

## 2. Connection in Richard Ford's *A Multitude of Sins*

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**Frédéric Dumas**

*English Department*

*Stendhal University — Grenoble, France*

ORCID iD: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5896-8001>

E-Mail: [frederic.dumas@u-grenoble3.fr](mailto:frederic.dumas@u-grenoble3.fr)

### Abstract

A Multitude of Sins is a collection of short stories. Richard Ford insists he had always planned for them to be included in the same volume; their individuality, however, raises the question of the cohesion and of the coherence of A Multitude of Sins, which depends on how satisfactorily the separate pieces connect. The textual aspect of connection reflects a diegetic universe characterized by fragmentation: the stories involve a very limited number of characters who can hardly communicate and quite often find themselves greatly alienated. Disconnection threatens psychological as well as textual integrity; disruptive as it is, this trend actually makes up a key element in the dynamics at play in A Multitude of Sins. Its fragmented world is one narrative construct that strives to build meaning through a maze of perceptions whose randomness may disorient the characters and the readers alike. This article appraises the fragmented quality of that construct before attempting to define the connecting impulse that provides at once fictional material and literary relevance.

### Keywords

Richard Ford, American literature, short story, postmodernism, connection fragmentation, disembodiment.

# Connection in Richard Ford's *A Multitude of Sins*

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*A Multitude of Sins* is a collection of short stories that, with the exception of "Abyss," had all been published in various magazines. Richard Ford insists he had always planned for them to be included in the same volume<sup>1</sup>; their individuality, however, raises the question of the cohesion and thus of the coherence of *A Multitude of Sins*, which depends on how satisfactorily the separate pieces connect.

It turns out that the textual aspect of connection reflects a diegetic universe characterized by fragmentation: the stories involve a very limited number of characters (two in most cases) who can hardly communicate and quite often find themselves greatly alienated.

Disconnection threatens psychological as well as textual integrity; disruptive as it is, this trend actually makes up a key element in the dynamics at play in *A Multitude of Sins*. For its diegetic fragmented world is one narrative construct that strives to build meaning through a maze of perceptions whose randomness may disorient the characters and the readers alike.

That is why it is necessary to appraise the fragmented quality of that construct before attempting to define the connecting impulse that provides at once fictional material and literary relevance.

## A fragmented universe

Most characters are married, though not necessarily to one another. Almost all married characters find themselves alone at the end of their story, either because their couple is breaking down (in "Under the Radar," Steven is left stranded at night in the countryside as his wife leaves with the car), or has broken down (Madeleine also drives away from Henry Rothman at the airport in "Dominion" and Wales stays on the sidewalk as Jena enters the Drake in "Quality Time"), or else, as in "Abyss," one of the two has died).

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<sup>1</sup> Birnbaum: At what point did you see these stories pointing to something more or decide that you wanted to do a collection?

Ford: When I had written the first three. I wrote "Privacy" first, "Crèche" second and "Quality Time" third. Then I thought, "Oh, I see where this taking me." So I'm going to exclude stories that didn't go into what I thought this was going to be about. I wrote "Charity" last [...]. (Birnbaum)

As for the others, their lives end up sharing basically the same characteristics, even though they are not totally alone: in “Charity,” Nancy and Tom still live separately, while Mack Bolger in “Reunion” is meeting his daughter; his lonely figure in the middle of Grand Central, though, makes him a statue of grief. As for the anonymous narrator of “Privacy,” he hints either at an upcoming split-up or at a disastrous married life, and Faith’s relationship in “Crèche” appears doomed due to Jack’s obvious refusal to commit himself.

Each character seems locked up in him/herself for lack of adequate communication. It can happen out of insufficient interest in the interlocutor, as exemplifies the scene when Frances is driving and trying to relate to Howard by getting him interested in the Grand Canyon (just after poleaxing the jackrabbit): “Conquistadors came there in fifteen-ninety-something” (244). Howard’s haphazard response confirms his total disinterestedness: “I never thought about it,’ he said to whatever she’d said” (245) By giving access to Howard’s thoughts the third-person narrator discloses that such a reaction does not stem from utter indifference, but rather from an alternate stream of thinking that Frances cannot penetrate: “Howard [...] was thinking about the run-over rabbit and staring moodily out at a big cinema complex built to look like an Egyptian jukebox. A vast, unlined, untenanted expanse of asphalt lay between the theater and the highway. [...] in ten years it would be gone.” (244-5) Such a revelation denotes that Howard is capable of being interested in and of seeing through his environment, with great acuity. This is something the reader gets to realize, but not Frances. This incomprehension lies at the core of the crisis they are going through.

