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Chapter Two

"Like A Dam Broke Open": Water and Narrative in Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden*

By Frédérique Spill

"The pain of water is infinite."

—Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*[1]

Water—which Gaston Bachelard calls "The universal liquid" (60) and which Edgar Allan Poe describes as "the pure element" ("The Sleeper")—plays a major role in Rash's fiction and poetry. The characters in Rash's writing are often shown struggling with water, and their hubristic efforts to master the natural world are forcefully illustrated by the obsessive recurrence of images of the dam and man-made lake that irreversibly transformed the Jocassee Valley. While this dam was completed in 1974,[2] water-related issues began long before, altering—and very profoundly so—the habits, traditions, and beliefs of the people living in the valley. With compelling variation, Rash's works reimagine the key motif of man's (and sometimes woman's) exploitative struggle with nature—their efforts to contend with, let alone master, nature's inherent, unpredictable forces. The antithetical power of water—at the same time life-giving and destructive—is at the core of Rash's poetics. This leitmotiv took shape in two books published in 2002, the first of which—a collection of poems with a programmatic title *Raising the Dead*—engendered the second, Rash's debut novel *One Foot in Eden*, thus confirming the flowing quality of his imaginative and creative processes.

Both books are responses to the same event: the drowning of an ancient Appalachian valley by Duke Power Company to match the needs and expectations of modern life—amenities, services, and leisure. The flooding that literally erased an entire landscape awakened Rash's urge for remembrance, as well as his sense of obligation toward the mishandled dead, to whom he pays a belated homage. Haunting images of the buried valley,

the "place of the lost" (*Raising* 75; *One Foot* 214), surface in memory of the dead that literally had to be *raised*, as they were disinterred and displaced in order to allow humans to flood the valley and claim power over the natural world there. Rash asserts, "At Jocassee, there is only the water; not even the place names remain. It's simply terrifying to me, at Jocassee—the erasure—of lives, of graves, of farmland, of flowers, of names. All erased" (qtd. in Dunlap 56). The main concern at the core of *Raising the Dead* and *One Foot in Eden* is that the lost should not be forgotten, and water provides a powerful medium for addressing this concern. While in interviews Rash has repeated that he considers water as "a conduit between the living and the dead" (Bjerre, 225; Spill), the power of water and its attendant images also contribute to reasserting the indefectible bonds that tie the living with the dead. For Rash, water is a privileged metaphor of memory, of its flux, reflux, and unpredictable emergence at the surface of everyday life. Rash's prose and poetry formally echo this essential fluidity between themes, times, and places, as the past often merges with the present, as the regional specificity broadens into the universal, and as stories and histories are inextricably commingled.

This chapter will first explore the metaphorical power of water, as major upheavals in Rash's characters' lives are systematically associated either with water or its absence. I will also examine how the tensions generated by the dam project, the flooding, and eventually the lake conjure up images of the finitude of human life. I will then highlight the crucial role water plays in the narratological construction of Rash's *One Foot in Eden*. Ultimately, I argue that water and water-related imagery help define the categories of place, time, plot, and character, while operating as the privileged symbol of the fluid forms adopted by memory and writing. Gaston Bachelard's poetico-philosophical reflections on water and imagination, *Water and Dreams*, will be the main secondary reference used throughout this chapter;

building upon Bachelard, I hope to convey the centrality of water in Rash's literary imagination.

Slipping into Finitude: "Too much too soon disappears"[3]

Water seeps through every aspect of *One Foot in Eden*, and it is consistently endowed with strong symbolical significations. Rash's writing does not merely engender reflections that bristle at the surface of the text: Rash takes his readers deep into water, as the upheavals experienced by the characters are often associated with either water or its dearth. Rash can unquestionably be considered a "profound poet" who, in the words of Bachelard, "discovers enduring water, unchanging and reborn, which stamps its image with an indelible mark and is an organ of the world, the nourishment of flowing phenomena, the vegetating and polishing element, the embodiment of tears…" (11). In the first section of this chapter, I will analyze a few textual examples that confirm the "profound" nature of Rash's use of water, by illustrating significant ways in which water and associated images infiltrate Rash's descriptions of his characters' key experiences.

