

MISS FOTHERGILL AS MIRROR-IMAGE: AMBIVALENCE  
AND INCEST IN L.P. HARTLEY'S TRILOGY\*

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L.P. Hartley's Eustace and Hilda Trilogy constituted by The Shrimp and the Anemone (1944), The Sixth Heaven (1946) and Eustace and Hilda (1947) traces the development of the protagonist, Eustace, from a nine-year-old boy to a grown-up man, focusing essentially on the problem brought about by a life-time repression leading to frustrated incest and his relationship with his sister Hilda.

In a very perceptive manner, the critic Peter Bien has reached the core of the question: "It's toward Hilda that Eustace's incestuous desires are chiefly directed. This is the aspect of his neurosis with which she is concerned, but neither she nor Eustace consciously knows it. Nor does the reader, unless he examines symbols and interprets dreams. There are several open hints... but they nowhere convey the gruesome seriousness of the situation.

Incest, or rather frustrated incest, is the basis of Eustace's difficulty. Readers who feel that all the emphasis is on the domination of Hilda have missed the point.

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\* This essay is a version of Chapter 3 of my dissertation L.P. Hartley's—The Eustace and Hilda Trilogy—A Study of Symbolic Structure, presented in August 1981 to the Graduate School of FALE-UFMG in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Mestre em Inglês.

The real trouble is that Eustace unconsciously wants to be dominated, wants masochistically to satisfy his sexual needs in this way, and most strangely and perversely of all, feels guilty for anything his natural vitality may do to challenge Hilda's domination or to put himself out of its clutches.

Eustace's sexual attraction towards Hilda and his attempts to indulge it, are presented by Mr. Hartley in several different ways: by actions which serve as symbols, by dreams, and by combinations of actions and dreams. The symbolic actions which suggest the incestuous relationship between Eustace and Hilda are many and all of a pattern. Each one is an epitome of the whole book, since each includes an ecstatic union of Eustace and Hilda, followed by deflation, tragedy and failure— either presented or implied."<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the pattern is drawn in such a way that other characters will re-enact the neurotic elements of the brother/sister relationship, contributing to a clarification of its implications.

This is the function performed by Miss Fothergill, a character second in importance only to the protagonists. She is a half-paralysed old lady who leaves Eustace an £ 18 000 legacy and thus completely changes the course of his life.

One may say that the old lady brings a many-faceted, even contradictory influence to bear upon Eustace's life, and that the relationship between them constitutes a synthesis of the total sum of experiences he will undergo. It is she who tries to reveal him to himself, and prepare him for a confident launching into the world.

This is shown in several passages of the first book of the trilogy, The Shrimp and the Anemone, when the old lady makes pointed remarks on Eustace's self-effacing, self-denying habits.

On playing cards Eustace makes a mistake to which Miss Fothergill observes: "No good. Now you can see what comes of throwing away your opportunities."<sup>2</sup>

And again:

"...You know how you're pleased really."

"I suppose I am."

"You certainly ought to be. It's a great mistake not to feel pleased when you have the chance.

Remember that, Eustace." (p. 112)

There is still another instance, a straightforward remark on the submissive and passive Eustace who totally lacks confidence in himself, for appearances and public opinion are, in his mind, far more important than his own beliefs.

He is always worried about hurting people unintentionally and incapable of violent or gruff attitudes even if they might in context protect his own self. His guiding principle is to please everybody everywhere every time.

As this is humanly impossible Eustace is always struggling with his guilt complex: incapable of satisfying everybody at the same time he consequently cannot be at peace with his conscience.

All this becomes apparent to Miss Fothergill through her sensitivity and her experience of life. She has already detected this flaw in the boy's character, a flaw he will never be able to overcome. She clearly calls his attention to the fact through a wise piece of advice.

She points out to him that the repression of his inner life, that is, the annihilation of his own ego, would not give him peace either with himself or with the world in general.

Her advice associates her own observations with those of Dr. Speedwell who had assisted the boy during a peculiarly acute period of his heart disease:

"He [Dr Speedwell] said you had a lot in you, and it only needed bringing out. Don't forget that, Eustace, don't forget that... He said... that you can't please everyone- nobody can- and that if you minded less about disappointing people you wouldn't disappoint them. Do you see what I mean?"

"You mean Hilda and Aunt Sarah and Daddy and Minney and-."

"And me too, if you like. We are all designing women. you mustn't let yourself be sucked in by us." (pp. 118-119)

The expression 'sucked in' suggests the shrimp as an image of Eustace himself, and all his mother-surrogates—Hilda, Minney and Miss Fothergill— as devouring women, and castrating mothers.

