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On Contagious Disease, Economy, and Ecology in Marie Redonnet's *Splendid Hôtel*

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Abstract

Marie Redonnet's 1986 *Splendid Hôtel* tells the story of a crumbling inn and its nameless, obsessive innkeeper. The latter's efforts at maintaining the hotel are futile, however: all of her attempts are undone as she struggles to handle reckless guests, manage intrusive vermin and destructive weather, and, overall, keep the building habitable and hospitable. The following article analyzes this understudied novel by focusing on the notions of economy and ecology with respect to both space —namely the decrepit eponymous hotel— and body, most notably the narrator's. Both "economy" and "ecology" are concepts derived from the Greek *oikos*, or "house," and both are paradoxically distinct and blurred in the book. I argue that disease relates economy and ecology in Redonnet's text, indeed makes them interdependent, and through these derivations of *oikos*, I examine *Splendid Hôtel*'s reflections on contagion, its aftereffects, and our powerlessness when faced with it. My reading, in which the threshold between the inside and outside of the guest house becomes a metaphor for the interdependency between the inside and outside of the body, opens onto more general considerations of the liminal spatiality of economy and ecology. The lenses used here are Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of *becoming* as well as Cheryll Glotfelty's work on literature and environment studies and the wider theoretical frame of ecocriticism. Ultimately, the lines of thought structuring this article include what it means to become our environment, what (fear of) contagion does to body and mind, what a non-genealogical, "ecological" filiation might look like, and what insight *Splendid Hôtel* can offer on our current era's condition. Redonnet's novel and its close reading are exceptionally timely in our contemporary moment of, at minimum, dual pandemics. As I posit in this article, this literary text can function as theory to help us understand and act upon the crises that surround us.

Keywords: ecocriticism, contagion, economy, ecology, environmental humanities

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On Contagious Disease, Economy, and Ecology in Marie Redonnet's *Splendid Hôtel*

My interest in notions of inside and outside crystallized during the pandemic —but which one? I travelled to Australia in December 2019 for the Australian Society for French Studies Conference. On my second day in Sydney, struggling to breathe in the smoke as I looked on at a blazing red sky, I bought an N95 mask in a pharmacy. I wore it outside —protection against the air filled with fire as systems of life and infrastructure burned. That same day I was thankful to step into a safe, closed space, governed by its own rules of circulated air and cushioned seats: the train to Parramatta, where the University of New England, one of the conference's hosts, is located. I remember taking a deep breath inside the compartment along with the other riders. Solidarity. A sense of coming together, huddling inside, close to one another, hiding from the ecological disaster of the outside world. At the end of my trip ten days later, I distinctly remember reaching, rather uncomfortably, across my luggage to throw the mask out, completely oblivious to what would soon become our global reality. Thousands of miles away and three months later, I sewed my first cloth mask from a pair of old socks, longing for the one that I had thrown out, worth its weight in gold by then. This new mask, layered with another, would become what I wore inside, where the air might as well have been filled with fire at a molecular level. Months later once more, as I lay at the edge of a bed unable to move or do more than shallow inhale and exhale in deep pain, Covid-19 having wreaked havoc on every aspect of my bodily system, I longed for the N95 mask once more. Hadn't that mask been a warning? I remember more and more, now, that one of its ear loops got tangled in my hand as I insisted on throwing it out, as I cast it to its fate in a landfill after a short stint at the bottom of a plastic-lined trash bin. Didn't that mean something? Wasn't all of this death avoidable? And the fires? Those deaths too? Hadn't there been warnings beforehand?

Illness, contagion, and quarantine are the constitutive elements of contemporary writer Marie Redonnet's 1986 *Splendid Hôtel*, her first published novel and the first of a trilogy, with *Forever Valley* and *Rose Mélie Rose* completing the group of intimately linked texts. Ironically not very splendid, the eponymous inn has few redeeming qualities. Built on the edge of a wetland on unstable, shaky ground, the hotel plays host to a variety of guests: rats and mosquitos, infections and disease, aging and groaning sisters, and troublesome, inattentive clients, dragging mud with every step, clogging toilets with every new morning. With such a party, each of whose members is a nuisance in his or her own right, the hotel is clearly decrepit, namely because there are more "guests" contributing to its decay than there are people working toward its upkeep. In fact, the algorithm involving clients and personnel pits many against one, the novel's narrator, the "I" of the text. Having inherited the Splendid from her late grandmother, the nameless narrator, the youngest of three sisters —the other two are Ada and Adel— is obsessed with the maintenance of the building. The battle is continuous and cyclic, however: with every accomplishment comes a greater setback, a greater horde of vermin or absentminded guests creeping in.

The hotel, situated in a marshy region restricting its area, necessarily raises questions concerning its economy: not necessarily that of goods or services, but of the possible number and combination of events that can occur within the finite space whose finite resources are delineated by the confines of the Splendid. One can define this economy as an exchange of events or even of characters in —most importantly— a closed system: the hotel. Its constant infestations also raise concerns vis-à-vis ecology, that is, its environmental surroundings and their interaction with the increasingly decrepit building. All in all, *Splendid Hôtel* addresses the delimitation of space, the operative function of the notions of inside and outside, and the harmony, or more specifically the lack thereof, of nature and human-made construction. And although Redonnet's novel —indeed like the entirety of her oeuvre from her first publication, a collection of poetry titled *Le mort & Cie* (1985), to her most recent novel, *Trio pour un monde égaré* (2018)— offers much theoretical richness, not a great deal of scholarly commentary has been written on *Splendid Hôtel*.

