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THE AMERICAN DREAM OF SELF-RELIANCE: AVATARS OF THE ANTI-HEROIC COUPLE

Keywords: *self-reliance/achievement; the perfect couple; partnership; love; family; culture; memory.*

Abstract: *Self-Reliance is perhaps the most powerful American myth. It precedes Ralph Waldo Emerson himself in a vision that Benjamin Franklin called The American Dream: the availability of success to anyone who is ready to surpass one's own limits.*

This classic American heritage of thought has been questioned again and again by writers who put their national culture icons and their (sense of) history on the map of world literature. And further on, high up there, on the screen of really memorable movies.

My case in point here is Richard Yates's 1961 novel, Revolutionary Road. *Its outstanding 2008 film version, achieved by Sam Mendes, who directed a cast of actors starring Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio, is much more than a fortunate coincidence.*

Ironic distortion and doom interweave as echoes of one of the few books which William Faulkner wrote out of Yoknapatwpha County: The Wild Palms (1939). Whether modern or post-modern, the two realistic novels share a focus on the anti-heroic couple. Their main delusions stem from the deepest memory of American culture: the (revolutionary) myth of self-reliance.

For Kate Winslet, the year 2008 meant the international acknowledgement of a double triumph of her artistic maturity: first as the best actress in the film *The Reader* – which also brought her the Oscar – and second as the leading lady of the movie *Revolutionary Road*. This double story is the right starting point of my essay here, for some reasons like the following: 1. both movies stem from outstanding books, i.e. two postmodern novels, one German, the other American: *Der Vorleser* by Bernhard Schlink (1995), and Revolutionary Road by Richard Yates (1961); 2. both leading lady-roles are tragic, classic, metafictional. The deep significance of both books and their film versions will concentrate on their feminine protagonists, Hanna Schmitz and April Wheeler. This is just one of the (double) aspects we are going to focus on here.

If *The Reader* is metonymically the story of rise and fall of the German Dream as a fatal Nazi delusion, relying on the abysmal polarity literacy-illiteracy, *Revolutionary Road* puts Richard Yates's novelistic masterpiece on the map/screen, as an embittered meditation on the American Dream; the old American Dream as we know it: embroidering on the Enlightenment myth of self-reliance, hence annihilating any illusion of the conventionally romantic enduring couple.

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Yet, if we mean to stay within the boundaries of 20th century American fiction, there is still another former masterpiece which *Revolutionary Road* echoes quite strongly: William Faulkner's 1939 (double) story, *The Wild Palms*, or, *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* – one of his few books *out* of Yoknapatawpha. But is there actually any way *out* of Yoknapatwpha – for this writer and his readers? The State Penitentiary at Parchman, the terrible life-sentence prison, is (and is not yet, just due to his determination to live for his memories) a dead-end for Harry Wilbourne of " The Wild Palms", the tall convict of "Old Man", and Mink Snopes of *The Snopeses' Trilogy*. They might have met there. What brings these strange tales together is *not* the Mississippi River, the great American symbol of freedom and self-reliance, hence of the old American Dream; but rather the (image of) prison for life, whose convicts have some death/life on their conscience. And – to bring our speculation full circle – such is the case of the first book mentioned above, made famous by Kate Winslet's performance in the film drawn after it: *Der Vorleser/ The Reader*. Since Auschwitz guardian Hanna Schmitz is the exceptional illiterate who should confirm the fact that the literacy rate in Nazi Germany was the highest in Europe. Moreover, as a law scholar of the University of Heidelberg, Bernhard Schlink, the controversial author, also a philosopher and a lawyer by trade, born in 1944 Germany, somehow reminds us of Faulkner's character Gavin Stevens, the district attorney of Yoknapatawpha, with his academic diplomas earned at Harvard and Heidelberg.

Therefore: is (re)reading (or re-membering) an act of self-reliance or rather a place of refuge (and confinement), like a prison for life, in a dream with no way out?

