

## RIKKI DUCORNET REVISITS HAWTHORNE: *THE STAIN* OR A TIME FOR ‘SEXTS’

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ARISTI TRENDEL  
University of Maine, France

**Abstract.** Among Rikki Ducornet’s strongest intertextual bonds in her first novel *The Stain* is certainly Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. Her main character Charlotte unmistakably points back both to Hester Prynne and her daughter Pearl. In this dialogic enterprise Ducornet attempts to show what Hawthorne gives secondary focus to: the construction of the heroine’s identity. Whether a precocious feminist or a covert phallogocentric, as the majority of feminist critics maintains, Hawthorne centres the dramatic conflict on his male characters. Contrary to his patrilineal filiation, Ducornet displays a matrilineal one and places her female character centre stage. Albeit subtly ironic and overtly comic, *The Stain*’s relation to the *The Scarlet Letter* seems to be complimentary and complementary. Although Rikki Ducornet refutes being a feminist, some of Hélène Cixous’s concepts such as the feminine, the gift, the feminine libidinal economy could enlighten the American author’s text.

**Key words:** intertextuality, identity, femininity, Ducornet, Hawthorne

‘I like to start with an image and slowly shift its place in time and space: put it to the light, [...] stroke it, it gets hard, it gets hot, it weeps, it grows scales, and claws, it bleeds, it ejaculates, it gives birth, it takes roots [...]. And so it happens with words,’ says Rikki Ducornet in an interview (Hancock, 1982: 21). Indeed, it is with a highly eroticised image that the American author takes the reader by surprise in *The Stain*, which was born out of an encounter with a golden hare in the French countryside and the dream of a disfigured baby. This first novel and first part of Ducornet’s tetralogy on the four elements manifests not only the author’s sensual relations to words but also her loving rapport with other texts skilfully incorporated in *The Stain*, namely *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Little Red Riding Hood* and, above all, *The Scarlet Letter*. As it has been observed, ‘Rikki Ducornet fully understands that writing fiction is essentially the rewriting of other texts’ (Williams, 1998: 181). Like H.D. she could have safely entitled her novel *Palimpsest* to point to her text of election and predilection that marks the parchment of *The Stain*. A literary classic then constitutes the strongest intertextual bond of an established author’s novel.

If Hawthorne opted to call *The Scarlet Letter* ‘a romance’ for the latitude this former category provided, Ducornet refers to *The Stain* as ‘prodigy literature’ (Ducornet, 1999: 3), and like Hawthorne, but to a far greater degree, displays a penchant for the marvellous and the supernatural. Both writers, although they belong to two different eras, need some distance from realistic fiction for their

imagination to expand and flourish, while dealing in their respective novels with conflicts between repressive societies and defiant individuals. They prefer settings far from their own time – the seventeenth century Puritan New England and late nineteenth century rural France.

In *The Stain* Ducornet takes the reader through the follies in *La Folie*, the appropriately-named village where Charlotte was born and grew up, the fruit of lust and trophy of trespass. An abominable birth-mark etched upon her cheek in the form of a leaping hare is the testimony of her dead mother's original sin. Brought up by her great-aunt Edma, a figure of matriarchal authority and repressive religion, the stigmatised girl goes through the dark maze of her step-mother's crippling precepts, and at the Convent, where she seeks salvation through the Sisters' deadening dictates; at every corner the Minotaur-like village Exorcist and witch-doctor, who caters to villagers' superstitions, tracks her steps. He considers Charlotte to be his betrothed sent as a gift by Abraxas, the demon, the witch-doctor's chosen master. Two male figures assist the girl in her search for selfhood, Emile, Edma's hen-pecked husband, and Poupine, the village tramp.

Ducornet defines *The Stain* as a novel 'about the Christian idea of sin – the world and the body seen as Satanic vessels' (Gregory and McCaffery, 1998: 132). In a dialogic enterprise, then, she could find no better partner than Hawthorne who was haunted by Puritan ontology and the moral imperatives of Puritanism. The idea of good and evil is carried out by the two writers' female characters who carry a red badge of shame and courage, different in hue and form but very much alike in fashioning their identity. It is mainly in the construction of the heroine's identity and the representation of femininity that Hawthorne and Ducornet converge and diverge.