1 Literature Review

Nonetheless, some researchers have studied the novel, particularly following Jordan Stump's translation of the trilogy in 1994. Stump's own 1995 article considers a continuity among the novels of the trilogy, as well as tensions within the texts themselves. "Opposition is expressed in *Splendid Hôtel* by coexisting images of expansion and obstruction" (Stump, 1995, p. 107), he states, and indeed this article will also examine the novel's themes of growth and restriction and the oscillation between, or *coexistence* of, the two —namely with respect to the confines of the hotel and what lies beyond them. Further study of Redonnet's work has been published, namely by exploring how it relates to texts of other contemporary French writers such as Annie Ernaux and Marie Darrieussecq (Chossat, 2002; Duffy, 2009). Taking a different tack, Jeanine Alesch (2004, p. 59) addresses *Forever Valley*, and "read[s] the novel against Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993)", Jean Duffy (2009, p. 904) analyzes the "relationship between fantasy and liminality" in Redonnet's trilogy, whereas Elizabeth A. Mazza-Anthony (1996, p. 492) argues for a blurring of genre and medium, what she calls a "writ[ing] 'across boundaries'" in both *Splendid Hotêl* and Redonnet's play *Seaside* (1992). What these particular studies show, which will become clear in this article as well, is how in-betweenness is at the heart of *Splendid Hôtel*. I, too, will focus on this text's recurrent motifs concerning blurred thresholds, but I will emphasize the physical ones, be they of the hotel with the exterior world or of the body with what is beyond the threshold of the skin, rather than discursive ones regarding sex, gender, or the trilogy's female characters. I more specifically argue that the novel and the hotel itself bring into focus the indistinct separations within its economy and ecology through vectors of disease and non-filial lineage.

2 Definitions

I would thus like to consider the role of disease and genealogy in *Splendid Hôtel* in order to question the representation of economy and, ulti-

mately, ecology in the text, that is, the interactions and exchanges of the interior, closed system —the hotel— with the outside world —the open space and swamp around it. Though it may seem obvious that there should exist a relation between economy and ecology, the hotel goes so far as to problematize the limits of these spaces, these systems, even leading to a misrecognition of the two.[1] By means of the increasingly undefined hotel-swamp contrast, I will address how illness challenges the relation of the body to what is both inside and outside its physical epidermal barrier, in addition to how blame is attributed or distributed in disease, and how these considerations can help us understand and act upon our present-day ecological crisis. I will analyze the interdependence of economy and ecology, concepts that are both derived from the Greek *oikos*, "house," and the liminal spaces that are created between inside and outside that take place in the text by means of contagion, on the one hand, and filiation, on the other. I will begin treating the notion of economy by concentrating on disease, contagion, and blame. While building on the idea of liminality, I will then introduce the concept of ecology, and juxtapose it to that of economy, to encapsulate the novel's central concern of indistinct thresholds in general and, specifically, the overlap or even confusion between economy and ecology —epitomized by the narrator herself.

I use the word "ecology," here, to mean the systems of natural life existing beyond the threshold of the hotel. But the distinction between the outside, "natural" world, what we might also term the "environment," and the hotel's human-made inside, or the "built environment," is not so clear —and becomes less clear as the novel progresses. This growing indistinction is the nature of ecology itself, as Cheryll Glotfelty (2012, p. 614) explains:

> the science of ecology examines the interrelationships in sys-

1 Although this extends beyond the limits of this article, in a similar context, though obviously on a different scale, one could take a look at Timothy Morton and his *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013), which describes kinds of phenomena and pollution that cross ecological limits —and geographical and political frontiers too. The term "hyperobject" was first used by Morton in his *The Ecological Thought* (2010). Bruno Latour has spoken of "hybrids," what he also names "quasi-objects," that is, states of being that call into question the Nature/Culture divide. See his *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes, Essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (2006) for more.

> tems. . . . The very term environment implies a separation from the subject. This term suggests a binary divide between humans and nature. I don't think that is the best way to conceptualize the universe. I think the model of ecology where everything interacts always is the model that makes sense. I like having the "eco" to imply a systems approach, and I still prefer the term ecocriticism today.

This quote is taken from an interview with Glotfelty as she describes the birth of *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), an anthology that she edited along with Harold Fromm that cemented "ecocriticism" as a field of study. As Glotfelty (2012, p. 608) further clarifies:

> When I was at Cornell in the 1980s, it was an exciting center of developing contemporary literary theory, and I became interested in combining literary studies with environmental engagement. I started looking for scholars who were doing what I wanted to do: bringing literary-critical approaches or text-centered analysis to the study of landscape or place in a work.

