary mind represents a reliable heritage as a pervasive literary motive for both short stories. Both Emily and Zilphia provide rich pictures of luxuriant *insanity* with paranoid drives carried to their wildest grotesque limits. This is how their shrill overtones of aberration verge on an unmistakable blend of *dark Faulknerian tragicomedy*.

Still, in the particular (*curious*) case of “Miss Zilphia Gant”, *horror* takes a different hue: since she cannot control her former husband’s life anymore, Zilphia is determined *to conceive a child without a man*:

She would think about Christ, whispering “*Mary did it without a man. She did it;*” or, rousing, furious, her hands clenched at her sides, the covers flung back and her opened thighs tossing, she would violate her ineradicable virginity again and again with something evoked out of the darkness immemorial and philoprogenitive: “*I will conceive! I’ll make myself conceive!*” (Faulkner, 379; my emphasis added)

Mothering goes deep into Faulkner’s most haunting protagonists’ *minds*: Addie Bundren’s resenting it, as *the demonic mother* of the 1930 novel *As I Lay Dying*; Joe Christmas’s loathing it, as *the all-race orphan* of the 1932 novel *Light in August*.

As the first born of all his mother's four sons, William Faulkner never got enough of Miss Maud Butler Falkner's affection, appreciation and acknowledgement. There was always room for the other brothers – first, particularly for Johncy, also aspiring at a writer's glory. Bill – his senior brother – had first to earn his Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950, before his stern mother admitted that there was a *difference* between her two dear boys – at least in point of literary gift...

In “A Rose for Emily” there is – apparently – *no mother*: just *the father figure* of Mr. Grierson. But then, it may be that the very absence of any maternal force gives the story its unique *sense of bareness* and *waste of vitality*.

In “Miss Zilphia Gant” *mothering means failure*: at first, Mrs. Gant's, then Miss Zilphia's. Yet mothering is the *obsessive craving* of both mother and daughter – *doomed* never to know how to handle it.

Merciless and masterly in both his dark bitter caricatures, William Faulkner makes both Miss Emily Grierson and Miss Zilphia Gant get “*plump in the wrong places*” as they grow older. And crazier, too.

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“A Rose for Emily” and “Miss Zilphia Gant” are stories about *possessiveness*. *Possessiveness* and solitude. *Possessiveness* and despair. Faulkner's old Yoknapatawpha *clans* send their echoes from their *latent* common narrative background – in “A Rose for Emily”: Colonel Sartoris, Judge Stevens. This marks one of the differences between Miss Emily and Miss Zilphia: while the former belongs with the proper Yoknapatawpha families, due to her terrible father, Mr. Grierson – the latter is hardly any better than *poor white trash*, though her terrible mother, Mrs. Gant, gets accomplished enough in the trade of dressmaking to earn a living for herself and her daughter in Jefferson, the county seat of Yoknapatawpha.

Yet *the natural* has always belonged with the (American Gothic notion of) *family* (secret). And this is precisely what both Miss Emily and Miss Zilphia turn out to be: embodiments of the embarrassing shameful secrets of their ghostly families. If anyone (or anything) *survives* such Southern families, as the Griersons and / or the Gants of Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha – it is *this quintessential embodiment of dementia*. The craving for company: be it the corpse of Homer Barron in Miss Emily's bed upstairs, or little Zilphia, her late husband's (secretly adopted – or rather snatched) little daughter, holding Miss Zilphia by the hand – *the lonely witch* would not let go of *her prey*. *Possessiveness* is even stronger than their former *love* for the people whom they once used to care for. It drains their zest for living before the story is all said and done.

Therefore, the beauty of these two stories lies in their subtlety of rendering such portraits – above the standard of *the pathological*. Deliberately (or even wickedly) – William Faulkner adopts a *mock-mediocre narrative voice*, as if the story-teller could ignore the *intensity* of such passionate personalities, as Miss Emily and Miss Zilphia. Their *inwardness* seems to be thus protected from the (anonymous) reader's inquisitiveness and intrusion. Whereas in fact the latter is no better – or no worse than the would-be blunt average-minded (anonymous?)

narrator himself. Hence, the wicked stories of *the two Southern witches* involve in their progress all the possible players in the classic game of narrative: no one is spared.

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The South is no mere setting: it is a (*jazzy*) mood, a state of (*evil*) mind. The *irrational* prevails here irrespective of the *age* in history.

And yet, despite his propensity for such key-words as: jazz age, evil, the irrational – F. Scott Fitzgerald is no typical writer of the Old South. This is all the more remarkable, since the very source of all that jazz is New Orleans – the birthplace of Louis Armstrong, for instance, the iconic jazz artist.

The Deep South is bound to appear *forever doomed* – that is, no home to the cynics and cool “intellectuals” up north. The Old South has a sound reputation of a territory open to *risk* and *unpredictability*. Like Huckleberry Finn, the South would not be “*adopted & sivilized*”. It will stay the country of true born “*naturals*”: the kind of offspring no dignified family takes much pride in. And if their awkwardly different (mental) condition seems *funny* (i.e. *comic*) to the reader or to the moviegoer – to those who suffer from it themselves it is sheer *tragedy*.