*The Scarlet Letter*, a major work of the American Renaissance, has been widely discussed. Feminist reception has not been unanimous. From the admiring Antebellum feminists to a defensive Nina Baym and an offensive Louise DeSalvo, critical views diverge. In T. Walter Herbert's essay 'Nathaniel Hawthorne, Una Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter*: Interactive Selfhoods and the Cultural Construction of Gender,' the American writer comes across as a confused male supremacist. It may not be illegitimate to wonder in the light of Ducornet's contribution to a revival of Hester-related subjects whether Hawthorne's novel does not belong to those texts that Helen Cixous denounces in her manifesto 'The Laugh of the Medusa' as repressive and guided by a typically male libidinal economy and culture. On the other hand, we should keep in mind that Ducornet is no radical feminist. 'Power does not belong to the phallus,' she states (Gregory and McCaffery, 1998: 130) and proves it. In her denunciation of power she will make no discrimination between patriarchy and matriarchy.

But let's catch our hare first and discuss the Stain as it appears in Ducornet's text with the capital S. The capitalisation making it a proper noun changes its status in the discourse. In the economy of the novel it is no longer a generic notion but a fully-fledged operating concept. Its grammatical mobility is a prelude to its

semantic mobility and introduces the reader into the hermeneutics of the stain. As the title indicates, the novel heavily relies on the central image of the leaping hare 'sprawled across' the heroine's cheek (Ducornet, 1982: 12), which might have made Henry James find the same fault with Ducornet's novel as with *The Scarlet Letter*, i.e. 'an abuse of the fanciful element – a certain superficial symbolism' (cited in Bell, 2005: 455). However, Ducornet's eclecticism and the generic affiliation of *The Stain* with the fairy-tale and Gothic fiction provide ampler room for her leaps of fancy, which are undoubtedly given some impetus by her qualities as a graphic artist. The Aztec deity Teccuciztecatl who was thrown a rabbit across his face and was exiled on the moon, is behind Ducornet's image.

Branded for life by her mother's sin, Charlotte is banished from the society in which she lives. Her birthmark is an offense to the eye and makes her virgin and frigid aunt do her utmost to have it removed. The schoolteacher suggests that she wear a veil. The stain gives rise to a similar fascination as it entangles its viewer in the infernal duality of attraction/repulsion. 'Plum in colour' (Ducornet, 1982: 12), hot and furry, obscene, frightening, obscure in broad daylight, the stain is puzzling and begs for interpretation. It is God's signature according to Edma and the Devil's according to the village witch-doctor who is the one to voice the stain's open secret: 'For did not the hare symbolize [...] the female pudenda?' (ibid.: 17).

Thus femininity makes an explosive entry into the arena of representation, and the female body enters the discourse writing itself. A constant playing with this image takes place in the narrative. The stain leads a life of its own, records and then responds to what is going on. It is always hot and throbbing when it becomes the centre of attention and on the defensive when threatened with tactile proximity and aggression. In the course of the narrative, the stain will be established as a token of femininity, a hieroglyph of desire and an emblem of fulfilment.

If Hester has her letter A to grapple with, Charlotte has her stain. Right at the outset, the former is the sign of the law, the latter the sign of femininity. Both are seen as signs of transgression, but their proud bearers are bound to alter their significance, transforming themselves in the process. Hawthorne and Ducornet seem to capitalise on the instability of signs and the fluidity of meaning. Both signs hide and reveal, but the letter A relies on obliquity and indirectness, while the stain on exposure and immediacy. The letter A appears at the beginning of the Puritan alphabet spelled out in Hawthorne's text. As Millicent Bell suggests, 'The Puritans regarded reality textually; a long tradition of Christian thought which spoke through them analogized the world as a book which might be compared to scripture as an act of divine writing' (Bell, 2005: 454). 'The capital letter A seems to be in Hawthorne the seal of both human and divine law.' (Ducornet, 1982: 61) Upon the immutable adulterer's verdict Hester Prynne works a change. A brief overview of her trajectory will highlight the polarised properties of the letter A.