Certainly, much has changed since William Rueckert's first use of the term "ecocriticism" in 1978 (Glotfelty, 2012, p. 608), the growing interest in and urgency of environmental studies over the last four decades, the marriage of environmental concerns with literature, and *The Ecocriticism Reader*'s establishment of the discipline of ecocriticism. The field is wide, its methodologies varied, and its motives diverse, with the "eco" and "criticism" of "ecocriticism" focusing on different facets of our world: ecology, economy, ecocide, literary critique, and the criticism of environmental policy among other domains. Ecological discussions have gone from burgeoning to critical, increasingly dynamic and polemic. If emergent ecocriticism already alerted us to an environmental emergency in the 80s and 90s, today, in the age of —at the very least— dual pandemics, it is dire.

I focus, in what follows, not only on the architecture that exists between

economy and ecology, but also on how a literary text sheds a vital light on the interdependency between humans and their environment. *Splendid Hôtel* calls on humans to better cohabitate with their surroundings —and uncovers what happens if they choose not to. In its representation of dysfunction and decay, the book lays bare the need for sustainable interventions and alternative paradigms of existence, hoped-for reconfigurations in our current era as we battle interposed virulent pandemics —ecological, viral, and racial to name but a few. Redonnet's novel, though notably published a decade before *The Ecocriticism Reader*, already converses with this much larger frame and highlights its place as a prime interlocutor in ecocritical modes of thinking. *Splendid Hôtel* resists a simple reading; instead, though a detailed examination of its movements and major ideas, we can observe a poetic call to action. As we will see, calling into question the threshold between inside and outside, and thus conjugating notions of economy and ecology, permits us to think heterogenous spaces, to bring attention to the limits of the body and the relationship of those limits to the outside world —especially within the context of disease. It also encourages us to reconsider the interdependency of humans and non-human organisms, of the human-made and the organic.

3 Systems of Interdependence

3.1 Life Forms and Forms of *Récit*

Michel Serres, reflecting on the nature of writing, storytelling, and archiving memory —and which forms of life get to do it— asks:

> [A]u bilan, qui écrit? Réponse: les vivants sans exception, sur les choses et entre eux, les choses du monde les unes sur les autres, les planètes sombres, les étoiles scintillantes et les galaxies lumineuses . . . .Si l'histoire commence avec l'écriture, alors toutes les sciences entrent, avec le monde, dans une histoire nouvelle et sans oubli.
>
> (Serres, 2016, p. 18)

Composing history and stories —the two coupled in the French "histoire" and, more specifically, in the play of the uppercase (history) versus lowercase (story) "H/h"— must take into account all life forms, making room for them and voicing their concerns if they are not readily legible. As I appeal for here, reading and analyzing should initiate the same course of action. Close readings of literary texts reveal eerie parallels between fiction and real life. It is through literary analysis that literature becomes both a theoretical model and a call to praxis. Texts concerned with climate collapse and readings that articulate the anxieties of the human and non-human allow us to not only understand, through distance and abstraction, but also to act upon our contemporary crises.

Splendid Hôtel, to all appearances a monologue originating from the narrator, known only as "I" in the text, is in fact a novel composed of various layers. Initially, the narration functions as a justification of the day-to-day tasks performed in the inn, that is, a record of quotidian chores and why they must be done. Second, the novel also chronicles the legacy of the hotel, where inheritance equates to taking care of family members. "C'est mère qui l'a entretenue, maintenant c'est moi. J'ai hérité du Splendid Hôtel" (Redonnet, 1986, p. 10), states the narrator, the "la" of her statement actually referring to Ada and her poor health, and the juxtaposition of the two sentences thus expressing the need to "maintain" both her sister and the hotel. Third, the text is a documentation of disease, or, precisely, of the fluctuation of sickness. Cycling through the inhabitants of the Splendid, disease is represented in various ways in *Splendid Hôtel*, with Ada being the veritable voice, embodiment even, of illness in the text. She has bruises and poor blood circulation, swollen eyes, an asthmatic cough, and rheumatism, to name just a few of her indispositions. And yet, at a few singular moments in the text, Ada is the near picture of health. Ada's health, and then Adel's, seem to fluctuate in function of that of the hotel: "Le Splendid Hôtel n'a pas dit son dernier mot. Mes sœurs rajeunissent. Elles redeviennent coquettes" (Redonnet, 1986, p. 51), notices the narrator.

3.2 Circularities

This fleeting revival in the health of both the hotel and the sisters points to a cycle of events. Time moves linearly forward, yet the events occurring in the hotel fluctuate from bad to good to bad again, as though they were following a secondary, cyclical temporality, best illustrated in the conclusion of the text. The frigid night described at the end of the novel cycles back to its very beginning: "Et le Splendide-Hôtel fut bâti dans le chaos de glaces et de nuit du pôle," reads the epigraph, quoting Rimbaud's "Après le Déluge".[2] The story at this moment joins, both structurally and thematically, its beginning: the construction of the Splendid. Indeed, this recounted circularity in the events, in the tasks, in the various and wavering illnesses of the sisters in *Splendid Hôtel* underscores the fact that the text is based on an economy of exchange —namely of sickness— within the confines of the hotel. As Jeannette Gaudet (1999, p. 142) states, evoking Ada and Adel: "The sisterly relationship, like the narrative structure of the whole novel, feeds on continual change which, paradoxically, is always the same", an observation that equally recalls the logic of Franz Kafka's *The Burrow* (1931), summarized in the last (extant) phrase of the short story: "But all remained unchanged" (Kafka, 1995, p. 359).[3] This, not so paradoxically, is precisely an economy of exchange: change occurring without end within the confines of a system, with the overall result of the system and its contents remaining unchanged. In other words, the inhabitants of the hotel —be they guests or Ada and Adel— are constantly exchanging diseases, repeatedly changing state from healthy to unwell within the finitude of the hotel, and due to the continuity of this circularity, all always appear the same and appear to remain unchanged: Ada and Adel are sick (whatever

2 In this final scene, the hotel is covered in ice, and the lone narrator looks out onto the marsh (Redonnet, 1986, pp. 102–113).