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The Reader was the last film produced by Anthony Minghella (director of *The English Patient*, 1996, after Michael Ondaatje's 1992 book) and Sydney Pollack, neither of whom lived to see their final movie released (on December 10, 2008). After the film *Revolutionary Road* was released (on December 15, 2008), Kate Winslet, its absolute star, and Sam Mendes, its director and producer, divorced.

Kate Winslet, with her versatile figure often impersonating the *femme fatale* and still reminding today of Marlene Dietrich, could be the right choice for Charlotte Rittenmeyer, the tragic protagonist of William Faulkner's novel *The Wild Palms* – should anyone ever care to make a movie out of it[1]:

> He turned and saw a young woman a good deal shorter than he and for a moment he thought she was fat until he saw it was not fat at all but merely that broad, simple, profoundly delicate and feminine articulation of Arabian mares – a woman of under twenty-five, in a print cotton dress, a face which laid no claim even to prettiness and wore no makeup save the painted broad mouth, with a faint inch-long scar on the cheek which he recognized as an old burn, doubtless from childhood. (33–34)

[1] Incredible as it may seem, William Faulkner's book *The Wild Palms*, or, *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939), though acknowledged as one of both American literature in general, and the great modern writer's own canon, is still waiting for its first translation into Romanian.

In Richard Yates's novel *Revolutionary Road*, April Wheeler looks much like Kate Winslet herself on the silver screen:

> She was twenty-nine, a tall ash-blonde with a patrician kind of beauty that no amount of amateur lighting could distort, and she seemed ideally cast in the role. It didn't even matter that bearing two children had left her a shade too heavy in the hips and thighs, for she moved with the shyly sensual grace of maidenhood [...] (Yates 9)

The similarities between the two books are quite impressive, and particularly convincing, too. But the basic connection between them is *the double game of memory*. Living one's life deliberately *for the sake of memories* means professing *a personal religion*, in which *agony* itself, the endless *trauma* of lost love, stands as *the sole reason for living*, and at the same time *the only means of survival*. Even if offered the escape of poison to put an end to his infernal existence as a prisoner at Parchman, Harry Wilbourne makes his choice, takes his chance to *redemptive memory*:

> Not could. Will. I want to. So it is the old meat after all, no matter how old. Because if memory exists outside of the flesh it wont be memory because it wont know what it remembers so when she became not then half of memory became not and if I become not then all of remembering will cease to be. – Yes he thought Between grief and nothing I will take grief. (Faulkner 272–3)

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"The Wild Palms" and "Old Man" are the two narrative streams, each made up of five sections, merging into one book, which William Faulkner would have liked to call *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, in an echo of biblical Psalm 137:

> By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. 2. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. 3. For they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us *required of us* mirth, *saying*, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. 4. How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land? 5. If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget *her cunning*. 6. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy. (*The Holy Bible* 384)

Doom, loss and *failure* pervade the *memories* of any *culture of exile*. Faulkner's modernism is also manifest in his propensity for giving a classic ring to his books' titles.

Yet Faulkner's editors preferred *The Wild Palms* as a title for this experiment in narrative, whether modern or postmodern, in which the virtuoso writer chooses – instead of shifting various narrative points of view, as in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) or *As I Lay Dying* (1930) – the strategy of blending together two apparently separate stories, entwining them into a spider-web puzzle, as he had done before, in *Light in August* (1932). Thus the labyrinthine *Wild Palms* became one of his main books which proclaimed William Faulkner a true father figure of Latin American writers of the 20th century latter half, such as: Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Mario Vargas Llossa, who could read him in Spanish due to the enthusiastic achievement of Jorge Louis Borges as Faulkner's devoted literary translator.

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To consider the correspondences between *The Wild Palms* and *Revolutionary Road* means in the first place to contemplate a particular symmetry of themes and plots, which can render both books representative for all time American romance of doom, loss and failure.