At the beginning of the novel Hester Prynne is the sinner, the freak of the market-place exposed on the scaffold, 'the token of infamy' burning upon her breast. Hester cools 'this 'red hot iron' (ibid.: 62) of a letter, transforming it into an aesthetic object: 'in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread appeared the letter A' (ibid.: 80). From the gloominess of sin to the phantasmagoria of form Hester appears the free-willed beauty nurturing impulses of flight and hence revolt. But when she settles into her outcast life, the vista of martyrdom opens up: 'the torture of her daily shame would at length purge her soul, and work out another purity than that which she had lost; more saint-like, because the result of martyrdom' (ibid.: 105). While Hester's challenging élan fades, Pearl's blooms. As the mother's former mirror the child becomes an object of strong disapproval and apprehension. She is an elf-child, 'perverse' and 'malicious' and for others 'a child of the Lord of Misrule' (ibid.: 132), 'a demon offspring' (ibid.: 122).

By the middle of the novel, Hester is totally absorbed by the letter of the law, as her distorted reflection in the convex mirror at the Governor's Hall indicates: 'the scarlet letter was represented in exaggerated and gigantic proportions, so as to be greatly the most prominent feature of her appearance' (ibid.: 128). When the letter comes to mean 'Able' (ibid.: 180), even 'Angel' (ibid.: 177), as it is suggested, Hester's transformation is complete: 'Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman' (ibid.: 182). All the more so as the A also stands for 'avenger', having done justice to Hester's wronged husband (ibid.: 90). Hester is now the sexless 'angel in the house' (in Virginia Woolf's famous phrase), the sacred virgin holding onto her 'cross' (ibid.: 181).

Nevertheless, Hawthorne does raise the question of his heroine's abandonment of femininity and of her happiness and gives a prescriptive answer:

As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, [...] is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, [...] woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change; in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. (ibid.: 184)

The ethereal essence is the angel's identity Hester assumes and lives by to survive. In the middle of the novel the die is cast. Her future is predetermined. All she can build on is her 'ethereal essence', which excludes happiness. The other option, the witch, has already been rejected. Hester had declined Mistress Hibbins's offer to 'sign her name in the Black Man's book' (ibid.: 139), when she won the battle of Pearl's guardianship.

It has been maintained that it was Margaret Fuller who inspired Hawthorne in his construction of Hester's character. Although there is no proof for such an assumption, the following passage from Fuller's diary is echoed in *The Scarlet*

*Letter*: 'I love best to be a woman; but womanhood is at present too straitly bounded to give me scope' (cited in Chevigny 1976: 63). Nevertheless, a revival of femininity and a new impulse of revolt are in store for Hester in the forest scene where she challenges her former lover: 'What hast thou to do with all these iron men and their opinions?' (Ducornet, 1982: 215). Her hair released, her letter discarded, her beauty returned, she asks Dimmesdale to elope with her, but the 'free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized lawless region' is uncongenial to Hawthorne (ibid.: 219). The law is temporarily suspended but ultimately restored. It is as a missionary that Hester returns to Boston and remains until the end of her life. Hawthorne upholds the nineteenth-century image of the woman who falls within the paradigmatic polarities of the angel and the monster. She is 'the ideal woman that male authors dream of generating', as Gilbert and Gubar put it (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 20), but remains so as long as social and cultural conditions are still unchanged.

In *The Scarlet Letter* there is a movement away from the body, which is finally crushed by the law. Hester does not submit to the law, since with her needlework she becomes the author of her imposed letter: the letter A no longer signifies the deadly sin at the end of the novel. Nevertheless, she does not transform the law; she transforms herself to adapt to the law made by 'the iron men'. A mutilating operation is in progress throughout the narrative. On the Procrustean bed of the law Hester lies to be forgiven and accepted by the community. On the altar of motherhood and society she is the sacrificial victim.