3 Indeed, the themes of these two texts are acutely linked. The fear of intrusion, of destruction, is just as present in the mind of the mole-like creature of *The Burrow* as it is in the thoughts of the keeper of *Splendid Hôtel*. The narrators of both *Splendid Hôtel* and *The Burrow* are constantly under attack, needing to surmount various problems and overcome obstacles throughout their respective texts. The entrance to the burrow, like that of the Splendid, too marks a seemingly starkly defined threshold demarcating the distinction between the inside, the burrow, and the outside, the upper world. Moreover, in *The Burrow*, like in the Splendid, change within the closed system is possible, and in fact always occurring within the space of the Castle Keep labyrinth. In Kafka's text, new tunnels are built and small fry are constantly flooding in (Kafka, 1995, p. 327); in *Splendid Hôtel*, one group of insects or guests is continuously being replaced by another.

illness they may have), the Splendid is battling an infestation (whatever intruder it may be), the Splendid is in dire need of repair (no matter what particular part of the building may need repairing).

Although Ada's health does fluctuate in this circular economy, it is poor more often than not, thus begging the question: from where do the illnesses of the seemingly closed economy emerge? Disease can generally either be transmitted from one being to another, or it can originate from within the one who is unwell, this being an autoimmune condition where the cells of the body recognize their own as a foreign pathogen. And, in fact, representations of both internal and external maladies are found within *Splendid Hôtel*. The former, for instance, is exemplified when the narrator states: "Ça vient peut-être de l'intérieur, comme le reste" (Redonnet, 1986, p. 15), hypothesizing that Ada's swollen eye is not caused by a mosquito bite, but rather by an ailment from the inside. Other internal illnesses seem to be generated by the interior of the hotel itself: "Pour elle [Adel] c'est la chambre qui est responsable de sa maladie" (Redonnet, 1986, p. 64), as though the very rooms of the building were attacking its inhabitants.

3.3 Autoimmunity and External Pathogens: Diseases of the Inside and Outside

External diseases are illustrated elsewhere in the text, as in an episode where a guest, the hotel's general contractor, is bitten by a rat —an element external to the inn— resulting in infections contracted by both Ada and Adel.[4] Gaudet identifies this double transmission of illness as well: "Ada's weakened constitution is unable to fight off contagion that comes from outside herself. All her previous afflictions came from within" (Redonnet, 1986, p. 142), she writes, underscoring how sickness is most destructive when it comes from outside the hotel's economy. Though Ada is frequently ill from within —both the hotel and self— her overall health does manage to stabilize in these "internal"

4 Coincidentally rats bring us to the very beginning of Deleuze and Guattari's "Devenir-intense, devenir-animal, devenir-imperceptible. . ." chapter of *Mille plateaux*, which starts with a description of a *devenir-rat* in Daniel Mann's 1972 film *Willard*.

cases. And yet she is unable to recover from the rat incident, that is, following external contamination, contagion coming from outside the confines of the hotel. The internal economy of the system, defined by a circulation of internal disease appears, then, to be infiltrated by its surrounding ecology in the case of external illness, exemplifying the kind of in-betweenness embodied by Deleuze and Guattari's *becoming*: "Un devenir est toujours au milieu, on ne peut le prendre qu'au milieu. Un devenir n'est ni un ni deux, ni rapport des deux, mais entre-deux, frontière ou ligne de fuite, de chute, perpendiculaire aux deux" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980, p. 360). We begin to see how the hotel finds itself on the threshold of economy and ecology; it encapsulates the middle, the in-between, whereby contagion leads to this crossing over and muddling of the border between inside and outside.

As Deleuze and Guattari underline, "la contagion, l'épidémie met en jeu des termes tout à fait hétérogènes: par exemple un homme, un animal et une bactérie, un virus, une molécule, un micro-organisme" (1980, p. 295). Disease is a heterogeneous operation, a relation with the other, whether this other be an entirely *other* being —a contagious individual, for instance, passing along an infection— or oneself, such as in an autoimmune reaction by which the body recognizes itself as other. Disease also exposes the extent to which the self is insecure in relation to the outside world. A microbe need not ruin the integrity of a body to enter it. It can infiltrate imperceptibly, invisibly penetrating the permeable skin, transferring itself from the outside to the inside, disorganizing the interior of the body, provoking it to take action against the foreign pathogen. In other words, if we have seen how the hotel defines a space in which economic transactions —the exchange of disease— take place, we can now understand that the aim of contagion, of an external pathogen, is not only to break into the body from outside it, but also to call into question the very threshold that is presumed to separate that body as intact entity.