In *One Foot in Eden*, sense of place is chiefly conveyed to characters by the nearby presence of the river, which is an essential element of the novel's topography and functions as a main landmark. Much of the novel takes place on Billy Holcombe's land, one boundary of which is delimited by the river. The river operates as a liminal space between the familiar world Billy shares with his wife Amy—a world of hard daily farm work—and the wild beyond, where lurking snakes await their prey and where the local "witch," Widow Glendower, gathers plants out of which she makes strange concoctions. Beyond the river awaits a landscape where seemingly anything can happen. Consequently, crossing the river amounts to accepting the unruliness of the wild. The novel's most grisly scenes—the handling of a corpse that needs to be hidden from the law, the disposing of the remains months later—take place "across the river" in this "wild" space.

While the river is at times a menacing force, it is also a presence that can be trusted. As Amy pays a visit to Widow Glendower, on her way to the latter's secluded cabin, the creek, a tributary of the river, is the only landmark she can trust as darkness and snow have obscured the familiar trails. A reassuring element in the landscape, the river naturally orients Amy's—and many other characters'—sense of direction. "Walk[ing] the river a ways" (13), as Sheriff Alexander says, certainly has a redeeming value: his purposeful connection with the river at a critical moment in his life reveals his intention to do things "right," while probably also indicating his desire to escape the sordid present with which he has to contend. Nearly twenty years later Amy's child, Isaac Holcombe, in a state of shock as the long delayed revelation of his true identity has finally been revealed to him, also spontaneously goes to the river: "I followed the river down stream, not really knowing where I was going. It was like my mind moved so fast it was taking my body right along with it" (179). In the ontological disorientation he then experiences, Isaac walks to the familiar river of his childhood—a river whose banks are, ironically, about to vanish underwater. Bachelard, the master of poetic spaces, discusses the power of water on human consciousness: "The human mind has claimed for water one of its highest values—the value of purity. How could we conceive of purity without the image of clear and limpid water, without this beautiful pleonasm that speaks to us of *pure water*?" (14). At the very moment Isaac's innocence is corrupted, it is symbolic that he should revert to the cradle of purity that also was the central locus of his childhood.

Although the dam is created and the valley is flooded throughout the two-decade span of the novel, which dramatically alters the characters' sense of place, water will remain the only constant element in the landscape. The level of the river, whether low or critically high, often operates as a key element in the setting and contributes both to the characters' livelihoods and psychological wellbeing. For example, the river's sudden disappearance in

summer signals how the stability of ordinary life can quickly shift to the extraordinary. The effects of extended periods of heat impact both the landscape and characters; the drought causes a lengthy period of agricultural inactivity and, as a result, sharpens people's obsessive hope for rain on which their yearly crops and living conditions ultimately depend. While the city dwellers and white-collar workers can afford to be indifferent to rain, this is obviously not the case with the farmers. Sheriff Alexander, who has one foot in both worlds, understands these different relations to weather and rain: "Before I got in my car I glanced at the sky. Like it mattered to me, a man with a certain paycheck come rain or drought" (10). The dependence of the mountain farmers on contingent elements like the weather further highlights the isolation of the community, which seems far beyond the margins of the modern world. The contrast between the demanding efforts it takes to work the land, all the more so when drought desiccates the natural world, and the prospect of that same land's absurdly quick disappearance also underscores the gap separating two worlds operating in two radically different timeframes. While Billy has spent most of his life laboring to grow crops on land he is proud to claim as his own, Isaac is told "not to plant anything" (167) which he interprets as an insult to his "father" Billy's vocation: "But Daddy had told the Carolina Power man it was our land for a few more months yet, and he'd damn well do what he pleased" (167). This cultural gap is further reinforced by the superstitions associated with rain. *One Foot in Eden* repeatedly evokes the local beliefs regarding rain: "The old folks claimed you could kill a blacksnake and lay it on the fence and it would bring rain" (124). It seems that the dry, snakeskin-like bottom of the river asks for the sacrifice of a blacksnake to recover its wet smoothness.