Quite often, damaging failure to connect verbally arises from the very nature of social interaction. “Under the Radar” presents this in particularly humorous fashion too, as the omniscient narrator voices what Steven can’t, following his wife’s disclosure of her affair with George:

The other competing thought was that part of Marjorie’s character had always be to confess upsetting things that turned out, he believed, not to be true: being a hooker for a summer up in Saugatuck; topless dancing while she was an undergraduate; heroin experimentation; taking part in armed robberies [...] he did realize that he didn’t really know his wife at all; and that in fact the entire conception of knowing another person [...] was still completely out-of-date, defunct, was something typifying another era, now unfortunately gone. (146)

For Steven, then, despite the closeness of the relationship, marriage is no longer able to guarantee true connection between the spouses. This deduction comes as a minor epiphany for Steven, whose sudden awareness strikes him as a revelation. By acknowledging the distant possibility of at least the “idea” of marriage as a way of truly knowing someone, Steven reveals both his enduring naiveté (by believing that his parents’ marriage had been successful in that sense, “at least marginally”) – a

naïveté besieged, though, by a pessimism characteristic of the modern age, that held/holds that connecting to others was/is not simply impossible: it is at best an ideal and at worst a concept totally out of touch with contemporary reality. That contemporary reality can only afford the individual an illusion prompted by love, and then fueled by a social system whose commodified way of life is hardly able to compensate for the disconnection of the spouses from each other:

Meeting a girl, falling in love, marrying her, moving to Connecticut, buying a fucking house, starting a life with her and thinking you really knew anything about her—the last part was a complete fiction, which made it all the rest a joke. Marjorie might as well have *been* a hooker or held up 7-Elevens and shot people, for all he really knew about her. And what was more, if he'd said anything of this to her, sitting next to him thinking you would never know what, she either would not have understood a word of it or simply would've said, "Well, okay, that's fine."

(146-7)

Of course, as in real life, characters may find themselves mute owing to the high emotional impact of the moment. Steven's reaction as he's just heard the news of his wife's infidelity is a case in point: "he realized that he was saying nothing because he was at a loss for words. A loss for words, he realized, meant that nothing that comes to mind seems very interesting to say as a next thing to what has just been said." (144) His incapacity to speak does not impair his ability to think, or even to reflect on the nature of his absence of reaction. The way the narrator leads us to think that Steven's reflection does correspond to the reality of his experience. This is due to the use of the verb "to realize," which means "to understand" and which carries an objective value. Used twice in two lines, the verb attracts our attention, if only because repetitions are usually avoided in literary works, unless with a particular purpose in sight.

This passage clearly stands out, as it is built around the rhetorical device called "chiasmus," in which two parts reflect one another. The chiastic effect cannot be missed, and points to a subtle shift in point of view, for we notice that the first occurrence of "he realized" corresponds to indirect/reported thought: we are provided with the content of Steven's thoughts, but it is totally mediated by the narrator, who has selected the words to express the thoughts. The second utterance is more ambiguous, for it transcribes Steven's thinking in free indirect style: it reads like a direct transcription of what Steven actually thought—only this is achieved through the narrator's voice.

As is typical of free indirect style, this ambiguity cannot be cleared up, and we get the feeling that what is expressed here is to be attributed to both agencies. As a consequence, we are led to accept what is divulged here as a general truth about this kind of situation. It bears the form of a philosophical precept, and to a certain extent benefits from the aura of authority of timeless truths. But a loss for words can be explained in many different ways (one may be puzzled by the complexity

of the experience and may need some time to think it over, for instance, or the revelation has prompted a sudden recovery of painful memories that had been bottled up, which numbs all rational thoughts for a while). Given the superficial nature of the definition of a loss for words, then, the reader who cannot determine its origin will probably take the following forays into the characters' thoughts with a grain of salt.