In *Splendid Hôtel*, disease, then, points to the porousness of the body to the outside world, even to the seeming "outside" or "other" living within us in the case of an autoimmune disorder, and, more specifical-

ly, to the Splendid as less of a closed system than previously thought. The role of blame with respect to contagion in the Splendid also sheds light on the liminality of inside and outside. A concept which oftentimes functions in relation to infectious disease, blame —the desire (whether scientific or divine) to attribute fault to someone or something in order to explain the origin of unfortunate sickness— in Redonnet's novel can also be understood as a metaphor for disease. Though there is clearly a qualitative difference between the circulation of blame and the circulation of contagion, blame, like disease, in the Splendid follows a logic of transmission in terms of its transference of accountability, of responsibility.[5] In the rat incident, the external cause of the ailment is the animal —the rat— according to the contractor. The rat's supposed culpability, however, is displaced by Adel onto the construction overseer himself when Ada falls ill, a shift that is further supported by the narrator after the death of her sisters. "Les rats avaient toujours été inoffensifs. D'ailleurs, ce n'est pas la faute des rats, c'est la faute des hommes du chantier avec toutes les ordures qu'ils ont laissées pourrir dans le campement" (Redonnet, 1986, p. 112), she affirms, blaming not the rats, but the men and their mess. Here, human animals are to blame for their discordant existence with their non-human animal and otherwise organic and inorganic surroundings. It is as though the *hommes du chantier* act as foreign pathogens, infecting both the hotel *and* the humans linked to it even more so than the germs. The narrator thus removes the blame from the animals, and attributes it, rather, to the contractor and his team. Blame consequently circulates from party to party, highlighting the bounds and restrictions of the hotel and precisely the problematization of their limits, engendering a lack of focus, even an indistinction between the economy of the hotel and its surrounding ecological environment: it is thus unclear where these boundaries begin and end. Where the hotel's limits produce bodies that are susceptible to pathogens *and* diseased bodies "infect" the hotel, blame, once again like disease, too crosses the frontier from the interior site of sickness to the outside and vice versa —from the external lieu of contamination to the inside— circulating among the inhabitants of the hotel and the

5 It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the ethical or political considerations of responsibility, responsibility with specific regard to the animal, or the notion of consciousness or recognition with regard to responsibility. For more on this see, for instance, Jacques Derrida's *L'animal que donc je suis* (2006).

ecological beings (rats and construction workers) entering and exiting the economic system and space.

Even more obviously encapsulating the fact that blame cannot be contained within the Splendid's economy are the repeated moments in the novel highlighting the deceased grandmother's fault —be it of having built the hotel too close to the swamp, or of having chosen the wrong wood or paint for the interior of the building— which underline a kind of original sin and, by extension, original blame.[6] "C'est la faute à grand-mère" (Redonnet, 1986, p. 3) rings out on nearly every page of the text: blame, here, is displaced onto the grandmother —a someone, or something, fundamental yet *external* to the economy of the Splendid. Thus, if it would seem that in a finite, confined space there is a restricted number of events that can take place, that only so many can get sick, and that by extension there are only so many to whom blame can be ascribed or onto whom blame can be displaced, here the foundational blame for the Splendid's many problems in fact stems from beyond its closed economy. Blame thus exceeds the economy of the system, hinting at a remainder.

3.4 Uncanny Mathematics: Oddities and Remainders

An incursion of inside across a frontier to outside can thus be better understood through this notion of remainder —be it an addition or an absence, a lack— with respect to economy. The remainders, of blame as of contagion, that fail to add up in the novel point to the not-so-clear border between the finite inside of the Splendid and the greater outside. Indeed, one cannot affirm that everything in *Splendid Hôtel* adds up, or that everything lines up within the confines of the hotel. Oftentimes there is an odd one out, seen in the attribution of blame, for instance. Other times, there are subtle misalignments, dissonant repetitions in the text, with regard, for example, to identity: "Ada fait toujours le même rêve. Elle rêve qu'elle n'est pas Ada, mais Adel" (Redonnet, 1986, p. 23).

6 "Personne n'avait jamais construit un hôtel en bordure du marais" (Redonnet, 1986, p. 9), states the narrator, highlighting the hotel's proximity to the marsh.

Certainly, the similarity of the two names —Adel is sometimes referred to as Ada and vice versa— also hints at the likeness of the two sisters, and indeed, they seem almost to exchange identities. This consequently highlights not only a fracturing of individual identity, but also a congruence, even porosity of name and person, as though Adel were just a multiple of Ada, or Ada simply a version of Adel. And yet, "Ada et Adel, nées et mortes au Splendid Hôtel" (Redonnet, 1986, p. 114), read the plaques on the sisters' gravestones when they die, underlining the simultaneous singularity of each sister by identifying each in her own right. This points to yet another remainder in *Splendid Hôtel*: the sisters nearly overlap to form one single being in the text, but also always leave a slight remnant breaching the overlap —like the example above where they *are* correctly identified separately as Ada and Adel— that permits Ada/Adel to be identified independently from Adel/Ada.