The characterization of Billy also reveals how rain and its lack shape characters' lives. Indeed, as drought and emotional turmoil weigh on him, Billy mostly appears as a desiccated, incapacitated figure—a modernized version of the Fisher King of the Grail

legends. While Billy is deeply affected by the withering of the world around him—"most everything that surrounded me had seemed to lay down to die" (117)—he himself is portrayed as being contaminated by the environment around him and thus a shriveled version of himself. Indeed, his disabilities (his limping, his sterility) and limitations (his questioning his own courage) are persistently hinted at. The long expected rain toward the end of Billy's section of the novel takes the form of a deliverance; it significantly entails an unlikely sense of peace and ease: "It wasn't long before drops of rain tapped the roof and that's the best sound ever I've known to make a body drowsy" (154). At the same time, the possibility of renewal is evoked as "the splats of rain [turn] dust back to dirt" (155); while the quick succession of monosyllables is suggestive of raindrops, the way *dust* and *dirt* alliteratively echo emphasizes the metamorphosing effects of water on nature and humans. The general impression is that the return of rain contributes to Billy's own slow straightening, both physical and psychological, while his crops are fortunately saved and new life develops in Amy: "I felt the young one stir again and told myself my luck had changed, was changing with every drop of rain that fell on my thirsty fields" (155). The evocation of drought through the image of thirst is particularly striking as it associates humans and nature in the grasp of a similar fate; at the same time, the ultimate reversal—drowning by water—is also suggested. Bachelard says, "It is important to note in passing this new *inversion* that attributes a human action to a material element. Water is no longer a substance that is drunk; it is a substance which drinks" (54).

Such binary oppositions as drought and rain or sterility and regeneration are likely to be made more complex as contradictory metaphors surreptitiously come to the surface. Amy's "curse" (75), her unfulfilled pregnancy, is represented by the inexorable return of her monthly flow. Meanwhile, her making love with Holland, and truly enjoying the guilty experience, is compared with "a flood" (74), which thus becomes a metaphor for being overcome—

flooded—by pleasure. Yet Amy tries hard to resist the flood, endeavoring not to be carried away. While in the act, she focuses her attention on mundane remembrances of "quilt-washing day[s]" (84). Symbolically, this memory is associated with water, whiteness, and the removal of stains, thus obliquely figuring Amy's awareness of her shame. But the "hot and bubbling" (84) cleansing water also refers to her exhilaration, designating a very likeable sensation: "It was a good, pure feeling to be out in the river on a warm spring day. . . . It was knowing something could be made clean no matter how soiled and dirty it got" (85). Pain and pleasure, disgrace and grace, corruption and purification are indissolubly intermingled; therefore, water imagery thematizes the intricacy of human experience and its often conflicting urges.

Later, Amy registers the very moment Holland makes her pregnant through the joyful images of a well and a spring: "Then I felt something else, something deep inside me, a kind of brightness *welling up* and spreading all through my body like *spring water* when it *bubbles out* of the ground. At that moment I knew certain as anything ever in my life that Holland's *seed* had *took root* inside me" (88, emphasis added). While this primal scene takes place in a natural cradle, the spring water is intimately associated with the symbolism of springtime, the season of burgeonings, births, and rebirths. While Amy's most intimate desire—that is, procreating—is being fulfilled, she is also somehow born again as a woman. Indeed, while suggesting the intrinsic life of nature, the *bubbling out* Amy sensuously evokes designates the simultaneous experiences of new life "[taking] root inside her," her overwhelming pleasure, and a flowing sense of unity between woman and nature. Lastly, in their very magnitude, Amy's birth pangs catalyze in her an oceanic feeling, which points to her flourishing sense—however illusory—of her own limitlessness (101). The radical ambivalence of water imagery reaches a peak in Amy's depiction of her newborn baby as "drowned-looking" (102). As Amy fears for the life of her newborn, her feelings sink toward