The revelation opens up on a feeling of total disconnection from reality, which verges on hallucination and leads to a virtual dissolution of the self:

But for a great and terrifying instant [...] just when he began experiencing his lost for words, he entered or at least nearly slipped into a softened fuguelike state in which he began to fear that he perhaps *could* not say another word; that something [...] was at that moment causing him to detach from reality and to slide away from the present, and in fact to begin to lose his mind and go crazy to the extent that he was in jeopardy all beginning to gibber like a chimp. (144)

As is often the case in *A Multitude of Sins*, such shattering impressions do not lead to utter despair, as demonstrates the tongue-in-cheek, ironical concluding comment: we do not know whether the "terrible thought" is the one of his possible upcoming handicap or merely the fact that he might "have to be looked after by his mother's family in Damariscotta."! (144) This humorous trend continues as Steven makes a point of giving a response anyway: "And so to avoid that—to save his life and sanity—he abruptly just said the word, any word that he could say [...]. And for some reason the word—phrase, really—that he uttered was 'ground clutter.' Something he heard on the TV weather report as they were dressing for dinner." (144) The nonsensical answer denotes the futility of verbalization in case of distress; the irrelevance of the phrase lies both in the message and the origin of the phrase itself, for in every day life talking about the weather mostly partakes of phatic communication and only rarely conveys any real meaning.

At critical moments, phatic communication might prove lethal to an already tenuous relationship, and at least one in the couple realizes the danger of such otherwise innocuous comments. When Frances gets her first sight of the Grand Canyon, she "seemed blissed" (272), which automatically makes her anticipate Howard's small talk. She sharply stops him on his predictable impulse: "'I don't want you to say a single thing.' [...]. He did, however expect to say *something*." In her "bliss," she is experiencing nothing else but the "shock" (272)—that is, the ineffable pangs of emotions characteristic of the experience of the sublime which, according to Patricia Waugh "transcends every faculty of sense, taunts us with a glimpse of inaccessible plenitude and leaves us with the impossible

self-conscious wrestle with words in the hopeless struggle to embody it.” (*Waugh*, 27) Frances’s refusal to listen to Howard’s empty words signify her desire to be left alone, disconnected from her social life, so as to face the presence of the sublime in a transcendental, mystical attempt at reaching a state that goes beyond connection with the natural elements, to attain a—utopian—fusion with the wilderness.

Sentimental bonds are supposed to put an end to an individual’s feeling of loneliness; *A Multitude of Sins*, however, shows that such attachments are doomed, and that the characters are eventually plunged into a state of alienation that symbolically shatters them to pieces.

This is expressed literally in “Charity,” when Nancy confronts Tom at the restaurant as he is trying to explain his affair with Crystal: “She was actually experiencing a peculiar sense of weightlessness and near disembodiment, as though she could see herself listening to Tom from a comfortable but slightly dizzying position high up around the red, scrolly, Chinese-looking crown molding.” (187) Just as for Steven in “Under the Radar,” the disclosure of the infidelity gives way to a sensation of complete disconnection from reality, with hallucinatory symptoms leading to the dissolution of the self: “the more Tom talked, the less present, the less substantial, the less *anything* she felt.” (187) The first consequence of Nancy’s disconnectedness is to pay little importance to Tom’s explanation: “he seems to go on and on and on.” (187) We do not get his arguments, which are presented summarized, in reported speech, as if they did not matter so much.

Broadly speaking, a feeling of total disconnection is characteristic of particularly intricate situations, as amusingly testifies another restaurant scene, in “Crèche”: Faith “no longer wishes to look at her fragmentary salad” (126) as Roger gets more and more insistent, and as her attention wanders and as her sense of unease grows accordingly.

## Physical fragmentation

More frighteningly, disconnection is the ultimate lot of the individual, for it seems that all dead people in *A Multitude of Sins* find themselves actually physically fragmented.

In “Quality Time,” the woman that Wales sees bumped into outside the Drake loses her human appearance in a matter of seconds and gets transformed “into a collection of assorted remnants on a frozen pavement” (11), which reminds Wales of “a man named Peter Szayzee he’d know in Spain—a photographer, a silly man who was dead now, shot to pieces covering a skirmish in East Africa.” (11) As for Frances in “Abyss,” the appearance of her body is laden with suspense, for we are first misled into thinking that the description of the jigsaw-like body discovered by Howard fits that of a person still alive:

She was staring up at him, her eyes seemingly open, though the rest of her—her white shorts and blue sailcloth top with the anchor, her bare legs and arms—these were all jumbled around her in a crazy way, as if her face had been dropped first, and then the rest of her. (278)

In a most casual way, the following sentence reveals the awful truth: “It actually seemed, from here, that one arm was intact but separated from her body.” (278) Two hundred feet down, she has truly become disembodied, fragmented, chaotic. The horror of the scene contrasts even more strongly with Howard’s tone—for “here,” in free indirect speech, expresses his own point of view.