Faulkner's peculiar book is often evoked[2] in both types of fiction, printed or filmed, for the sake of its quips. *The Wild Palms* ("Old Man" included) will develop along the crucial themes of pregnancy, childbirth and fatal abortion, which bring coherence and metaphorical meaning to the two apparently disconnected stories.

Yet the main theme the two books share: Faulkner's *Wild Palms* and Yates's *Revolutionary Road*, is that of (anti)heroism. Each one of these books develops around an amorous triangle: Charlotte Rittenmeyer, Harry Wilbourne and Francis Rittenmeyer – in *The Wild Palms*; April Wheeler, Frank Wheeler and Maureen Grube – in *Revolutionary Road*. Actually, in the latter case, the bitter irony of defeat is already there from the level of the title: the little revolution of a petty bourgeois suburbia family is doomed to fail, in resonance with the great revolution of the American Dream itself; the road leads nowhere. Both couples: Faulkner's Charlotte Rittenmeyer – Harry Wilbourne and April Wheeler – Frank Wheeler are doomed to fail, likewise, in their tragicomic attempt to surpass their condition. Revolutions – whether big or small – are utopian (self)projections, revolutionary roads with no heroes.

Both books may be read as variations on the Flaubertian theme. But if Faulkner's Charlotte Rittenmeyer is closer to Emma Bovary, in her attempt to proclaim absolute love as the very meaning of her life with Harry Wilbourne, her lover, leaving a tender and affectionate husband back home, April Wheeler is a more subtle and for that matter even more improbable version of Emma Bovary, since she tries to reinvent her lawful marriage to Frank Wheeler, her unfaithful husband.

In vision and style, the two 20th century American writers establish a dialogue of unique harmony. Its basis is irony of both vision and style. If in Faulkner's failed romance, the failing doctor is the lover, instead of the husband, as it is in Flaubert's iconic book, in Yates's failed romance revolution the husband should be recreated as the supreme lover.

Like Emma Bovary, both Charlotte Rittenmeyer and April Wheeler run away – or at least, so they plan. For, if Faulkner's romantic couple does elope and roam around the United States, with the reluctant but gentlemanly blessing of a husband too understanding

[2] *A bout de souffle / Breathless*, a 1960 landmark of the New French Wave, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, with Jean-Paul Belmondo as Michel and Jean Seberg as Patricia, who actually quotes Harry Winterbourne in Faulkner's *Wild Palms*, "Between grief and nothing I'll take grief", referring to the memory of Michel. It has become a cult movie across the Atlantic: with a successful American remake in 1983, with Richard Gere in a role corresponding to Michel's original part, then celebrated by a new American version in 2010, on the occasion of its 50th anniversary; last but not least, often referred to by Quentin Tarantino, as an essential moment in his personal history of cinema.

and wise for any standards of verisimilitude[3] in search of a place to live their love-story undisturbed – April Wheeler's utopian destination should have been (Flaubertian) France, had she survived the (self-provoked) abortion. Because this is where the beautiful dream of *hybris* – American or not – gets utterly and pathetically defeated: both Charlotte and April die in the end. Less heroically than Emma, who took her symbolical 19th century French poison. The 20th century American anti-heroines both die in abortion: there is no exceptional escape from the indifference of (human) nature.

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Like Emma Bovary, who dreamt of herself as a romance heroine, thus projecting Flaubert's self as a writer, as a maker, an artist, Faulkner's Charlotte Rittenmeyer and Yates's April Wheeler are also failed artists. Charlotte (sometimes just Charley, for friends) is a sculptress – the (quasi)feminine correspondent to Gordon, in Faulkner's earlier novel[4], *Mosquitoes*. April is an amateur suburbia actress: as the book opens, she stars provincially (and fails inevitably) in the maiden production of their troupe, "The Laurel Players", in a play called *The Petrified Forest*. Their two romance male partners are failures, likewise: Charlotte's Harry is an intern in a New Orleans hospital – and gets sentenced to fifty years' prison at Parchman State Penitentiary for Charlotte's death following the abortion she had asked from him, and which he had performed despite himself. Frank Wheeler has "a beautiful mind": he has the rhetorical gift of a writer without a work of his own. This is what inspires April to her utopian plan: to give him time and place "to find himself".