"the ocean bottom" immediately after she has enjoyed the elation associated with mountain peaks. She experiences a state of nadir before reaching her zenith: an all-pervading sense of finitude thus replaces the previous impression of infinity.

One Foot in Eden is scattered with images evoking the fragility of life, relentlessly pointing to the essential transience of all things. The flood that finally erases the valley is certainly the most striking image of impermanence in the novel, as well as in *Raising the Dead*, but there are echoes of the wider picture to be found at every level of the text. For instance, as Billy observes the pool of blood—what is left of Holland after he disposes of his body—he realizes that most of the trace has already partly vanished: "The ground stained dark where Holland had laid but the *dust* had already drank up his blood. Another few minutes and you wouldn't be able to tell a man's life had *spilled* out there" (131, emphasis added). As Holland's blood has been "swallowed," such vampire-like representations of nature, which are prone to erase man and the memory of him "in a few minutes," foreshadow the future disappearance of the whole community.

While life's end is often represented as a *spilling*, which conjointly suggests an *emptying* that evokes violent deaths, the turning point—the "tumble" (107)—between life and death takes the form of a *slipping*. The story that lies at the core of *One Foot in Eden*, as the rising water uproots the dead and carries the living away, is encapsulated in the poetical shift from *spill* to *slip*. While Rash's writing often features "slick rocks" ("Compass Creek" 17), many of his characters, "not trusting even the ground beneath them" (35), "[risk] a slip in the river" (33, 34). The recurrence of the verb *slip*—"slipping on a slick rock" (43), "slipping free" (46), "slipping off in the dark" (47)—always contains an impending threat: that of losing one's balance and becoming prey to the irresistible power of waters. This is how Billy's crossing of the river with his horse, Sam, and Holland's corpse is portrayed: "The water ran slow, the stones under our *feet* green and slick. I took my time, tucking my *feet* in

white pockets of sand amongst the rocks . . . . Halfway across Sam's legs splayed out in front of him. He near went *tumbling* and kicking into the whitewater downstream, taking me and Holland with him, but he found his balance. We got the rest of the way without *slipping* and sloshed out of the river unto Carolina Power land" (132, emphasis added). As they cross the river, the balance of man and animal is lost, and they both make great efforts to recover their endangered stability. Meanwhile, the clear and peaceful beauty of the river makes the probability of drowning and the precariousness of the characters' lives even more dramatic.

Similarly, as she walks in the snow toward Widow Glendower's cabin for advice and a remedy for Billy's sickness, Amy's tumble downhill portentously foreshadows her later fatal slipping in the river: "The land was *s*id*l*ing and snow *sl*icked the ground. I tried to hold my balance but soon enough I *sl*ipped and *sl*ided down and down…" (106, emphasis added). The prolonged alliteration in /s and l/ materializes Amy's plunge down the snowy hill.[4] As in the case of Billy's crossing of the river, Amy's tripping feet (and there are countless references to feet) echo the novel's title. Indeed, the phrase "one foot in Eden," which Rash borrowed from Orcadian poet Edwin Muir's own *One Foot in Eden*—the title of a poem and that of a collection—plunges the novel into a mythico-biblical dimension that suggests from the outset that the plot about to unfold will take the reader both into Appalachia and beyond. Furthermore, this title, which establishes the indefectible link between poetry and prose and the essential porosity of the genres, also contains a sense of promise, which is inseparable from the risk of a terrible loss. Indeed, as dramatically illustrated in the 2004 short story "Something Rich and Strange," placing one's feet in two different places is a precarious and dangerous posture. The young girl in the story "wants to wade into the middle [of the river] and place one foot in Georgia and one in South Carolina so she can tell her friends in Nebraska she has been in two states at the same time" (Rash 221). Quickly, the reckless young girl becomes the victim of the sly, deceptive waters of the river. Although they appear