Miss Fothergill herself admits being so and here she has associated herself with the people closest to Eustace; three of them—the boy's aunt, the family servant, and his sister— playing the role of mother-surrogates.

That is the reason why, on one hand, the old lady tries to

prepare the young boy for a successful launching into the outside world as any good mother should.

We shall see, on the other hand, that again like most mothers, she cannot fail to try to hold his affections and thus thwart her liberating influence, then assuming a phallic role.

The ambivalent relationship between Miss Fothergill and Eustace is clearly shown by the fact that, mother-surrogate as she is, Miss Fothergill paradoxically also stands for the boy's — indeed any child's— fear of the outside world. Her witchlike appearance and mysterious life introduce a note of threat which justifies this symbolic association.

This explains Eustace's reluctance in talking to her the first time he meets her on the beach and in going to tea with her for the first time:

[Hilda] "Remember what Aunt Sarah said. She said, 'Eustace, next time you see Miss Fothergill I want you to speak to her.'

'But next time was last time!'  
.....

'Go at once Eustace.'

'I can't. I can't,' Eustace wailed, beginning to throw himself about. 'She frightens me, she's so ugly! If you make me go, I shall be sick at dinner!'" (p. 25)

In fact, the boy had strange fantasies about the old lady.

Before he finally accepted her invitation for tea, he imagines her as a monster, only half-human, with the paws of a lion—a sphinx-like figure standing for the fearful mysteries of the world.

It requires of him a great effort to overcome such fantasies:

"Without too much mental suffering, Eustace was able to make a visual image of himself shaking hands (only the phrase wouldn't fit) with Miss Fothergill. He almost brought himself to believe—what his aunt and Minney with varying degrees of patience continually told him—that Miss Fothergill's hands were not really the hands of a lion, they were just very much swollen by rheumatism...

But neither of his comforters could say she had ever seen the hands in question, and lacking this confirmation Eustace's mind was never quite at rest.

But it was sufficiently swept and garnished to let in (as in the way of minds) other devils worse than the first. With his fears concentrated on Miss Fothergill's hands, Eustace had not thought of speculating on her face.

On Monday night this new bogey appeared, and even Hilda's presence was at first powerless to banish it." (p. 63)

In fact Miss Fothergill was a half-paralysed old lady who went about in a bath-chair, always careful to half conceal her face and hands wearing a hat, a veil and gloves.

Living in a solitary house, and having withdrawn herself from social affairs she can thus hardly be spoken to. People

were not able to form a consistent opinion about this peculiar person.

The visual image of that strange and solitary figure who did not belong to their daily world made them resort to the supernatural: they came to think of her as a witch. This partly set their mind at rest. It explained the old lady's seclusion and also provided an exciting answer to their curiosity.

Thus for a long time Eustace keeps the witch image of the old lady. Well aware of that, Miss Fothergill takes severe precautions.

The first time the boy goes to have tea with her she carefully chooses their places at the tea table. She is wearing neither hat nor veil and her fingers are visible peeping out of black mittens curiously humped.

"'He'd better sit there,' said Miss Fothergill, 'so as to be near the cakes.'

Eustace was too young to notice that, as a result of this arrangement, Miss Fothergill had her back to the light." (p. 109)

Miss Fothergill's strategical position leads the boy to have a better impression of her mishappen face and hands and "that afternoon marked more than one change in Eustace's attitude towards life. Physical ugliness ceased to repel him and conversely physical beauty lost some of its appeal" (p. 109).

It is significant that Eustace's lovely schoolmate, his beloved Nancy Steptoe, is now going to be removed from his path almost completely. The fairy is replaced by the witch. From that day on the path of Eustace's life will take such a

direction that Miss Fothergill will come to mean everything to him.

It is also remarkable that Nancy Steptoe—the charming and beautiful girl who is interested in Eustace—is the person who mostly talks of the old lady as a witch. She obviously senses the rival in her. This rivalry shows up in many ways.

On one occasion, for example Eustace declines Nancy's invitation to a paper-chase because of a former promise to have tea with Miss Fothergill. His remaining fears are renewed by Nancy's comments on the old lady:

"'But she's old and ugly, and I suppose you know she's a witch?'

Eustace's face stiffened. He had never thought of this. 'Are you sure?'

'Everyone says so, and it must be true. You know about her hands?' Eustace nodded. 'Well, they're not really hands at all but steel claws and they curve inwards like this, see! ... And, once they get hold of anything they can't leave go, because you see they are made like that. You'd have to have an operation to get loose.'" (p. 71)

This anticipates Eustace's fear of getting caught in the old lady's spell, which is prophetic and symbolic.