April believes that not only artists are entitled to meaningful lives of their own, thus trying to see who she really is and make the best of it. "Carpe diem/ Seize the day", or, Thoreau's urge to "live deliberately", his recommendation to use a personal "Realometer" cannot be too far at the back of her mind. The American Dream takes its toll even when it is denied, come to terms with, criticized, put to the test.

Even the time of such revolutionary resolutions is symmetrical in the two books: Harry fatefully meets Charlotte on the day of his twenty-seventh anniversary. Frank is having his thirtieth birthday when April comes up with the (disastrous) idea of their "starting a new life", i.e. leaving for France, where they should exchange roles in their

[3] In the same line, we may recommend here a less known but just as charming Faulknerian story, "Idyll in the Desert", from the volume *Uncollected Stories by William Faulkner*, Edited by Joseph Blotner, Random House, New York, 1979, pp. 399–411. Its first and only Romanian version is to be found in the volume William Faulkner, *Povestiri inedite*, translated into Romanian by Anca Peiu, RAO International Publishing, Bucureşti, 2009.

[4] *The Wild Palms* (1939) is William Faulkner's eleventh novel. Just like *Mosquitoes* (1927), his second one, it is set *out* of mythical Yoknapatawpha and placed in early 20th century New Orleans, where the author also lived during his apprenticeship as a novelist. The house still sheltering his ghost now is on Pirates' Alley.

family economy, she would work as a secretary while he would just "find himself" – maybe turning into the belated artist he had sacrificed within himself, for the sake of his family, earning their living by means of "the dullest job in the world".

The book abounds in witticisms, puns, quips – all of them memorable and good to quote. For instance, John Givings, Mrs. Helen Givings's son, the real-estate broker who provided the Wheelers with their nice place on Revolutionary Road, on his first visit to the Wheelers compliments them on their homely atmosphere with a somewhat ominous remark:

> "Old Helen here's been talking it up about you people for months," he told them. "The nice young Wheelers on Revolutionary Road, the nice young revolutionaries on Wheeler Road – got so I didn't know what she was talking about half the time. Course, that's partly because I didn't listen. You know how she is? How she talks and talks and talks and never says anything? Kind of get you so you quit listening after a while. No, but I got to hand it to her this time; this isn't what I pictured at all. This is nice. I don't mean 'nice' the way she means 'nice' either; don't worry. I mean nice. I like it here. Looks like a place where people live." (Yates 252)

It should be evident by now that in both books, it is *she* who takes the initiative: Charlotte persuades Harry to elope, then perform her abortion, against his wish; April persuades Frank to "start a new life", practically ignoring the quick-sands on which the frontier between realism and utopia is traced. Thus traditional gender roles are reversed: the American Dream is re-written as romantic European chivalric myth…

Faulkner's modern romance and Yates's postmodern realistic novel both amount to a much deeper significance than what actually meets the eye: they both question traditional American values, the American Dream to begin with. April and Frank see eye to eye in their disappointment with American values of the affluent fifties:

> "This whole country's *rotten* with sentimentality," Frank said one night, turning ponderously from the window to walk the carpet. "It's been spreading like a disease for years, for generations, until now everything you touch is flabby with it."
> "Exactly," she said, enraptured with him. "I mean isn't that really what's the matter, when you get right down to it? I mean even more than the profit motive or the loss of spiritual values, or the fear of the bomb or any of those things? Or maybe it's the result of those things; maybe it's what happens when all those things start working at once without any real cultural tradition to absorb them. Anyway, whatever it's the result of, it's what's killing the United States. I mean isn't it? This steady, insistent vulgarizing of every idea and every emotion into some kind of pre-digested cultural baby food; this optimistic, smiling-through, easy-way-out sentimentality in everybody's of life?"
> "Yes," she said. "Yes."
> "And I mean is it any wonder all the men end up emasculated? Because that *is* what happens; that *is* what's reflected in all this bleating about 'adjustment' and 'security' and 'togetherness' – and I mean Christ, you see it everywhere: all this television crap where every joke is built on the premise that daddy's an idiot and mother's always on to him; and these loathsome little signs people put up in their front yards – you ever notice those signs up on the Hill?"
> "The 'The' signs, you mean; with the people's name in the plural? Like 'The Donaldsons'?" (Yates 176–7)