On the contrary, there is movement towards the body which escapes the law in *The Stain*, where the main focus is the female conquest of identity. 'Identity is rooted in our sexuality, as is our hunger for being and becoming,' states Ducornet in an interview (Hancock, 1982: 21). In her essay, 'The Death Cunt of Deep Dell', the writer discusses the idea of the 'Death Cunt' as it is embodied in works of literature and art, while in her novels she constantly explores this theme. In *The Stain*, particularly, she subverts this 'gnostical perception of the female body as a lethal detour of the spirit leading to enslavement [...] as snare, prison and coffin' (Ducornet, 1999: 82). If in *The Scarlet Letter* Hester's survival and modulation of identity involves the denunciation of the body as a source of evil and the destruction of femininity, in *The Stain* the construction of identity entails the affirmation of femininity. While Hester's femininity fades away in the course of the narrative, in spite of the forest interlude, Charlotte's comes into full bloom, as the young girl threads her way through death, abjection and alienation.

The Gnostic vision of the eternal duelling good and evil informs *The Stain*. It is the power who are enlisted in the forces of evil and attempt to annihilate the body. Charlotte who bears her mother's name and its programmatic sensuality – 'like the way it fills the mouth,' says the witch-doctor (Ducornet, 1982: 23) who thus enacts the wolf – finds herself in a state of siege from the enemy forces, namely Edma, the destructionist, the Exorcist, the appropriator and the Convent Sisters, the despisers of the body. 'Were it not for relentless hunger, they might have forgotten they had bodies' (ibid.: 128), says the narrative voice about the

young nuns. Charlotte is ugly and unclean for Emma whose wasted femininity tolerates no feminine signs around her. As Cixous makes clear in her discussion of Clarice Lispector's confrontation with the unclean, the 'ugly' is the subject in exile, the outsider, the subversive feminine writer (Cixous, 1993: 113). Like Hester in Hawthorne's iconography of the scarlet letter (cf. Jean Fagan Yellin's '*The Scarlet Letter and the Antislavery Feminists*'), Charlotte still in captivity is depicted as a slave under Edma's domination. When the woman gives the girl a bath attempting to rub the stain off, the birthmark is likened to 'a scrap of dark velvet pressed beneath a very hot iron' (Ducornet, 1982: 84). In Edma's yard, where Charlotte plays, the furry rabbits are lascivious, diseased and frightening. Likewise, the stain has been placed by the exorcist under the sign of Belial, the demon of lechery. He constantly dreams of and lusts for her femininity: 'She's electric. I've touched her, I know' (ibid.: 87); 'He wanted [...] to caress the Stain and feel its velvety fire beneath his fingers' (ibid.: 104). Sister Malicia, too, the perverse practitioner of the will to power, 'salivates when she says the words official, officially, officer, authority' and then caresses the stain. (ibid.: 149).

Charlotte is born and grows up in a world marked by decay and death where sexuality and love are either distorted or absent. The opening chapter, which simultaneously recounts her birth and her parents' first encounter, sets the tone. Charlotte's father and mother are victims of the dominant culture and cannot rise above alienation. The father living in constant fear of femininity is the hunted hunter, the mother living in constant fear of society is the hunted game. There is no romance in *The Stain*. As in *The Scarlet Letter* the love story precedes the time of the narration, but if in Hawthorne it never loses its romantic aura and nobility, in Ducornet it is depicted in crude colours and recounted in terms of power.

Moreover, while in Hawthorne family is upheld as a value, as the third scaffold scene consecrates Hester, Dimmesdale and Pearl's reunion, in Ducornet family is falling apart right from the start. The only instance Ducornet brings the trio together is in the first chapter where the mother is dead in a hellish childbirth, the father dead drunk and the new-born caked in blood. It is the father's law epitomised by his kill, the 'fat hare, firm fleshed and golden, hung by his ears from his belt' (ibid.: 12), that seals this unfortunate childbirth: 'And then she saw him. And she saw, dripping blood by his side the dead hare. And as the baby spilled from her body she screamed [...]. So Charlotte was born. Born with the creature's image slapped to her face' (ibid.: 12).

After a gory, violent birth marked by the supernatural, Charlotte's life will oscillate between the Scylla of the maternal sin and the Charybdis of the paternal law. A freak and an 'invalid' (ibid.: 82) and betrothed by birth to a fallen sage who tries to decipher her future in her 'bedchamber's dirt' (ibid.: 67), Charlotte's life seems predetermined. Yet unlike Hawthorne, Ducornet answers positively the question of a felicitous existence for women at the end of the novel. She is equally concerned by the attainment of happiness but has her character follow another path.