"shallow and slow," there is a strong "current surging under the smooth surface" (221)—a current that is about to absorb her as "[s]he takes another step and the bottom is no longer there" (222). Consequently, to have "one foot in Eden" is by no means a comfortable position. The expression designates an unfinished movement, as if temporarily frozen, that may or may not lead to the achievement of a desirable condition.[5]

In *One Foot in Eden*, the symbolical dimension of such losses of balance is lastly highlighted by Isaac's "grip[ping] the railing" (172-73), as he is about to enter Mrs. Winchester's house and learn she is his grandmother and that Holland is his true father. This gesture can be interpreted as Isaac's ultimate endeavor to cling to the world he is familiar with and which, he senses, is about to vanish. As the truth slowly imposes itself upon him in the dense cloud of "kerosene fumes" from Mrs. Winchester's self-immolation (174), Isaac's eyes start watering as a response to the fire and the revelation, the effect of which reaches a peak in his sense of drowning; he states, "I felt like I was drowning" (174). Similarly, when Holland's corpse is "raised into the sky" (136) as Billy hoisted it up to hide it in a tree, the images Billy conjures are again those of a drowning: "I took Sam's rein and walked with him out into the stand of yellow poplar, Holland's body circling slow as it raised into the sky *like a body caught in a suckhole below a waterfall*. I looked at Holland dangling from that white oak and tried not to see it as a sign of my own future" (136, emphasis added). Like most evocations of mortality in the novel, the corpse's rise to heaven (or hell) paradoxically invokes water rather than air. Billy cannot prevent himself from contemplating drowning; this is foreboding in that his own end will be the result of drowning in the floodwaters that will carry him away, together with his love and his land, in a single vengeful current.

Water and Narrative

Throughout *One Foot in Eden*, there is an unbroken, almost aqueous, quality to the narrative itself. Indeed, though divided up into five clearly separated sections, the novel

manages to take the form of a single flow. While distinguishing between the five different perspectives that contribute to the development of the story, adding up streams and tributaries to the main current, the metaphoric dams that fragment the narrative also make it clear that the fluid continuity of the story is by no means disrupted by such delimitations. The five headings, which refer to the five character-narrators as archetypes, replacing proper names with characterizing social functions[6] that further open up the singularity of individualities into a universal dimension, are also reminiscent of the headstones that are evoked throughout the novel. But even headstones are doomed to be carried away by water, which demands that graves be displaced. Similarly, the current of the narrative actually seeps through the small-scale metaphoric dams that separate each section and announce the emergence of a new stream that will follow a current of its own with a voice of its own, while gradually augmenting a single river. *One Foot in Eden* thus achieves its unity and unique beauty through plurality and diversity. The essential porosity of the five narratives is due to the resurfacing of the same key elements and themes.

The narrative structure of *One Foot in Eden* echoes the fluidity of memory. Indeed, far from following a straight line, each of the five narratives take the form of meandering curves, as frequent returns to the past are likely to interrupt the advance of the present. This meandering pattern is all the more complex as the evocation of the same events, especially in the first three narratives, rests on a constantly reshuffled version of chronological time. The story is consequently told in the form of continuous shifts through time, as the past of each character-narrator colors his or her own perceptions of the present. In most cases, the past takes the form of harrowing existential questions that densify the present. Such intrusions of the past into the present create momentary disruptions in the narrative, but they also constantly remind the reader of how the past informs the present. Images of the future—the dam / "damn" project,[7] the planned flooding of the region—foreshadow the dramatic blurring

of both time and place, making the need to remember what is about to be "erased" all the more necessary and difficult. Memories of his thwarted career as a football player, of his war wound, and of the consequences on his life choices keep resurfacing and interfering throughout the Sheriff's murder investigation, and his monologue significantly concludes with a memory of his own baptism in the river. While the omnipresence of water thematizes the permeability of time, this final image reconciles the Sheriff's conflicting perception of himself and the world around him with the acceptance that the near future, fated to take the form of an all-erasing immersion, will be but a prelude to the ultimate disappearance of all things.