One is immediately reminded of the image of a shrimp caught by an anemone in the beach scene between Eustace and Hilda in chapter I, and which constitutes the core of the symbolic construction of this novel.



That image with its implications of castration and destruction is recalled through Nancy's reference to Miss Fothergill's "claws." To be released from them Eustace would need an operation. There is a hint at the possibility of mutilation—which projects the dominant theme to be unfolded in the trilogy and contributes to establish thematic unity.

Eustace, the shrimp, is in a symbolic way seized upon by Miss Fothergill, the anemone, which is also an anticipation of the destructive incestuous relation between the protagonists Eustace and Hilda, brother and sister.

Eustace became so attached to the old lady that, as time passed by she

"had come to mean to him all those aspirations that overflowed the established affection and routine employments of his life at Cambo; she was the outside world to him and the friends he had in it; its pioneering eye looked no further than Laburnum Lodge, the magnetic needle of his being fixed itself on Miss Fothergill." (p. 128)

The word 'magnetic' clearly hints at Miss Fothergill's charms. Eustace is in fact 'charmed,' completely subdued by Miss Fothergill's spell, reinforcing the idea of bewitchment and Nancy's prophetic image.

In the relation Miss Fothergill—Eustace there is no need however for physical operation as in the case of the shrimp and the anemone at the beach. Fate provides the operation, the rupture: Miss Fothergill's abrupt death. But, as the disembowelled anemone which leaves a part of its body attached to the shrimp, Miss Fothergill leaves an everlasting mark on Eustace's

personality.

Death— the operation brought about by fate— will mean just a partial separation, for Miss Fothergill's influence upon the boy will be much deeper than at first expected. It is the money left to Eustace in her legacy that enables the boy to go to Oxford. It is also this amount of money which will make things too easy for Eustace. It gives him a position where most struggles for an ordinary existence become unnecessary. This makes him finally unable to fight, face up to or cope with life. He is to be eternally submissive, passive, incapable of taking decisions. The lion claws will never actually leave him. Once started, the relationship with old Miss Fothergill will never really be broken.

Another aspect of this relationship will now be broached: the double nature of the mother figure, which in fact includes the good mother, represented by the fairy- godmother in children's tales, and the bad stepmother or witch.

Miss Fothergill, like most real mothers, plays both roles in Eustace's life. From one point of view, she paves the way for a fuller and easier life. From another she also stands for frustration, for the fear of the unknown.

Miss Fothergill knows that, and even while trying to liberate Eustace she frustrates the boy trying to keep him in that kind of relationship. As selfish mother-surrogate she, in turn, appreciates him precisely because of his childish passivity and dependence.

When playing cards with him she bribes the boy offering him money if he wins but demanding kisses no matter whether he

wins or loses. She manoeuvres the situation in such a way that the boy himself is led to say: "But you'll let me kiss you all the same? Once if I lose, twice if I win." (p. 116)

If the agreement suited the boy, much more did it suit the old lady: he would get money from her some times, that is, when he won, while she would always be kissed, no matter what happened.

Bribing Eustace in order to get his affection and companionship, Miss Fothergill realizes, in the meantime, as any reasonable person, that it was bad for the boy to be lost in that unique and private relationship with her.

That's why she tells him:

"'You mustn't come so often... if that's the way your father and your aunt feel about it. I shan't be hurt, you understand!'

Eustace's face fell.

'But I wish you had some... some other friends...'

'You mustn't spend too long playing cards with an old woman!'

'It's what I like doing best,' said Eustace lugubriously.'" (pp. 115-116)

The word 'lugubriously', on the other hand, ambiguously hints at Eustace's unconscious awareness of the harm that is being done to him: he really wanted to kiss his partner. But he also unconsciously knows the morbid character of his affection.

Miss Fothergill, on the other hand, is conscious of her

role as a castrating mother and tries to overcome it, but the mark of her ownership upon Eustace is going to outlast her life. Events however take another turn. She perpetuates the symbolic castration through her legacy. It handicaps Eustace in such a way that he will remain forever submissive, restrained and passive.

It is then not to be wondered at that the fairy -witch's death leaves an indelible mark on Eustace's mind.

This appears very clearly in the episode when Minnie, the devoted family servant, bathes the boy and gently tells him about his benefactress's funeral.

In this episode, prompted by conscious and unconscious associations with the dead, the crucially symbolic episode of the mutual destruction of the shrimp and the anemone which opens the book is re-lived once more through Eustace's fantasies.

