

VERBAL DREAMSCAPES. DOROTHEA TANNING'S VISUAL LITERATURE

GABRIELA GLĂVAN

West University of Timișoara

Abstract: A Surrealist painter whose artistic vision is equally visible in her literary works, Dorothea Tanning established a solid dialogue between literature and the plastic arts. The corpus of her literary oeuvre is rather small, consisting of a novel, a volume of poetry and her memoir, *Between Lives*. This paper argues that Tanning can be regarded as an exemplary author of a creative transfer between verbal and plastic imagination. It also explores the tension between the two means of expression, most visible in her novel *Chasm: A Weekend*. Here, the imagery and enigmatic symbolism of her painting come to life in the story of a strange little girl called Destina Meridian.

Keywords: American women artists, Dorothea Tanning, literature and painting, Surrealism.

1. Introduction

“Each of my paintings are steps marked on the same path. I don’t see any cuts, any deviations. The same preoccupations are manifest since the beginning. Obsessions come to the surface as marks that can’t be erased. My paintings, and lastly, my sculptures, are part of the same search, with the same discoveries, the same storms, the same mad laughter, suffering and rebirth” (Nordgren 1993:48-67). Read as an artistic credo, Dorothea Tanning’s suggestion that her oeuvre forms a coherent unity inevitably connects the two domains of her creative life – plastic arts and literature. If Tanning’s paintings and sculptures lie at the core of her critical reception, her activity spanning over almost seven decades, her writings have benefitted from less critical attention. A closer look at her literary production reveals the numerous threads that connect it to her plastic one. From intricate symbolic structures to predominant characters and metaphoric allusions, the consubstantial nature of plastic and literary expression in this artist’s work is remarkable, calling for closer analysis.

Chasm: A Weekend is Tanning’s only novel, and its long journey to a final form took several decades. She started writing it in 1943, and a first variant was published in *Zero* magazine in 1949. In 1977 the novel was published under the title *Abyss*, and, in a revised form, in 2004, as *Chasm: A Weekend*. Since then, numerous critical approaches have explored, among other aspects, Tanning’s gothic imagination (Carruthers 2011), her Romantic strategies and Surrealist visions. Destina Meridian, the protagonist of *Chasm*, has been associated with Lewis Carroll’s Alice (McAra 2011a), and, quite naturally, considered one of Tanning’s many nubile/demonic girls, dominating her earlier artistic period (the 1940s and 1950s).

An investigation of Tanning’s work from this interval confirms the obvious artistic transfer between painting and literature. Domestic life is one of the artist’s major themes and she often explores it by revealing the unexpected facets and strange angles of an apparently peaceful, predictable environment. Her interest in cultivating a gothic dimension in her art

might partially explain the prevalence of interiors, although the roots of this propensity might also be subjective, connected with the memory of Tanning's bourgeois childhood and teenage years. Victoria Carruthers argues that "from an early stage, Tanning's work utilizes the visual imagery found in the gothic novels she read in her youth, particularly the motif of the haunted house with its potential for both secret spaces and ordinariness, where supernatural activities could be folded into otherwise mundane, domestic interiors" (Carruthers 2011:135). She also mentions Katharine Conley's observation regarding Tanning's ability to radically transform and challenge the notion of domesticity – "Tanning's paintings redefine domestic space for young women as claustrophobic, haunted by malevolent spirits" (Conley 2009:50).

Tanning's novel *Chasm: A Weekend* develops a complex intrigue around issues such as ownership and mastery, with female characters in the centre of attention. Destina, the adoptive daughter of the decrepit and depraved millionaire Raoul Meridian, claims her right over the fabulous desert manor Windcote. After a convulsive string of events, she and her grandmother decide to abandon the cursed house and, despite gaining complete control over the domain, they decide to leave. It is important to note, at this point, that this character has strong autobiographical roots. Reminiscing about her young years, Dorothea Tanning declares, in her memoir, that she too felt odd in her traditional American bourgeois family: "How embarrassed they must have been, these gentle people, confronted with the growing proof of oddness in the family, and hoping they could keep it covered up – after all, I was not dangerous. But still, wondering: where did they go wrong?" (Tanning 2001:18).