This may have been the reason for Eric Roth’s choice of New Orleans for the successful movie, to replace the Baltimore in Fitzgerald’s original short story “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button”. (Funny: one cannot help noticing here that one of the rather few things William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald had in common was their Hollywood job experience as screenplay writers.)

Eric Roth makes New Orleans on the eve of devastating Hurricane Katrina (2005) the starting point of his *flashback recounting* “the curious case” of Daisy’s lifetime love for Benjamin. Daisy is on her hospital deathbed. Her name is also different from that of Benjamin’s wife in the original story (Hildegard Moncrief) – still it somehow makes sense here, indirectly evoking the one true Daisy of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby* (1925). Charmingly performed by Cate Blanchett, this 2008 version of a Fitzgerald Daisy is certainly no cynical sophisticated flapper. On the contrary: Eric Roth’s Daisy remembers her youth as a gifted and passionate ballet dancer, and her (doomed) passion for Benjamin Button (alias Brad Pitt) at various ages along their lives. She tells this incredible story to her daughter, Caroline, played in the movie by Julia Ormond. (In the original short story, Benjamin Button is the father of an only son, Roscoe – quite ungrateful and embarrassed by his father’s failure to grow old decently, like anyone else...)

Mainly due to Eric Roth’s free re-reading of the original story, there followed promptly a *parody-reply film*, which was merciless. This was also due to some obvious similarities with the screenplay for the movie *Forrest Gump* (1994), also signed by Eric Roth. The main common traces between the two screenplays were the following: the beginning confession-like formula runs: “*my name is...*”; the protagonist has a thoughtful and affectionate mother, who encourages him all along his lifetime (while there is hardly *any motherly presence* in Fitzgerald’s story!); the protagonist has one love for a lifetime; he spends some time working on

a boat and loses his best friend in a wartime battle (both of which details, again, have no support whatsoever in the original 1922 story!); he then takes a long trip round the world, all by himself; he has no trouble making *money* (which *does* conform to Fitzgerald's story – also corresponding to his general leitmotif of *money* as a requirement for *happiness*). *Last but no least*: both Forrest Gump and Benjamin Button are *native* (anti) *heroes* of a (rather grotesque and a-temporal) *Old South*! By “*natives*” in both these “curious cases”, of both Forrest Gump and Benjamin Button, the way Eric Roth put them on the silver screen map – we also mean here “*naturals*” in any one of this funny word's meanings. Q. E. D.

On the other hand, Fitzgerald's Benjamin Button is born in September 1860 – unlike Roth's hero, who gets born on November 11, 1918. Therefore, the Civil War *does* have a meaning in the original story – which, by the way, makes refreshing use of *irony*. For instance, the Benjamin Button of the book is sure to greatly please his father-in-law, General Moncrief, by the end of the 19th century, when he helps the latter see his “masterpiece” finally published:

Needless to say, Baltimore eventually received the couple to its bosom. Even old General Moncrief became reconciled to his son-in-law when Benjamin gave him the *money* to bring out his “*History of the Civil War*” in *twenty volumes*, which had been *refused by nine prominent publishers*. (Fitzgerald, 333; my emphasis added)

It is ironically significant that F. Scott Fitzgerald chose the Old South as a setting/ a location of his *fantasy*: there, safely far away from the “civilized” North Eastern Coast, anything is possible. Even the tale of a man born as a *septuagenarian*, in 1860, *growing* curiously *younger* – instead of *older* – as long as he lives. So that, finally, by the time he dies, in 1930, he should reach *the peace of mind* of a new-born baby, free from memories, regrets and remorse.

One indirect meaning of this “*curious case*” is that *any age in human life* represents a *crisis of identity*. Because we take it for granted that we should come into this world as babies and die as elderly people. Even if the circuit were the other way round, we would still be very far away from the ghost of a hope for a clue. To a plausible answer to the *old question: who am I?* It is the first question Mr. Button addresses his son:

“Where in God's name did you come from? *Who are you?*” burst Mr. Button frantically.

“I can't tell you *exactly* who I am” replied the querulous whine, “because I've only been born a few hours – but my last name is certainly Button.”

“You lie! You're an impostor!”

The old man turned wearily to the nurse. “Nice way to welcome a new-born child,” he complained in a weak voice. “Tell him he's wrong, why don't you?”

“You're wrong, Mr. Button,” said the nurse severely. “This is your child, and you'll have to make the best of it. We're going to ask you to take him home with you as soon as possible – some time today.” (Fitzgerald, 321)

In the Old South, indeed, *the obsession with racial purity, the horror of miscegenation*, must have taken such a toll of victims, that the collective unconscious may have got shaped by it ineluctably, and even deeper than poets and philosophers may ever know. But the betrayal of such a commonsensical expectation, that an infant should look like an infant – is appalling! It puts a great question mark above the head of *the mother*: she must be some *monster* of infidelity. And yet, *the mother of Benjamin Button* gets practically no attention from the narrator. I find this the strangest thing in Fitzgerald's story: indeed, *the curious case of Benjamin's mother* remains a mystery for ever!