It is a meaningful coincidence that both Frank Wheeler and Harry Winterbourne take comfort in childhood memories patronized by *old fathers*. Moreover, the sons step into their fathers' shoes: Frank follows his father's (mediocre clerk) "dream" to work in the Knox Building of Lower Manhattan – and this is all that he ever accomplishes in terms of "finding oneself". Because ironically, much like Charlotte with Harry, April overestimates Frank: he fits his average destiny only too well, he does not want anything more or better than that. It is she who expects too much from him and their relationship alike: again, the projection of that old feminine *hybris* seems to be enough for two. On the other hand, the boldness/ harshness of both April Wheeler and Charlotte Rittenmeyer may be read as symptomatic of women with an unhappy/ lonely childhood. They cling to trustworthy partners, (who seem) emotionally secure and well-balanced. And they drag their masculine partners fatally to disaster:

> When the man called Harry met Charlotte Rittenmeyer, he was an intern in a New Orleans hospital. He was the youngest of three children, born to his father's second wife in his father's old age; there was a difference on sixteen years between him and the younger sister of his two half sisters. He was left an orphan at the age of two and his older half sister had raised him. His father had been a doctor before him. (Faulkner 27)

Frank indulges in tender daydreams of his lost (and idealized, as deeply missed) parents:

> He remembered, too, of both of them, that they'd always been tired. Middle-aged at the time of his birth and already tired from having raised two other sons, they had grown steadily more and more tired as long as he'd known them, until finally, tired out, they had died with equal ease, in their sleep, within six months of each other. (Yates, 47)

Frank and April have two young children, siblings Jennifer (Niffer) and Michael, who become April's orphans, while their father is left the caricature of a "survivor": a good patient himself now of the "headshrinkers" he used to deride while his wife was still alive:

> "Boy, I guess the headshrinkers could really have a ball with me," he liked to say, wryly, among friends. "I mean the whole deal of my relationship with my father alone'd be enough to fill a textbook, not to mention my mother. Jesus, what a little nest of neuroses we must've been." (50)

It is significant that such recollections of family life and parents are used by the selective omniscient narrator – in the old classic vein of novel-writing – to highlight Frank's much praised (even overestimated) way with words. Ironically, by the end of the book, this picture of would-be maturity and aloofness will turn against Frank, like a boomerang. And then "the headshrinkers" (read "therapists") can actually get to "have a ball" with Frank Wheeler.

Charlotte and Francis Rittenmeyer[5] have two young daughters, left motherless twice: first by their mother's elopement with Harry Wilbourne and then by her death. Charlotte is one of Caddy Compson's many versions, the only sister of a family's predominantly male offspring:

> "I've got two children, both girls," she said. "That's funny, because all my family were brothers except me. I liked my oldest brother the best, but you cant sleep with your brother and he and Rat roomed together in school so I married Rat and now I've got two girls, and when I was seven years old I fell in the fireplace, my brother and I were fighting, and that's the scar. It's on my shoulder and side up and hip too and I got in the habit of telling people about it before they would have time not to ask and I still do it even when it doesn't matter anymore." (Faulkner 35)

The flash of memory, the (would-be) confession is already fiction, already ascribed a (not only psychoanalytical) connotation: the self projection is already different from the lost anonymous contingent fact of life.