Characteristically, the real does not manifest itself only in concrete reality; it also surfaces in dreams, as show Sallie’s “war dreams,” characterized by fragmentation, and whose origin confuses both her husband and her therapist:

violent, careering, antic, destructive Technicolor nightmares without plots or coherent scenarios, just sudden drop-offs into deepest sleep accompanied by images of dismembered bodies flying around and explosions and brilliant flashes and soldiers of unknown armies being hurtled through trap doors and hanged or thrust out through bomb bays into empty screaming space. (86)

Such repressed images of horror are an integral part of Sallie’s psyche and if we are not put in a position to interpret their psychological relevance, we can still put them into perspective. We may then notice the analogy between the fate of her “dismembered” soldiers with the destruction of the real life characters of *A Multitude of Sins*.

Death is pictured as a terrifying fragmented and fragmenting universe, where the characters lose their physical integrity without any sense of transcendental design. Those images are part and parcel of the modern condition, for they are “Technicolor.” The Hollywood-style commodification of hell, however, contributes to making its definition even less comprehensible: for all its modernity, it is a grotesque Bosch-like “Garden of Earthly Delights,”<sup>2</sup> also reminiscent of several paintings by Bruegel, whose “Return of the Hunters”<sup>3</sup> hangs on a wall of the hotel in “Crèche” (122). In Sallie’s nightmares, space—standing for the unknown—is endowed with a fear-provoking human attribute: it is a “screaming space.” Terrifying as it is, Sallie’s psychic hodgepodge still reads very much like an

<sup>2</sup> Hieronymus Bosch, “The Garden of Earthly Delights” (1500 – 1505), Prado Museum, Madrid. Visible online at <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/the-garden-of-earthly-delights/>

<sup>3</sup> Pieter Bruegel (The Elder), “The Return of the Hunters” is an alternative title for “Hunters in the Snow” (1569), Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Visible online at <http://www.visitmuseums.com/work-of-art/hunters-in-the-snow-141>

impressionistic digest of media conveyed horrors that baffles rationality by its lack of “plots or coherent scenarios.” Such visions render obsolete the difference between reality and fiction, for their mediated quality has definitely transformed them into a mere spectacle. This explains their paradoxically superficial impact on Sallie, who “usually wakes from these dreams slightly worn down, but not especially spiritually disturbed.” (86) This is confirmed by her therapist, who does not use painting or cinematographic metaphors, but a musical one to articulate his non-diagnosis: “her dreams [...] were just the baroque background music of how she resides on the earth and didn’t represent [...] repressed memories of parental abuse or some kind of private disaster she didn’t want to confront in daylight.” (87)

Referring to “background music,” also called Muzak, to give an account of Sallie’s “empty screaming space” seems surprising, for Muzak is meant to create a soothing atmosphere and its quality is usually so poor that no one ever really pays any attention to it. Attaching to it the modifier “baroque” does make it the equivalent of Sallie’s nighttime chaos, though, for “baroque” does not only refer to the flamboyant musical period that followed the Renaissance; it also means “irregularly shaped”<sup>4</sup>—i.e., “chaotic.”

The allusion to the importance of shape (lessness) in Faith’s dreams points to the relevance of the notion of formal disconnection in the volume in general. By nature, a collection of short stories is the putting together of separate narratives, which is why *A Multitude of Sins* cannot reach the completeness of a novel and its formal structure inevitably proves slightly artificial.

Out of the ten stories, nine were published in three different magazines (six in *The New Yorker*, one in *Granta* and one in *The Southern Review*), sometimes with different titles. Each fulfills a purpose of its own, and if their reunion actually composes the vector of a given narrative project, the basic structuring principle remains essentially repetitive and specular.

It is worth noting that the opening page of the volume does not use “short stories” as the generic term for those narratives, but “stories”; the table of contents also reveals the distinctive status of “Abyss,” which is physically set apart from the rest. In the Birnbaum interview, Ford justifies this specific location by the fact that to him “Abyss” is a novella. Such a distinction seems to imply that generic reasons prevail in the structure—over thematic or stylistic ones, for instance. The reader, however, is free to interpret this instance of disconnection as a humorous play on the most common meaning of “Abyss,” namely “a deep, immeasurable space, gulf, or cavity; vast chasm.”<sup>5</sup> In harmony with the dark humor of the novella, the significant blank textual space that separates the title of that longer story from the others thus reflects the “abysmal” fate of the unfortunate Frances, who falls off

<sup>4</sup> “Baroque”, *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>5</sup> “Abyss”, *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*.



the Grand Canyon. Such playful humor would nonetheless attract the reader's attention on the limits of writing when it comes to relating human experience, especially when this writing is supposed to belong to the realist trend: the blatant discrepancy between the truly unfathomable Grand Canyon and this tiny textual marker casts an ironic shadow of doubt over the capacity of realism to transmute concrete reality.