As *The Stain* is marked by alchemical imagery, which is unearthed by M. E. Warlick in 'Fantastic Metropolis', the great work in the novel seems to be the construction of identity. Although Charlotte is initially tempted by sainthood just like Hester, she will not finally fall into the trap of martyrdom on her meandering course towards selfhood. While the heavenly father is in the centre of *The Scarlet Letter*, it is an earthly mother that stands Charlotte in good stead. Ducornet's filiation is resolutely matrilineal. Unlike Hawthorne whose image of God is very similar to the Byzantine iconography of the Pantocrator's face split into two distinct parts of austerity and wrath, tenderness and forgiveness, Ducornet beheads the Universe. In Charlotte's childish game God is the bucket that is covered with rags and rejected as a witness of her life. Likewise, in her dream of a triangle of rotting flesh the Death Cunt is dismissed as the House of God (ibid.: 58).

Charlotte's search for self-definition is guided by her search for a maternal figure as the paternal figure has been discredited. Even the Heavenly father is represented as 'a monstrous wing that would blot out the sky' (ibid.: 44). We shall see that the divine mother in the Christian sense, the Good Mother in the psychoanalytic sense, and the Great Mother in the anthropological sense replace Charlotte's mother to lead the girl out of the maze of evil, while in the maternal locus, par excellence, the forest, the identity-building work-in-progress is intensified.

*The Stain* enacts the drama of enclosure and escape that, according to Gilbert and Gubar, characterises the nineteenth century women's fiction. Although Charlotte is soon aware of her stain as a sign of exception in a life mapped by 'the weekly celebrations of marriage and death' (ibid.: 59) – marriage in chapter 8 is depicted as the death of woman – the only escape seems through the anorexic control of her own body, experienced as abjection. As Julia Kristeva states, 'Le dégoût alimentaire est peut-être la forme la plus élémentaire et la plus archaïque de l'abjection' (Kristeva, 1980: 10). Furthermore, as Gilbert and Gubar maintain, anorexia is a distinctively female disease associated with enclosure and escape (Gilbert and Gubar, 54). However, Charlotte's act of eating the glass pieces of the clock when she finds herself threatened by time not only enacts the Cronus myth but also confers upon her the provisional identity of a fairy-tale heroine: 'She thinks of the Princess who weeps diamonds; she, Charlotte, swallows glass. She knows her deed is the greater' (Ducornet, 1982: 62). The body as both enclosure and escape becomes the site of rebellion. Charlotte loses her voice in the bargain but gains access to visions of the Virgin Mary that will sustain and guide her.

The quest for identity is now magnified by the quest for the lost voice, robed in Ducornet's incisive irony: 'she can no more say holy' (ibid.: 66). Edma is consequently dismissed as a madwoman in the pyramidal puzzle starting with M for mother that Charlotte contrives. If Edma is the figure of the Kleinian bad mother, according to Melanie Klein's analysis of object relations, the Mother Superior is a parody of the good mother figure. It is her, though, who gives Charlotte the sugar egg that triggers a divine epiphany: 'Like her visions, the egg's

window afforded a new image of the world. And all at once *Charlotte knew God*' (ibid.: 71). Ironically this new *Weltanschauung* is intimidated by maternity; what she sees inside the Easter egg is a hen and its chicks. *The Stain* is a carefully plotted novel. In the chain of identity-building events a specular image comes next. It is in 'The Poor Devil', the local café renamed 'The Dancing Hare' to her honour, that Charlotte goes through her mirror stage. Her imagination is stirred by the picture of a woman, she discovers in the café mirror; she is Wet Winnie, for the café's old timers, an image of the Great Mother emerging from the earth as the picture suggests.