The funniest aspect of our speculations here is that the amorous triangle Charlotte-Harry-Francis (plus the shadowy reminiscence of Charlotte's nameless favorite brother once passionately desired by his roommate's wife; Poe still looms between the lines) may have actually met April Wheeler's parents. Hinting vaguely at the couple Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald, April Johnson-Wheeler's parents are evoked as if from some fiction containing them all: the memory converted to ready-made fiction of The Jazz Age. Since, after all, realistic love stories, whether modern or postmodern, always end up as tales about (conflicts? clashes? between) generations of the misunderstood:

> In the scanty stories she told about them, her parents were as alien to his sympathetic understanding as anything in the novels of Evelyn Waugh. Had people like that ever really existed? He could picture them only as flickering caricatures of the twenties, the Playboy and the Flapper, mysteriously rich and careless and cruel, married by a ship's captain in mid-Atlantic and divorced within a year of the birth of their only child. "I think my mother must've taken me straight from the hospital to Aunt Mary's," she told him. "At any rate I don't think I ever lived with anyone but Aunt Mary until I was five, and then there were a couple of other aunts, or friends of hers or something, before I went to Aunt Claire, in Rye." The rest of the story was that her father had shot himself in a Boston hotel room in 1938, and that her mother had died some years later after long incarceration in a West Coast alcoholic retreat. (Yates 50-1)

If Frank lets himself seduced by April's promise of a new life in Europe-as-their- promised- land, this is just his secret acknowledgement of another piece of American heroic fiction: the France of his World War Two memories is suffused with the ineluctable romance touch of Hemingway's American Dream. Frank Wheeler dreams to go "back" to an idealized France that only existed in the writings of Ernest Hemingway, not in his own sordid wartime memories. As an American officer in

[5] Inspired perhaps by Cornell Franklin, Estelle Oldham's first husband, with whom the writer's wife had had two siblings, before marrying William Faulkner himself?

World War Two, Frank Wheeler, the good storyteller without a book to his credit, would rather replace his own memories of France with those of consecrated Nobel Prize winner for his typical anti-heroic American fiction. Hemingway's anti-heroic stance works like a boomerang, too, ironically: it is preferred to "the real thing", to Frank's personal experience even, for the sake of Hemingway's cynical Hollywood glamour and romantic dignity. Richard Yates performs *a metafictional tour de force* in this exceptional book, which we have just rediscovered thanks to an exceptional early 21st century American movie.

The fact that the Romanian title of the film & book was adapted to just one word, "Nonconformiştii", meaning "the noncomformists", points to the deeper bitter message: that striving so hard to be what they were not (the "mildly talented" amateur actress; the would-be writer without a work), April and Frank are doomed to fail. Being the great exception from contingency means feeling, "knowing" it from the very beginning. True actresses, true writers assume their sacrificial destinies from the earliest age, because it cannot be helped. They cannot afford the time to "find themselves" first. And this is the fatal difference between *actual* and *artificial dreamers* of The American Dream.

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If John Givings accepts the Wheelers' friendship, it is just for the sake of this utopia, of their plans of leaving for France and for a "new life". Himself a former navy officer in World War Two, a former M.I.T. successful graduate, a former instructor of mathematics at some Western university, at present a patient of the insane asylum of Greenacres, John Givings believes in the Wheelers' dream *against/despite* the American Dream, as long as it lasts. He is bitterly disappointed when they give it up. He should have known better; his devotion to *nonconformity* might have prompted him Emerson's old ominous warning:

> Travelling is a fool's paradise. Our first journeys discover to us the indifference of places. At home I dream at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty and lose my sadness. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea and at last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from. I seek the Vatican and the palaces. I affect to be intoxicated with sights and suggestions, but I am not intoxicated. My giant goes with me wherever I go. (Emerson 150)

What are John Givings's dreams of self-reliance now? Speaking the privileged mind of the author, the fool is telling the truth, "the *the*" of Wallace Stevens's "Man on the Dump".

The (anti-)heroic *couple* has no ghost of a chance to victory. It is not even a couple at all. The looming solitary *self* – the old Emersonian "*giant*" – follows like a shadow: our only proof we once were alive.

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