A constant element of the narrative—in the past, present, and future—water consistently contributes to the novel's sense of time, and it provides much of the pacing and tension in the narrative. Indeed, the rising level of water, which threatens to take everything along with it, generates an increasing sense of urgency that peaks in the novel's fourth section, which is narrated by Isaac: "'That water's not waiting for anyone.' I looked toward the river and knew the truth of what he said. The tobacco was already underwater, and the land I stood on would soon be. I was in a race with the water to see who would get to the cabbage first" (168). As the water inexorably rises, the flood, which, up to Isaac's section, had been only a distant threat, increasingly becomes a reality and, as a result, quickens the pace of the narrative. While water contributes to the novel's pacing, it does not simply operate as a narrative function; it also plays a major poetical role in the narrative. Water conveys one of Rash's favorite metaphors of time, which often takes the form of a pool of water: "I drove out of the valley, the sun *sinking* into the trees. By the time I got on the blacktop, twilight had *turned* the strange color it always does in August, a pink *tinged* with green and silver. That color had always made it seem like time had somehow *leaked* out of the world, past and present *blending* together. My mind *skimmed* across time like a water spider *crossing* a pool"

(19; emphasis added). This passage is scattered with verb forms pointing out two apparently conflicting movements: the horizontality (*skimmed*, *crossing*) and verticality (*sinking*) of water and of time are indeed educed conjointly, conjuring at the same time images of surfaces and images of depths. Through these water-related images, the evocation of time as a chronological sequence of events—hence a flat, linear surface—becomes indissociable from its depiction as a profundity, the cradle of memories having become impervious to clear temporal distinctions. Hence the multiple images of elements merging and becoming indistinct: *turned, tinged, leaked, blending*. The gerund forms show this blurring process at work. In the last pages of the Sheriff's monologue, the merging of time and water recurs as memories surface with renewed intensity: "I dreamed of water deep as time" (51). In *Raising the Dead*, the poem "Deep Water" similarly interlaces categories (time and place) within a memory of water: "Soon that squared pool of water / flickers as if a mirror, / surfaces memory of when / this deep water was a sky" (14). While the lake operates as the mirror reflection of a past remembrance, the future (*soon*) merges with the past (*when, was*), and water and sky appear to be reversible.

Water thus generates the overall sensation that categories are blurred, as in a dream. Time in Rash's writing is inextricable from place. Water allows the poetical synthesis of place and time. As the Sheriff depicts "the sun sinking into the trees" (19), the temporal evocation of the end of the day cannot be dissociated from the simultaneous sense of place; the central form *sinking* indicates the leaking of one category into another, while the overall blending is further emphasized by the intertwined alliteration in /s/ and assonance in /i/. The "liquid quality" of language, which Bachelard defines as "a flow in its overall effect, water in its consonants" (14), is thus realized.

The combined motifs of sleeping and forgetting repeat, with some variation, the same liquid sense of blurring that allows a momentary escape from the real world. By

contrast, the moment of waking, which is also described through water imagery, marks the return of blunt, bare reality. "Then it all came rushing on me like a dam broke open" (142), says Billy after indulging in a few hours of willed forgetfulness. It is quite striking, of course, that the undeniable truth that imposes itself upon him (in this case, his own responsibility as a murderer) should be evoked through the image of a broken dam that carries all things away. The portentous significance of his truth makes all other things weightless. The same kind of violent image is likely to be associated with the sudden surfacing of memories: "Then another memory tore into me" (197). In Isaac's case, the return of the repressed—deeply buried allusions to his likeness to his birth father Holland—similarly takes the form of a breach, triggering a general sense of flooding. While sleep, whether literal or figurative, allows a transitory blurring between what is and is not, waking brings back the return of reality, as a kind of vengeance. Water, in the various forms it is likely to take (the peaceful splattering of rain or the violent breaking of a dam), thus contributes to representing multiple and conflicting states of being.