In the course of the narrative Charlotte's mother, Wet Winnie and the Virgin Mary blend into one single earthly and celestial being and remain her unflinching guides. Some significant developments ensue the discovery of Wet Winnie's picture. The stain is established by Poupine as a source of luck, acquires radiance. Charlotte's budding beauty is constantly underlined by the narrative voice and in her first excursions of freedom, she scales the Devil's Finger, the stone menhir, where she was conceived. This symbolic act follows an equally symbolic itinerary 'past the church, the cemetery, past the fountain where the brawny laundresses washed the scrawls of conception, death and infidelity' (ibid.: 111).

In this search for identity the appeal of purification, expiation and abnegation constitutes the strongest intertextual strand in the narrative. 'I want to be a saint' (ibid.: 115), states Charlotte in the middle of the novel. Two main loci, the Convent and the forest, shelter and propel the quest. Villains or the semi-villains orchestrate the girl's entry into the Convent. It is Charlotte herself who engineers her exit.

Ducornet hides her madwoman in the Convent's attic. Unlike the mad character, who as its author's double, was created to be destroyed, in the nineteenth century women's fiction, Eulalie, the rebellious novice not only escapes from the cuckoo's nest but brings about Charlotte's liberating epiphany, 'I am flesh! And when the terrible image of the suffering Eulalie flashed across her mind, Charlotte nearly shouted out: 'Both God and Satan despise flesh! Both are the enemies of man!' (ibid.: 134)

Both girls are endowed with supernatural powers, Charlotte with telekinesis, Eulalie with levitation, which allow them to defend themselves in the Convent. Ducornet thus subverts the figure of the witch associating it with the victimised, innocent girls.

Another specular image that emerges in the text is the golden hare that thwarts Charlotte's sainthood projects, taking her to the maternal felicitous space, the forest. The encounter is described as another epiphany: 'He [the hare] run to the setting sun; it floated in the sky like an egg of sugar. Charlotte sat awestruck, her hands and teeth pressed to the glass, the Stain twitching violently as if it would tear itself free' (ibid.: 195). It is here that the stain becomes the hieroglyph of desire. Consequently, Charlotte leaps from the train that takes her to the Convent of the Thorny Agony and like Alice follows the hare, instead, to the wonderland of selfhood, the forest where she escapes.

There are still two dangers lurking in her shelter, an internal and an external one. Kristeva's remark is quite relevant here: 'L'excrément et ses équivalents (pourriture, infection, maladie, cadavre etc.) représentent le danger venant de l'extérieur de l'identité [...] Le sang menstruel, au contraire, représente le danger venant de l'intérieur de l'identité' (Kristeva, 1980: 86). The menstruating body is brought into focus as a menace to Charlotte's newly acquired freedom: 'Charlotte feels between her thighs with her hand (...) and tentatively tastes with the tip of her tongue. The *stigma* here in the forest! What can that mean?' (Ducornet, 1982: 196, emphasis added). The text answers her alarmed question with the synaesthetic memory of her writing and reading lessons based on Emile's gardening catalogues: 'How strange, she thinks, that the taste of blood should bring back the smell of pastel, of ink and musty paper!' (ibid.: 197). The recollection acts as a prolepsis that announces Charlotte's coming to painting. In Poupine's womb-like, troglodyte dwelling, an unmistakable sign 'of the return to the mother' according to Bachelard's interpretation of symbols (Bachelard, 1948: 6), and 'a place of female power, the *umbilicus mundi*, one of the great antechambers of the mysteries of transformation' in Gilbert and Gubar's words (Gilbert and Gubar, 1976: 95). Charlotte like a prehistoric person paints everything on the limestone walls of the cavern and finally the dancing hare. If 'the walls are all eyes' (Ducornet, 1982: 207), her paintings are the materialisation of the new eyes she is about to acquire and point to the transformation in progress. Gilbert and Gubar significantly note that 'eye 'troubles' seem to abound in the lives and works of nineteenth and twentieth century literary women' (ibid.: 58), and Ducornet who sets her novel in the nineteenth century does not fail to put herself on the record and set it straight.