Moreover, the sisters are distinct from the narrator. Although they begin and end their lives, their life cycle, in the Splendid, Ada and Adel both spend their youth traveling beyond the boundaries of the hotel, gaining experiences, evolving as individuals. Before permanently moving into the Splendid, their bodies are in continual contact with the outside world, thus incurring changes, once again suggesting that the body is not a closed economy. The leaky restrictiveness of the body's economy and its beyond, as well as the narrator's difference vis-à-vis her sisters, are also seen in the former's language. Indeed Redonnet, expanding on the narration of her trilogy in a 1994 interview with Stump published with the translation of *Forever Valley*, explains that

> [e]ach book adheres to a rigorous structure, at the same time mathematical, architectural, and musical, which transforms itself from book to book: the elements multiply, the combinatorial system grows richer, space and thus mobility become more important, the story grows more complex.
>
> (Redonnet, 1995, p. 111)

There is consequently a conscious effort on Redonnet's behalf to introduce greater scope and complexity within the progression of her trilo-

gy. *Splendid Hôtel* is the first entry of the triad, and, reflecting Redonnet's strategic narratological development of the trilogy, more confined, bare-bones, in its language, setting, and description of character. Stump (1995, p. 106), for instance, also notices this style by underlining the "polyvalent nature of Redonnet's infinitely simple writing", while Katharine Gingrass-Conley (1993, p. 51) remarks on her "short, descriptive sentences in the present tense". The linguistic simplicity in both the narrator's syntax and semantics, the nearly infantile quality of her speech and vocabulary, stems from the fact that her language is restricted spatially —the narrator having never left the hotel.[7] Her language has always been used in an isolated context and has thus never been exposed to the outside. And yet, she inevitably picks up snippets of phrases enunciated by the guests, adding, as a result, a certain mobility to her mode of communication, a certain element from without, beyond language's exteriorization of and projection from the human. The narrator's language is consequently not only a product of the Splendid but equally parallels the functioning of the hotel. The Splendid —defined by a combinatorial, mathematical system based on exchange and substitution due to its confines— is secluded and delimited, made finite by the swamp. And yet, motion within the space, and *through* the space —embodied by the very notion of a hotel— is not restricted: comings and goings occur daily, disease and contagion multiply ceaselessly in the hotel, and transference between spaces, thus highlighting their porosity, is foundational to the text.

4 Liminal Spaces

4.1 Environmental Porosity: The Osmotic Flow of Economy and Ecology

Every question addressed in this article thus far has sought to underline a liminality pointing to a perviousness by means of which the economic, pathogenic exchanges within the hotel, among its guests, and be-

7 "Je me sens différente de mes sœurs, sans doute parce que je n'ai jamais quitté le Splendid" (Redonnet, 1986, p. 41), she affirms.

tween its interior and its surrounds, comes to be understood in terms of ecology. Like the body, physically delimited by its skin from the outside world, but never out of contact with it, the hotel, although physically delimited by the swamp and seemingly entirely closed off from it and the external world, is in a continual, contingent touching with its environment. The threshold that is skin and wood, for the body and hotel, respectively, is not a clearly defined frontier. Rather, it manifests as an osmosis, a diffusion; elements of the outside world —be it through the animal life of the swamp, the weather, or the pathogens constantly invading the hotel— obscure the threshold between the building proper and the marshy lands surrounding it. Similarly, although attempts at communication and transportation between the Splendid and that which is external to it fail, as exemplified by the abandoned project to build a bridge that would make the hotel more easily accessible, there is an exchange with the outside through the comings and goings of the guests and the vermin. The hotel is thus in a constant state of oscillation between the inside and the outside, between economy and ecology, exemplifying what someone with a mathematical inclination might call *clopen*, that is, an object simultaneously closed and open.[8]

Why are these questions of transmission, transfer, and threshold, then, important? It is difficult, if not impossible, to bring into focus blurred frontiers, a project in and of itself unnecessary, as it is precisely the unclearly defined, or clearly undefined, quality of the threshold that makes it of interest. Thresholds and their confusion, their overlap, effectively enable the examining of limits, or the lack thereof. What is serious illness other than an oscillating state, a hazy threshold between life and death? And, if we are to think the interior and exterior, where do the limits of the inside end, and where do the beginnings of an outside emerge? How does a building, a human-made construction, live in harmony with its environment? In other words, where and when does one space or self become different or other?

The aim of the foregoing analysis has been to demonstrate how any con-

8 A *clopen* set is a set that is open *and* closed, that is, both the set and its complement are open (a set is closed if its complement is open). Thus I am not necessarily using "clopen" in a rigorous mathematical sense, but rather as a fitting term that captures the open-closed, inside-outside state of the Splendid.

sideration of the economy that functions in *Splendid Hôtel*, and in Splendid Hôtel, must deal with the fact that such an economy is conjugated in association with an ecology. Both economy and ecology derive from the Greek *oikos* "house," where one, economy, etymologically carries the sense of the management of the household, of the inside, *oikonomia* (economy), and the other, ecology, studies the circulation of substances, of organisms, and their relation to their environment. The hotel is thus at the threshold of *oikos*, of economy and ecology, at the threshold of the finite events produced in the finitude of the space of the hotel and the mobility through the space —that is, how the hotel interacts with its ecological exterior, with the "guests" from the outside world, from microbe to animal to human. For all its seeming isolation, the Splendid cannot escape seeping out of its own boundaries. And perhaps this is most accurately and acutely captured by the narrator's description of the cemetery adjacent to the marsh: "La tombe de grand-mère s'est complètement affaissée, comme je le craignais. Quant aux autres tombes, dans l'état où elles sont, il est impossible de les distinguer les unes des autres. Le cimetière était plein d'eau. Il fait comme partie du marais depuis que le marais gagne" (Redonnet, 1986, p. 48). The hotel, like the graveyard, *fait comme partie du marais depuis que le marais gagne*. The boundaries of both these spaces are permeable, pervious, leading to a transmission of substances from the marsh to the hotel and vice versa, a lack of focus therefore between the limits separating the economy of the Splendid from the ecology of the wetland surrounding it.