Conflicted emotions are likewise prone to be evoked in terms of water. As the Sheriff remembers his own father as a young man, the distance between father and son is ominously evoked through the image of a lake: "Though we sat five feet apart, it seemed a lake had spread out between us, but it was something wider and harder to get across" (38). A few pages later, as the uninterrupted flow of his reflections and remembrances runs on, the Sheriff defines solitude as man's essential condition: "But we lived in the here and now. You tried to find something to fill that absence. Maybe a marriage could cure that yearning, though mine hadn't. Drink did it for many a man besides Williams" (49). While Hank Williams and rain compose the two-voice soundtrack of existential melancholy, solitude is evoked as a void that demands to be filled, however precariously and by whatever substance, for man to have a chance to cope with living.

Following this scene, Alexander contemplates the naturalist William Bartram's ominous idea of the mountains as an ocean: "*The mountainous wilderness appearing undulated as the great ocean after a tempest*" (51). While eliciting a reversed image of Creation, the "*dry* land" returning to its initial condition as "waters" (*Genesis* 1:9), Bartram's words evoke the deliquescence of all elements. Moreover, the way these words dissolve into the Sheriff's thoughts is suggestive of how various histories and narratives eventually comingle and how the same images proliferate in a constant recycling of ideas in Rash's writing. For instance, the poem entitled "Bartram Leaves Jocassee" also revolves around Bartram's prophetic imagining of "the lake's coming" (*ATB* 61) and, with subtle variations, quotes the same words in italics. In "Calenture," the image of "Appalachian / hills unfolding in waves" (*WK* 28) can be interpreted as a leitmotiv of Rash's imagination. While the fluid and flowing quality of memory is thus pointed out, what is also suggested is the way water literally irrigates remembrance: "water gives beauty to all shadows, it gives new life to all memories" (Bachelard 66).

In *One Foot in Eden* the images of memory sustained by water are multiple: water incorporates individual memories as well as the traumatic memory of a whole community. It also artfully keeps the collective memory of earlier texts and writers alive. The unheralded emergence of other writers' words or privileged figures in Rash's writing, together with the fluid recurrence of the same or similar images within his own work,[8] seems to partake of a general vision of literature as made of a single, uninterrupted outflow, whose energy and perpetuity are fostered by individual streams.

At its own small scale, the structure of the novel can be considered as echoing the broader way literature develops, in the form of separate threads that eventually weave into a single text.[9] As some critics or interviewers have noted, *One Foot in Eden* belongs to the southern subgenre of flood literature that includes novels such as William Faulkner's *The*

Wild Palms, Robert Penn Warren's *Flood*, Madison Jones's *A Buried Land* and, more recently, William Gay's *Provinces of Night*.[10] Undercurrents of intertextuality can be found throughout *One Foot in Eden*, further highlighting the essential fluidity of literary themes and images. Faulknerian echoes are numerous. For example, the buzzards attracted by the decaying body of Billy's plow horse Sam are evocative of the buzzards that circle in the sky above Addie Bundren's coffin in *As I Lay Dying*. The tension of Amy's forbidden, yet growing desire, the fulfillment of which soon becomes inexorable, is reminiscent of Dewey Dell's elliptical narration of "the first time me and Lafe picked on down the row" (26). Also, in *Raising the Dead*, Rash's poem "The Request," in which sons "gave their word / to honor [a mother's] dying words" (50), can be interpreted as a much-condensed version of *As I Lay Dying*. Finally, the minute description of the uninterrupted heat and drought in *One Foot in Eden*, together with the tension and need for action they generate, may be regarded as a tribute to Faulkner's "Dry September." In this way images and homages keep circulating in Rash's writing. While Rash gracefully acknowledges his peers and predecessors, he also rejuvenates familiar figures by engulfing them in the fluid current of his own creation.