She does the same with her rewriting of *The Little Red Riding Hood*. It is Charlotte who unmasks and exposes the Exorcist's madness and perversion. Unlike Roald Dahl's *Little Red Riding Hood*, in the eponymous poem, built on a masculine model, Charlotte has no 'pistol in her knickers' but only her intuition and cunning in her showdown with the wolf-cum-exorcist. She does not use his skin as a furcoat, her act is only profitable to the community which assists her along with Poupine. Just like Pearl Charlotte has two fathers. Contrary to Hawthorne's, Ducornet's fathers are socially powerless, withdrawn from society, figures of laughter. Besides, being effeminate, they are closer to maternal foster-figures.

However, the major difference between the two novels lies in their closure. Both works in their integration of hope appear open-ended. Yet Hawthorne seems to deliver his final blow on femininity. Hester's sacrificial femininity is followed by Pearl's tamed one in a Snow-White, live-happily-ever-after marriage. Pearl, rich and wed to a noble man is frozen in the glass coffin of matrimony, while Hester becomes the defeated prophetess of a liberated womanhood, 'a new truth would be revealed in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness' (ibid.: 275). Hester cannot be 'the angel and apostle of the coming revelation' (ibid.: 275) because she is neither pure

nor joyful. Hawthorne bases his hope on a wrong foundation once again, on an angelic woman, untouched by suffering.

Hope in *The Stain* is immediate, visible, tangible. Ducornet's ending is marked by what Cixous calls 'l'impératif d'espoir' (Cixous, 1996: 103), the feminine mobilised against repression and death. Neither the glass coffin of martyrdom which is reserved for the Exorcist's victims, the Teton twins, in a hilarious epilogue, nor the one of matrimony is set up for Charlotte. The looking-glass that Ducornet holds up for her heroine helps her through the other side of the mirror, the side of life. As Cixous puts it, 'To begin (writing, living) we must have death... We need to lose the world, (...) and to discover that there is more than one world and that the world isn't what we think it is' (Cixous, 1993: 10).

It is a March hare that Charlotte meets in May, the one she has been waiting for:

They are both startled, and as she leans above him, nearly swooning with excitement, he crouches in the wood-violets, evoking the treasure at the rainbow's end – a mound of gold and cinnamon and snow – his obsidian eyes transporting her to a swifter, more triumphal star. He is enchantment. He casts a spell from which she will never entirely awaken, not even when the years will have carried her far from this time and place. And when at last he moves, it is with short, hesitant bounds, as if knotted to her heart by an invisible thread. The witchery is such that when in an arc of fire, he is gone, she is still leaning (Ducornet, 1982: 221).

The novel comes full circle opposing life and death in the ineluctable juxtaposition of the paternal kill and the maternal revival. The stain, no longer internalised as a disfigurement, appears only in its symbolic avatar. The hare as a specular image, in consonance with the reflected subject, points to the liberation of desire. It is the representation of *jouissance*, this eruption into the Symbolic from the Imaginary, transgressing the father's law. The subject appears as a process of becoming rather than fixed by social and familial structures or diverse categories. Both present and future carry the pledge of Gnosis, the knowledge of the world's mystery and of the self. The body becomes the site of rebirth. Ducornet intimates the subtle opening into the vastness of consciousness through her key term, spell, enchantment which evokes a sense of wonder and the response to the call of things. Cixous hears this call in the prose of Clarice Lispector: 'Lispector makes us hear things calling. The call there is in things: she gathers it back' (Cixous, 1991: 60). Calling and gathering form what the French writer terms as 'an opportunity for wonderful expansion (ibid.: 42), part and parcel of the feminine libidinal economy. With the liberation of desire and its circulation through the image of femininity *The Stain* seems deep in the heart of Cixous's country. Ducornet depicts a bleak, cruel world. The flash of hope comes precisely from a victorious and promising femininity that seems to be absent from the Gothic tales of Edith Wharton, Carson McCullers or Flannery O'Connor.