## The connecting impulse

Artificial as it must be by nature, *A Multitude of Sins* is still tightly controlled, through a wide range of narrative and structural devices that interconnect and collide constantly.

Notwithstanding Ford's claim, which makes love the major theme of his volume, the unifying theme is adultery, which relates the separate casts of characters into a human comedy moved mostly by illicit love (?) affairs. Structurally, the cyclical nature of a collection of short stories is difficult to avoid; *A Multitude of Sins* is no exception, for it opens on a man peeping through a window, and concludes on another man "peering out the windshield" (288) of a police car. The end is thus connected to the beginning, thus denoting the mastery of the author over his collection as a *whole*.

Of course, in itself that device is not sufficient to guarantee a truly integrated textual production. The latter is also achieved through a very complex web of inter/intra textual references that links each story to the others: *A Multitude of Sins* opens on a man watching a woman from a window in winter, and "Quality Time," the second story, also reveals a man watching a woman in winter, through a slightly different window (the windshield of his car). Each man compensates for what he cannot see with his imagination, which implies that they connect with reality in the same way. From now on, the similarities between the first two stories appear manifold: each character finds himself in a cold room, with a bed in a dark place, and both couples go out in the cold to find a restaurant.

In "Calling" and "Reunion," which follow one another after "Quality Time," St Louis is the center of adultery, and the narrator of "Puppy," the following story, lives in New Orleans just like the narrator of "Calling"; he also regularly goes to St Louis for business.

Thus the first five short stories of the collection are closely interrelated at the level of action and location, which constitutes a cohesive and coherent introduction into the heart of the matter. By then, the reader will have been introduced to other idiosyncrasies, such as the taste of most characters for expensive clothes and polished shoes and the frequent presence of windows and revolving doors, for instance.

The beginning of the collection presents Jena ("Quality Time") at her window, with her imagination stirred by the atmosphere of the cityscape she dominates: "it was exhilarating to be here, as though they were on the edge, waiting to jump. Below them eight floors, the Drake was astream with cars."

(18) Actually, the “canyon of buildings” (26) and the lake “like a lightless precipice” that prompt her enthusiasm are a proleptic reference to the real canyon that will thrill Frances beyond words just before causing her death at the end: “the whole Grand Canyon just all right there at once, opened out and down and wide in front of you, enormous and bottomless.” (272)

The numerous elements that echo each other in the collection range from the humorous to the tragic: “Crèche,” placed immediately after “Puppy,” happens to introduce Roger wearing Hush Puppies (113), while just like the narrator’s father in “Calling,” Roger stands drunk at the shelter where he almost tries to rape Faith and which looks very much like the duck blind in “Calling” (133, 53).

As the collection unfolds, such echoes becomes endowed with new layers of meaning, as for instance when in “Under the Radar” Steven imagines fishing with George. That fantasy inevitably reminds the reader of the duck hunting in “Calling” and establishes a filial connection between the 2 men that would not have been so palpable otherwise.

As for the image of the raccoon run over by the truck in “Under the Radar,” it is reminiscent of the puppy’s fate in the eponymous story, as well as of the woman bumped into in “Quality Time.” Touch by touch, this motif points to an indictment of indifference to others that becomes more and more insistent and prevents a superficial reading of what in disconnected stories might appear anecdotal.

## Conclusion

In her study of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon alludes to Lyotard’s view on postmodernity, which is “characterized by no grand totalizing narrative, but by smaller and multiple narratives which seek no universalizing stabilization or legitimation. » (24) In that context, disconnection could turn out to be a paradoxical unifying factor for Ford’s multiple narratives.

The stories of *A Multitude of Sins*, though, do combine into a cohesive whole that points to a unified narrative project. Since connection aims at reaching coherence, the characters’ actions in that sense denote an inarticulate quest for emancipation from their limited human condition. The perception of that condition, though, is necessarily rooted in contemporary phenomenological views and, as an artistic creation, *A Multitude of Sins* has inherited some of these modern and postmodern concerns. The failure that lurks behind all the characters’ initiatives is characteristic of the spirit of the age and bears similarity with the acknowledged failure of the short story in its phenomenological endeavor.

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