It is from water that some of the most evocative poetic figures of *One Foot in Eden* and *Raising the Dead* emerge. Rash's use of water imagery and symbolism provide the textual ground in which his most beautiful and intricate flowers take root. The boundless diversity of its uses place water at the heart of Rash's poetics. From rivers, currents, and lakes, rain and snow, drought, floods, and deluge come the undercurrents of a writing that is often characterized by its rich complexity, as similar images are prone to elicit both dread and desire. Forever reminding the reader that life is flux and that one cannot step twice in the same river,[11] the symbolism of water in Rash's writing is multifaceted and often contradictory, both "rich and strange." While the "universal liquid" is an essential element of the landscape Rash calls his own, water offers multiple occasions for the here and now to

merge with the far beyond. In both *Raising the Dead* and *One Foot in Eden*, Rash raises his voice both as poet and novelist, and water can be considered his first matter, the primary color in his stylistic toolbox. As Bachelard reminds us, "But the region we call home is less expanse than matter; it is granite or soil, wind or dryness, water or light. It is in it that we materialize our reveries, through it that our dream seizes upon its true substance. From it we solicit our fundamental color" (8). For Rash, water is the very stuff of which dreams are made.[12]

Notes

1. Bachelard, *Water*, 6.

2. In the "Notes" concluding *Raising the Dead*, Rash provides the reader with precious elements of clarification: "In the early 1970s, despite fervent opposition by the valley's inhabitants, Duke Power Company built a dam to create Jocassee Reservoir. Both the living and the dead were evicted, for hundreds of graves were dug up and their contents reburied in cemeteries outside the valley. The reservoir reached full water capacity in 1974. In Cherokee *Jocassee* means 'place of the lost'" (*Raising* 75).

3. Rash, "In Dismal Gorge," 19.

4. While she slips on her way up, Amy finds proper balance as she walks down, once things are settled: "The snow had hardened up and made a crunching sound every time I laid my foot down, but it wasn't slippery and I made my way down the river without much bother. The rest of the way home was trifling easy for the sun was out bright by then" (111). Once again, symbolically, the recovery of balance marks the disappearance of a temporary menace, and the character's return to a precarious form of equilibrium.

5. Thomas Ærvold Bjerre interprets the title of the novel as follows: "This is perhaps what the title connotes: one foot in a mythic agrarian Eden and one foot in harsh reality" (235).

6. The characters-narrators are, indeed, respectively identified as follows: "The High Sheriff," "The Wife," "The Husband," "The Son," and "The Deputy." The actual names of the characters appear almost accidentally in the flow of the narrative.

7. Rash plays cunningly with homophony through one of his secondary characters, Roy, who thus voices the community's collective response to their common fate: "They'll do what they *damn* well please. Just ask them farmers that lived down there where Santee-Cooper Reservoir is" (135, emphasis mine).

8. For more information on Rash's recycling of his own material, see Wilhelm, "Introduction," 1-32.

9. It may be useful to remember that the word "text" comes from the Latin *textus*, which means "style or texture of a work." It literally designates a "thing woven," from past participle stem of *texere*, i. e. "to weave, to join, fit together, braid, interweave, construct, fabricate, build."

10. Some of these works probably inspired Rash. For more on genre and literary influences in the novel, see Bjerre and Vernon.

11. The actual quote from Heraclitus reads as follows: "In the same river we both step and do not step, we are and are not" (Kaufmann 20).

12. See Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "We are such stuff / As dreams are made of; / and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep," (IV, 1).

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