An intimation of the sublime seems to inform the philosophical subtext of the novel. According to Bachelard 'l'image littéraire nous donne l'expérience d'une création de langage' (Bachelard, 1948: 7). Ducornet's seminal image of the stain, as a signifier of femininity calls to mind a rhetorical concept, *deinosis* which appears in Longinus, the advocate of the sublime in language. *Deinosis* refers to the terrifying and the marvellous, the capacity of the orator to stun the audience with an extraordinary, exaggerated image that verges on the scandalous. It seems that Ducornet relies on this concept in her attempt to encode femininity in an image that creates a language whose aim is ultimately the reconstruction of Eden. As she says, 'All my books investigate the end of Eden and the possibility of its reconstitution' (Ducornet, 1999: 3). Hawthorne's nostalgia for a pre-lapsarian world, embodied in an idealised image of femininity, also makes all the more salient the loss of Eden. Ducornet's constant play with the garden motif that runs through the novel and her faith in the female body, in the ability of the maternal to bestow life to what is seemingly death-bound, in her author's capacity to dissociate evil from the female genitals underpin her reconstitution of Eden. As Giovanna Covi advances, 'The reconstitution of Eden, indeed is the language of the voiceless and the damned who speak outside the logic of the domination that has previously emarginated and silenced them. In this sense Ducornet's Eden is what I call the feminist subject, a subject who is at home with the unattainable, enigmatic nature of the world' (Covi, 1998: 207). This is precisely Cixous's conception and representation of the feminine. Just like the French writer, Ducornet uses femininity as an antidote to alienation, and invites a straight-on look at the Medusa's face. Her Medusa, too, is beautiful and she is laughing. In *The Scarlet Letter* the body is stifled by its denial whose agent is the capital letter A, in *The Stain* the leaping hare becomes the symbol of a body that transcends its own limits to reach out to the enchanting mystery of the world.

*The Stain* could be fruitfully compared to John Updike's novel *S.* (1988), another rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter*. Updike was self-avowedly inspired by Hester in his attempt to create a strong female character in her own voice, as an answer to feminist claims that the American author never featured emancipated women. Sarah Worth oversteps the Hester model as she asserts her womanhood through her sexuality. *S.* stands for Sarah and for Siva, since Sarah, in the ashram where she seeks a new home, bears his serpent's name Kundalini, source of sexual and spiritual energy. *S.* also stands for sex and the US dollar, as Sarah is part and parcel of the American society Updike relentlessly satirises. Yet, neither Hester nor Charlotte is the target of any satiric intent, which confers some import upon the feminist subtext. Updike is a writer who forges in his texts the consciousness of his sex. It might be reckless to advance, though, that Hawthorne or Ducornet do the same.

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that Ducornet, having taken 'the garden path of intuition' (Ducornet, 1999: 4), serenely confronts the achievement of her predecessor without any 'anxiety of influence' (in Harold Bloom's famous phrase). Hawthorne does make an attempt towards the affirmation and liberation

of femininity before he finally succumbs to the domestic ideal of the nineteenth century. He writes within the limitations of his age and sex but whether voluntarily or not, he does open a breach, which Ducornet widens, ushering the reader into the open air of femininity. In his impulse for romance he makes a step toward what he calls 'anew truth' about the sexes (Ducornet, 1982: 275), which Ducornet takes into account in her own fable of femininity. From this point of view we could consider that her relation to Hawthorne might be complimentary and no doubt complementary.

If *The Scarlet Letter* can be read as a novel about the dismantlement of femininity, *The Stain* can certainly be approached as a text about the reconstruction of femininity, speaking anew in Ducornet's novel. For *The Stain* reminds us of the work of un-forgetting, un-silencing, un-earthing un-blinding that women have to keep in progress. To Gilbert and Gubar's playful question, 'if the pen is a metaphorical penis', as some male authors seemed to imply, 'with what organ can females generate texts?' (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979: 7), Ducornet seems to answer jocularly, by creating a character with a symbolic pudendum on her cheek, and a Janus-like face looking backward to her literary forefather, and forward to a revived image of woman set in the nineteenth century, yet informed by the gains of the twentieth. Mothering her own text Ducornet creates Charlotte out of the rib of Hester/Hawthorne. If Hawthorne pores over the unbearable gravity of being, it is over the unbearable lightness of being that Ducornet reflects.

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**Aristi Trendel** (Dr., Assoc. Prof.) is currently working at the University of Maine, in Le Mans, France. Her field of research is modern American literature.  
Email: [aristi.trendel@sfr.fr](mailto:aristi.trendel@sfr.fr)