2. A Surreal *Chasm*

In 1943, Dorothea Tanning and Max Ernst visited the small city Sedona, near the Arizona desert, where they later built a house. In perfect agreement with the couple's predisposition to perceive the otherworldly in banal circumstances, this house "remained curiously unfinished in a way that never entirely left the desert outside" (Tanning 1986:82). Rather threatening than protective, the house nourishes the artist's creativity in strange ways: "Then as now the decibels of nature can crush and artist's brain... So I lock the door and paint interiors. Great events... Chilly, secretive paintings that typify my response to the diabolical landscape outside" (84). The first paragraphs of *Chasm: A Weekend* can be read as an echo of these confessions:

Few travelers ever see the buildings of Windcote. The ranch, despite its vast size, is ringed with fence, and two cattleguards must be crossed to enter the property. After that, for several miles of punishing washboard road there is still nothing but dust and cactus. Then, abruptly, the house is there, as shocking as a fallen meteor. Ponderous, tall, defiant and truly alien, it nicks the desert like a weapon. (Tanning 2004:13)

The house is reminiscent of the paradoxically baroque and austere interiors of Tanning's paintings, dominated by proud and defiant female characters. An entire series of paintings, built around the menacing presence of young, pubescent girls, can be invoked in connection with the odd mistress of Windcote, Destina Meridian. *Children's Games* (1942), *Palaestra* (1947), *The Guest Room* (1950-1952) and *Interior with Sudden Joy* (1951) reflect the artist's preoccupation with precocious children and her interest in the unseen machinations of innocence becoming corrupt. In *Chasm*, the main agent of seduction, the source of all evil, is the house itself. Both frightening and absurd, it charms and repels with equal intensity. Onlookers may feel disconcerted by its irresistible attraction, as it lures them like a trap:

Could the big, vaguely Byzantine entrance reached by wings of gray stone stairs lead to cheerful murmur, smiling welcome? Could the little belvedere, hung with mad care on the west facade above a leaded window, be anything but a gratuity, a wart, a fragment of baby-talk clinging to the ear? Had the hand of the architect been ground to meat before he grasped the crayon? Questions that wither in the desert glare while the house looms, nerveless and heavy, born of itself. On its massive façade the evening's red rays seem to sear instead of caress, and on the two round towers, with their mullioned windows, the departing sun casts its daily crimson frown of repudiation. Surely Windcote, its very name a masquerade, can only have sprung full-blown from some conjurer's chant; so it must one day vanish, leaving perhaps for one wild instant a puff of black smoke on the scorched sand. (Tanning 2004:14)

The house, projected as a massive anomaly against the desert background, is no less disconcerting when seen from the inside. An unnamable evil permeates the interiors, and Windcote seems to be alive and breathing, much like a mythological beast. Destina appears to be the only one feeling truly at home in the labyrinthine structure. She "sits at the head of a long table completely laid for a dining party of eight. [...] Here, in the big shadowy room with its carved pilasters, crystal sconces, ponderous sideboards and leather-backed chairs the little girl is, for her part, superbly unaware of the evening outside" (Tanning 2004:16). Catriona McAra argues that "While Windcote offers accommodation and caters for a variety of locked door perversions and other surrealist-flavoured desires, one can never make oneself truly at home" (McAra 2016). The "dialectical tension" the critic identifies as the fundamental connection between Destina's nursery and the desert chasm reinforces the dominant role of both the girl and the manor – also imagined as the unity of mistress and her domain. Tanning's interest in dwelling in hostile environments has visible biographical roots. Of her time spent in Sedona, in the raw and hostile proximity of the Arizona desert, she would exclaim:

Reader! Imagine the pure excitement of living in such a place of ambivalent elements. Overhead a blue so triumphant it penetrated the darkest paces of your brain. Underneath a ground ancient and cruel with stones, only stones, and cactus spines playing possum. The vilest creatures of nature crawled, crept, scurried, slithered and observed you with hatred... [...]. It was then that you gave yourself up to that incredibly seductive wafture that, try as you might, you could never name. (Tanning 2001:145)

Before Destina's ascension to power, the master of Windcote is a villainous crook who earned his fortune as a merchant of sex toys – Raoul Meridian. Destina calls him Papa, but she is well aware of his twisted secret life and dirty secrets. His affair with Nelly, her governess, ends abruptly, and so does his life: she kills him during one of their sadomasochistic sexual encounters. Meridian is the embodiment of a nightmarish presence that can be identified in some of Tanning's most expressive paintings depicting the surreal inner landscape of childhood and adolescence. *A Very Happy Picture* (1947) materializes the threat of a giant hidden behind abstract layers of transparent silk, closely watched by a child-like figure sitting on a pile of luggage. The suggestion of Meridian's presence can also be perceived in *The Guest Room* (1950-1952), where a hooded dwarf wearing cowboy boots seems to have entered by force into the room of two pubescent girls. Hideous and menacing, in *Chasm*, Meridian functions as the opposite pole of all that is young, exciting and mysterious:

He was a monument of puzzling freakishness to many, including his employees, who saw in him a certain dire personification of malignant forces, while closing their eyes and minds to them for the sake of their salaries.[...] They may have wondered, in their way, what gasp of nature could have produced so fungoid a growth of glistening flesh. In imitation of human bluk he sat on his horse or in his princely chair, sardonic behind an air of benevolent ease. (Tanning 2004:21)

A crook trying to live the life of an aristocrat, Meridian, much like his symbolic name, might be understood as a divisive character, one that signals the entrance to the unseen side of

the real. His hypersexuality is a tragic mockery of what a normative answer to female charm and beauty should be and his role as ruler over an underground sex toy empire dramatically emphasizes his impotence. Meridian's death, unexpected yet welcome, opens the way to Destina's ascension as mistress of Windcote.

The descriptive core of *Chasm: A weekend* consists of several nuclei, the strongest ones being generated by Destina and Windcote. The girl and the house dispute their dominance with other characters – namely Meridian and his guests, and the canyon, where Destina ventures at night to meet her friend, the mountain lion. Despite its predominantly descriptive narrative, *Chasm* abounds in dialogues that heighten its tension and create a balanced rhythm of action and contemplation. Destina's encounter with Albert Exodus, her stepfather's guest, is an example of this carefully orchestrated reunion. The little girl seems mature well beyond her age, and her seductive skills impress and confuse Albert:

He turned away from the table and looked at her face. His gaze lost itself in the eyes, the throat, the hair, the white dress, as he devoured the plateful of food. She waited there without surprise, always smiling. "Come over here", putting her arm across his shoulder, "let's go sit on the sofa. I'll show you the things in the box."

And he allowed himself to be led away once more. (Tanning 2004:58)

As she investigates the recurrent presence of Alice-like femme-enfants (referring, of course, to Lewis Carroll's celebrated heroine) in the works of surrealist artists such as Leonora Carrington, Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning, Catriona McAra argues that this preference may be connected to a sense of revolt these artists might have felt towards their conservative upbringing in religious, bourgeois families: "Alice becomes an interesting figure of identification in this regard. She appears sweet and wholesome but transgresses the confines of her bourgeois nursery, through escape into imaginative, fantastical domains" (McAra 2011a:7). As Destina unfolds her seductive rituals and lures Albert into the canyon, it becomes clear that "the surrealist femme-enfant embodies a slippage between childhood and adulthood" (McAra 2011a:19). The metaphor of the title (present in both published variants of the novel, as chasm and abyss) suggests a dark and mysterious void that may be associated both with the absence of social order and the irrational, and with the dangers of eroticism and the female vagina. The scene of Albert's death is narrated much like the ambiguous context of a sexual encounter. Exodus and his fiancée, Nadine (in her turn, Meridian's guest and new erotic obsession), take a walk into the canyon one night, to spy on Destina and see for themselves if her unlikely friendship with a mountain lion is real or imaginary. They start to fight, and in the middle of a physical collision, Albert falls into the dark chasm and dies, impaled at the bottom:

When Nadine sprang at him he turned to face her. He saw her swung hand, its intended impact, stepped back. And then with a little whisking sound he dropped away. Like the nimble amazement of the trap door, instantaneous, muffled in shock, he vanished. [...]