As we have seen above, economy and ecology —and their overlap as the result of the invasion of one into the other— necessarily raise questions of frontiers, asking us by extension to consider the implications that such a growing indistinction has for filiation, identity, subjectivity, and disease. How do considerations of economy merging into ecology then affect genealogy and its conceptualization? As mentioned above, there is a parallel in *Splendid Hôtel* between the narrator's inheritance of the Splendid and the nursing of Ada (and Adel), thus already a parallel between inheritance and disease. The original transferal of the hotel, from grandmother to granddaughter, is based on filiation, a perverted filiation perhaps, as it skips the underrepresented mother, but a bloodline none-

theless. More importantly, we may ask where the establishment will go from there: once there is a halt in lineage, will the hotel be inherited by the swamp and the life, the animals and plants, living there? When, as Deleuze & Guattari (1980, p. 295) state, "[n]ous opposons l'épidémie à la filiation, la contagion à l'hérédité", they are calling for genealogy to be redefined, and it seems to be exactly this reconfiguration that *Splendid Hôtel* underlines with its incursion of ecology into economy. This consideration is, in fact, once again intimately linked to Deleuze & Guattari's notion of *becoming*, identified as being of an order other than descent: "Le devenir est toujours d'un autre ordre que celui de la filiation" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980, p. 291). Similarly, in Redonnet's text, by way of the infected hotel itself, there is, in addition to a genealogy defined by filiation (for example from grandmother to granddaughter), a more generalized transmission that functions by means of contamination and heterogeneity, of inside meeting outside, of the threshold of the hotel lacking focus with respect to the beyond-threshold. The hotel can thus be seen as being "passed down" to the marsh, perhaps entirely swallowed up by the swamp, or even becoming the wetland after the death of the narrator.

4.2 Identity: The Poetics and Praxis of Becoming

Considerations of threshold are just as essential for subjectivity, for the definition of "I" and the forging of self. In fact, as state Deleuze & Guattari (1980, p. 305), "le moi n'est qu'un seuil, une porte, un devenir entre deux multiplicités". The notion of threshold thus puts into perspective the self's relation —be it physical, mental, ethical— to the other. It underlines considerations of where the "I" ends and where the other begins, hence dramatizing the very question of how the "I" defines itself. The "I" cannot solely be determined by what is inside the skin, and yet the "I" cannot be physically exterior to itself, in a constant flux, then, between its interior economy and external, surrounding ecology like the Splendid itself. Once again underlining the hotel-body parallel —and thus the permeability of the systems, of the economies, of both body and hotel— the Splendid seems to be a near extension, that is, a

prosthesis, of the narrator's body since she was not present at *its* birth, its construction at the time of her grandmother, nor will she be present, we can speculate, at the time of its demise, its becoming entirely one with the swamp.

Consequently, it is not solely the hotel that is en route to becoming one with the marsh: the narrator too exhibits such a *becoming*. Indeed, if the ecology of which the hotel is a part penetrates its internal economy —ecology, in the words of Deleuze & Guattari, becoming economy— and this very economy reciprocally seeps into, becomes, ecology, then its resulting heterogeneity of states is best encapsulated by the narrator herself. As mentioned above and to come full circle with my discussion of disease-contagion-blame, the "I" of the text feels different from her sisters, an inkling she attributes to having never left the place in which she was born. When, at the beginning of the text, guests become ill on account of a microbe in the water, the narrator's difference is manifested as immunity. "Je suis acclimatée au marais. Le microbe n'a pas réussi à me rendre malade" (Redonnet, 1986, p. 22), she affirms, referencing a kind of adaptive immune system in which the body remembers a foreign pathogen and no longer sees it as a threat. Having become immune by means of an overexposure to the outside elements and microbes —though paradoxically having never left the inside— the narrator is thus unable to become ill. And immunity entirely relates to blame. There is an association, in fact, to be made between immunity and guiltlessness. The one who is immune is, by definition, exempt from illness. Unable to become ill, the immune body is also unable to actively, knowingly, pass on the illness, unable to be a link, a stage, in the cycle of transmission: one who is immune is exempt from blame.