This scene has a multiple significance. Probably as a compensation for his submission and weakness, Eustace has a liking for powerful and grand things as well as for destructive games. This is explicitly mentioned in the

"cone of Cotopaxi, for which he had a romantic affection, as he had for all volcanoes, earthquakes and violent manifestations of Nature... In his progress he conceived himself to be the Angel of Death, a delicious pretence, for it involved flying and the exercise of supernatural powers." (p. 20)

In the bath episode the threat of Eustace's fantasies is taken up again. In his imagination the bathtub appears as a

place of danger, terror and destruction.

The description starts factually enough, but soon takes another turn.

"The taps were of a kind that would turn interminably either way without appreciably affecting the flow of water. Even grown-up people threatened with a scalding or a mortal chill, lost their heads, distrusted the evidence of their senses, and applied to the all-too-responsive taps a frantic system of trial and error. And there were many other things that might go wrong. Eustace no longer feared that he would be washed down the waste-pipe when the plug was pulled out, but he had once put his foot over the hole and the memory of the sudden venomous tug it gave still alarmed him. If his whole leg were sucked in he might be torn in two.

The fear that the bath water might overflow, sink into the floor and dissolve it, and let him down into the drawing room, the accident costing his father several hundred pounds, was too rational to scare Eustace much, though it sometimes occurred to him; but he had conceived another terror more congenial to his temperament. The whitish enamel of the bath was chipped in places, disclosing patches of a livid blue. These spots represented cities destined for inundation.

... Sometimes a single submersion satisfied his lust for destruction, but certain cities seemed almost waterproof and could be washed out time after time without losing their virtue. Those he cared about least came lowest in the bath,

and as the upper strata of sacrifice were reached so Eustace's ecstasy mounted. When at last,... the water rose to Rome, his favourite victim, the spirit of the tidal wave possessed him utterly. But he rarely allowed himself this indulgence, for above Rome, not much above... there was another spot, the Death-Spot. If the water so much as licked the Death-Spot Eustace was doomed." (p. 125)

Eustace fears his death—for he knows he is doomed to destruction—even when he himself is in control of things. But he imagines somebody else, particularly Hilda, to be the tidal wave. Then his destruction and death are not only just a possibility: they seem to be imminent.

Eustace comments:

"Supposing I was the city of Rome,' he thought, 'and the tidal wave, was really somebody else, perhaps Hilda, then it would kill me and without ever touching the Death-Spot at all.'" (p. 128)

To this Peter Bien remarks: "In the case of the bath which is the Death-Spot scene, it is clear that though Eustace may be the destroying force, the object of his destructions is himself. This is consistent with his masochism."<sup>3</sup>

It is also meaningful that Rome is Eustace's favourite victim. As one of the main symbols of Christianity Rome means to Eustace the rigid religion which oppresses and suffocates him, the Scarlet Woman of Protestant polemic.

It's significant that soon after Miss Fothergill's death

Eustace should be depicted as having a bath.

Water, in this case, conveys one of its most universal symbolic meanings, that of purification.

The bath becomes a ritual: Eustace is to be purified from Miss Fothergill's inhibiting influences, but, paradoxically, the bath is also to be his baptism—his initiation into another life which is going to begin with the old lady's legacy.

On the other hand the bath-scene is basically a repetition of the first image of the book: the mutual destruction of the shrimp and the anemone is clearly re-lived here, through Eustace's fantasies. Instead of a ritual liberation, the bath reveals his fears and indicates he will never be free. The bath then acquires an ironic meaning. Eustace as once the shrimp did, now lies in the water. Hilda associated to the anemone becomes an equally destructive tidal wave, which will symbolically fuse the bath and beach scenes.

The image of the half-eaten shrimp is re-created through Eustace's morbid fantasies: the fear of his leg being 'sucked in' by water down the waste-pipe and of his being torn into two.

The bath and the initial scene of the mutual destruction of the shrimp and the anemone are deply connected through the use of similar imagery. In addition the same verb of action 'to suck in' is used to convey the destruction of both the shrimp at the beach and of Eustace in the bath. Both are killed by being 'eaten' — sucked in—by someone stronger. Two quotations, one from the initial scene and the other from the ritual bath fit in here: "It was a shrimp, Eustace decided, and the anemone

was eating it, sucking it in." (p. 9) "If his whole leg were sucked in he might be torn into two." (p. 125).

What is revealed is the perfect symbolic construction of the trilogy: characters and images mingle together forming a web by means of which the relationship between incest, castration, and destruction is unfolded.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Peter Bien, L.P. Hartley (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), pp. 84-85.

<sup>2</sup> L.P. Hartley, The Shrimp and the Anemone (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1969), p. 111. All other quotations from the novel were taken from this edition and are indicated by page numbers in parentheses.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Bien, op. cit., p. 77.