The only *motherly presence* in the entire original story is that of Nana, Benjamin's nurse, who attends him after he was taken from the kindergarten, as a ridiculously *failed* grandfather to Roscoe's son, in the last days of *his curious life*:

He was taken from the kindergarten. His nurse, Nana, in her starched gingham dress, became the center of his tiny world. On bright days they walked in the park; Nana would point at a *gray monster* and say "elephant," and Benjamin would say it after her, and when he was being undressed for bed that night, he would say it over and over aloud to her: "Elyphant, elyphant, elyphant." Sometimes Nana let him jump on the bed, which was fun, because if you sat down exactly right it would bounce you up on your feet again, and if you said "Ah" for a long time while you jumped you got a very pleasing broken vocal effect. (341; my emphasis added)

In David Fincher's and Eric Roth's post-Katrina New Orleans film, Nana's correspondent is Queenie, beautifully played by Taraji P. Henson, nominated for an Academy Award for the year 2008, as the Best Actress in a Supporting Role. She would have well deserved it, though she did not get it.

Queenie must have resonated at the back of Eric Roth's mind as an echo of William Faulkner's Dilsey, or maybe even his true Mammy Callie. "They endured" – as Faulkner would say.

Queenie belongs to this most distinguished gallery of *Southern motherly personalities*, the (Afro-American) nurses who keep the (white) children's lives on the right tracks – particularly when the officially acknowledged (white) lady of the household is as good as absent. It is characters like Dilsey and Queenie who make a *true home* of their place (of employment, actually). In Eric Roth's screenplay – and then in the movie – Queenie is the Afro-American nurse who finds the abandoned Benjamin Button on the steps of the nursing house for the elderly, where she works. Since, unlike in Fitzgerald's original short story, in the film Benjamin's mother dies in childbirth.

With *the movie mother figure* – therefore – we are and are not so very (un)familiar. For half the while, there is faithful, reliable, kindhearted, generous Queenie to protect "young" (or should we say rather "old"?) Benjamin Button and give him the sound sense of *belonging to a family*. Yet (very) much later, there is Daisy herself to play *her lifetime lover's mother*.

There is the powerful final image of this movie: quite close in its suggestion of the *Pieta*, in 2003, Daisy holds baby Benjamin on her lap, looking him deep into the eyes. And the old mother, dying in a New Orleans hospital, in 2005, shortly

before Hurricane Katrina, confesses to her (and Benjamin's) daughter that she was sure he remembered *who she was*.

So: *who was she?* Was she *his best friend* of what had been a most *curious* childhood for him and those around him, alike? Was she *his impossible love* – as *true love always* is – of his tormented days of a wanderer's youth? Was she *his true partner*, in a hardly credible age of reconciliation and (mature?) harmony? *Was she his only daughter's (m)other?* Quite a question we got here...

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Aging, therefore: is it a thing of nature? Who can keep up pace with it?

It is not so much of a *fantasy* to say (and see) that the elderly sometimes acquire children's minds.

In Fitzgerald's short story there is a fine strain of irony that the film is bound to miss: young Hildegarde Moncrief being attracted (and candidly acknowledging it out loud) to men (who look rather) fifty years old:

"I like men of your age," Hildegarde told him. "Young boys are so idiotic. They tell me how much champagne they drink at college, and how much money they lose playing cards. Men of your age know how to appreciate women." (331; my emphasis added)

Only too soon will the wheel turn again. He wondered what possible fascination she had ever exercised over him.

To add to the breach, he found, *as the new century gathered headway*, that his thirst for gayety grew stronger. Never a party of any kind in the city of Baltimore but he was there, dancing with the prettiest of the young married women, chatting with the most popular of the debutantes, and finding their company charming, while his wife, a dowager of evil omen, sat among the chaperons, now in haughty disapproval, and now following him with solemn, puzzled and reproachful eyes.

"Look!" people would remark. "What a pity! A young fellow that age tied to a woman of forty-five. He must be twenty years younger than his wife." They had forgotten – as people inevitably forget – that back in 1880 their mammas and papas had also remarked about this same ill-matched pair. (335; my emphasis added)

If this fragment did not remind us – *for all forgetfulness in human nature* – of *contemporary curious cases of ill-matched pairs* – even famous Hollywood couples defying the world, for a while, with their deliberate lack of concern for age differences, we could say Fitzgerald returns to Goethe's Faust, pleading with the wondrous moment in time to still linger on...

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As a lucid researcher of the intricate relationship between *time* and *narrative*, Paul Ricoeur would have found in F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1922 short story "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" a fine argument for his theories.

Here is one of them, that seems to me the best to confirm the suggested messages above mentioned:

Philosophy, in this sense, is a long footnote at the bottom of this declaration, uttered with fear and trembling: "Nous voici, nous les humains, nous les mortels!" (Ricoeur in Kemp, 101)

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