Although the narrator of *Splendid Hôtel* is oftentimes underappreciated, she is never blamed, and, specifically, never blamed for making anyone ill. Fault and accusation are, indeed, always projected onto someone exterior to the narrator. It is precisely, then, this *becoming-immune* that permits a seamlessness between the narrator and the world immediately outside her body, and, ultimately, what enables her to escape the death that takes her sisters. The narrator thus embodies threshold itself; she

is the epitome of the in-between, of the liminality between inside and outside. Though she has never left the hotel, she is the one most in tune with what is beyond it. Though she remains firmly within the literal confines of the Splendid, she oscillates on the border between the hotel and its environment, living in the delicate symmetry of inside and outside. She is also the sole individual in the novel who takes her responsibilities seriously. She is not to be blamed because she is responsible —conscientious, that is, not accountable. If the Splendid shows us, even teaches, us anything, it is that there is no escape from one's surrounding environment and that —if we are to emulate the narrator— in order to survive, we must recognize the inevitable necessity of concord between the *oikos* of the inside and that of the outside. In other words, there is no choice as to whether or not we must cohabitate with our ecological surroundings. The choice lies in how we do it.

5 Conclusion: Crises, Choice, and Change

"In what ways and to what effect is the environmental crisis seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture?" Glotfelty (1996, p. xix) asks in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Such concerns clearly seep into and structure Redonnet's novel. *Splendid Hôtel* uncovers deep and insightful truths concerning how we interact with our environment, the perils that this puts us in if we continue on our current track, and how a *becoming* (more like our environment) might help in the wake of virulent pandemics. This text does not quite serve as a retroactive mirror, that is, an example from the past that can illuminate our future, or even a wise warning from a bygone time as to how to behave in the present, but rather constitutes an urgent request for cohabitation, even a *becoming-environment*. In this article, I have underscored the knowledge that circulates in this literary narrative, thus positing that *Splendid Hôtel* can and should play a role in our conception and perception of ecological catastrophe. Here, fiction has emphasized a concern for our "natural" environment and has put to the fore the troubled relationship, playing out in real time, between human animals and non-human animals, among humans, plants, bodies of water, objects, and the

built environment. The cohabitation of these entities in times of crisis especially is put into focus in Redonnet's novel, which is extraordinarily relevant to our current moment —and all moments to come if change is not enacted.

I firmly believe that the Covid-19 pandemic is helping us understand what it means to live with our unfolding ecological pandemic. Each is the inverse of the other: one, virulent from the outside, the other, virulent from the inside. However, the two have changed our connection to both the inside and outside world and our relationship to matter and beings —from a particulate, molecular level to all-encompassing proportions, captured by the very word "pandemic," that is, "all of the people," from the Greek *pan*, "all," and *dēmos*, "people." Both pandemics have challenged the limits of space, threshold, and safety. Inside, the air might be contaminated with a virus. Outside, the air is filled with fire, the water caked with spilled oil, and the ground suffused with plastic. Peril surrounds us. Yet as a remedy, or at least response, to an accumulation, oversaturation of harrowing news built on models of speed and easy consumption, literature can help. *Splendid Hôtel* echoes the epoch of Covid-19 still carving itself into our timeline two years on. The narrator is truly quarantined in her hotel, acutely aware of her surroundings, her limited supplies, and the potential dangers that human animals and non-human animals alike can bring into the guest house. Her existence is defined by cyclic, accelerating hardships in an inn that seems to be standing, unbalanced, on a precipice. Glotfelty summarizes this simultaneously ongoing and further looming disaster, a sentiment that is keenly felt by many in the field of ecocriticism, as follows:

> Ultimately, not to be a pessimist, but giant disaster can sometimes be the ashes out of which new forms arise. It has happened many times on smaller scales. Maybe that is where we are heading.
>
> (Glotfelty, 2012, p. 614)

Splendid Hôtel allows up to think about our current, still developing crisis —with distance. Indeed, Redonnet's book, set in an undefined

place and time, serves as a translator of our current era, of the human footprint that has imprinted destruction onto our environment.

In the final analysis, problematized thresholds permit us to think heterogeneity, to redefine genealogies, question the limits of the body, especially within the context of disease, and reconsider the interdependency of systems and spaces, of humans and non-human organisms. The narrator, a being immune to the swamp *and* to the hotel, goes so far as to blur the human-animal divide, exemplifying, we return to Deleuze and Guattari, a *becoming-animal*, an in-between figure, a fluctuating middle line at the epitome of heterogeneity, of limitlessness to the outside world, of interdependency between the two *oikoi*. After all, there is no "outside world," but simply world, composed of the human and non-human, of plant, human animal, and non-human animal life. This human-animal coexistence brings to mind another *becoming* and another set of infiltrating organisms —ants this time as opposed to rats— via Henri Michaux. To conclude, I would like to consider the opening lines of his "Encore des changements." "À force de souffrir," recounts the poetic voice,

> je perdis les limites de mon corps et me démesurai irrésistiblement. Je fus toutes choses: des fourmis surtout, interminablement à la file, laborieuses et toutefois hésitantes. C'était un mouvement fou. Il me fallait toute mon attention. Je m'aperçus bientôt que non seulement j'étais les fourmis, mais aussi j'étais leur chemin.
>
> (Michaux, 1998, p. 479)

There is not only a literal *becoming-animal* described in the poem, but an intimate relation to the outside that is accentuated. *I soon noticed I was not only the ants, but also their path*. Perhaps, then, we should think of the "I" of *Splendid Hôtel* as a path linking the hotel to the swamp, bridging interior and exterior, a path at the intersection of —and entreating for solidarity among— economy, ecology, and the other.

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