Some twenty feet below, against the wall's face, Albert Exodus clings to a small projection in the rock. [...] the stump has ripped through his abdomen and impaled him, deep under the cage of his ribs. (Tanning 2004:133)

When read as a literary expression of the symbolic structures present in Tanning's paintings in the 1940's and 1950's, *Chasm* reveals degrees of violence that plastic art merely suggests. It seems that the narrative employs different means of unleashing the major potential of cumulative details, powered by the dynamics of verbal coherence. If painting could be deemed symbolic and suggestive as far as violence and the irrational are concerned, narrative proves rather explicit and straightforward. Nadine's death is described in an even

more acute register, as, before falling into the abyss, she lies beneath the massive body of the lion that seems to embrace and seduce her. The true nature of Destina's contact with the lion is revealed when the girl bids her friend one final goodbye. At dawn, after the frightful night Exodus and Nadine perished in the precipice of the canyon, Destina emerges victorious, with her secrets intact:

Child and animal came to the mesa's rim. Hills and canyon lay behind, withdrawn and indifferent to the quickening light. [...] Destina stopped and turned, laid her hand on the lion's head, her face grave: "Goodbye, goodbye!" But in the next moment she dropped down and threw her arms around his great neck. "I'm going now", she whispered, "back there." (Tanning 2004:142)

Meridan's death, although apparently independent from Destina's constant bizarre plotting, reinforces the element of female danger that strengthens the young girl's position as dominatrix femme-enfant. Sensing Meridian's betrayal, arising from his infatuation with Nadine, Nelly kills him in a ritual reminiscent of a medical, rather than erotic, encounter:

He might have been in the dentist's chair save for the rivulets of blood winding their way around the curve of the neck and soaking in under his head. Carried far away now, Nelly raised the instrument again. More fountains, more spurts of fountains bubbled up as she plunged her weapon again and again in the waxy flesh, in the chest, the stomach, the eye, the mouth, even a thigh when it flexed. (Tanning 2004:111)

Tanning's careful descriptive edifice in *Chasm* relies both on a well orchestrated visual design and on the subversive potential of dialogue. The novel's surrealist core consists of a kind of verbal power that manages to translate and amplify the shocks and deviations present in the language of painting.

3. Conclusions

It is not common for a painter to successfully contaminate literary discourse with a consistent amount of elements present in his/her plastic art. Dorothea Tanning's novel is a rather singular example of this kind. The vivid imagery and symbolic structures present in the paintings from her first two decades of activity re-emerge, recalibrated and more powerful, in *Chasm: A Weekend*. The concentrated two-day interval of the weekend at Windcote may suggest a limited amount of time in which the essences of Tanning's most prolific surrealist decades appear purer and stronger than ever before. Much like Tanning's self-portrait, *Birthday* (1942), where the young woman dominates the strange interiors of a bourgeois house while a gryphon lies at her feet, the novel confirms the continuous supremacy of mistress and beast as the artist's main archetype. The reunion of beauty and violence ultimately signals the fertile tension between the eerie and the familiar, and, implicitly, its resonance in Surrealist imagination.

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Note on the author

Gabriela Glăvan is an associate professor at the West University in Timișoara, Faculty of Letters, History and Theology, where she teaches courses and seminars in Comparative Literature, Discourse Analysis and Cultural Studies; she has published a book on particular discourses of modernity in Romanian interwar literature, several academic studies on cultural identity and avant-garde literature, and is a constant contributor to various literary and academic reviews.