

## On Eric Rohmer's *A Tale of Winter*

WHAT IN SHAKESPEARE'S *The Winter's Tale* suggests Eric Rohmer's *A Tale of Winter* (1992) in response to it? What, from the point of view of Rohmer's film *A Tale of Winter*, is Shakespeare's play *The Winter's Tale* about?

Here is one line of answer: Shakespeare's play is about "an art / which does mend nature—change it rather—but / The art itself is nature" (Act IV, sc. iv). Applied to film, writing in light and motion, these too-famous words take on an uncanny literalness. The causal connection between the world and film is like and unlike the connection between them in the other arts. Here is another line of answer, perhaps more thematic than formal or generic: The play is about the separation (or loss) and the reunion with (or finding of) Perdita (a daughter); together with the disappearance and resurrection of Hermione (a wife and mother). Rohmer's Félicie is shown as both mother and daughter, which none of the women in Shakespeare's play is. Now a Rohmer film is characteristically about how people find one another and about what constitutes a woman's quest for herself, or her resurrection or transfiguration. I think expressly of the four tales of the seasons (together with the film called both *Summer* and *The Green Ray*) (1986), of which the last, *A Tale of Autumn* (1998), was released last year.

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This chapter is a version of a paper presented at a symposium on the films of Eric Rohmer at the Annual Meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, October 1999. It provided the basis for the more extended treatment of *A Tale of Winter* in Chapter 23 of *Cities of Words*.

Here is a brief recital of some of their motifs, to be heard against a sense of certain of the obvious preoccupations of *The Winter's Tale*. All concern demands for, and of, specific places, particularly moving between two places; all are about measuring or marking time, or the lapse of time; and about nature or the normal or the trivial; about coincidence, loneliness or separation, chance, and choice; about impressions you cannot put a word to; and all contain a moment of insight that has transformative power, and some fantastic thing that simply and blankly *happens* (a trick of the setting sun, a sudden onset of wind through high trees, an encounter); and about transcendence entering the everyday. Pervasively they involve explicit discussions of religion, specifically of the difference between true and false religion, or between religion and magic.

I mean this to confirm William Rothman's sense of Rohmer as having a cinematic signature as powerful as Hitchcock's. It suggests Rohmer as a good site to test an idea I proposed to myself a long time ago and have not explicitly followed up very far, namely that for certain films the idea of an *oeuvre* is more pertinent than that of a *genre* in coming to terms with them—a different way of understanding how one work is conceived in the light of others.

But I want to go on here considering the light cast on a film by one of its self-declared sources in another medium, specifically in a Shakespearean romance. The most stunning connection—apart, I mean, from the fact that Rohmer's film actually depicts a scene from Shakespeare's play—is the concluding, miraculously achieved reunion of a man and a woman and of parents and a child, and the way in which belief in the credibility of that achievement, or acceptance of its inevitability, is something that each of the works declares and upon which they stake the powers of their respective arts. I have known superb and famous Shakespeareans who testify that the ending of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* just does not, as they put the matter, "work." How can one know whether the basis for this sense is a function of the performances they have seen? And I should add that the question is live for the film *A Tale of Winter*, where the matter of performance is held constant. Here there is the matter of what I sometimes call "the good encounter" (or the good viewing)—distinguishing the many times nothing much works in a work (of any art) from those times when, as it were, everything happens.

One good encounter is quite enough—if, as I wish to testify, this film can work—for me to insist that with masterpieces nothing should go unaccounted for, including, as Marian Keane particularly notes, the slip or lapse of the mistaken address, even though, or perhaps especially when, a Freudian explanation of some automatic kind seems irrelevant or impertinent.

The point of topological identity between the film and the play is the coincidence of two lines—one in Shakespeare's play: "Perdita is found" [in Act V]; and one in Rohmer's film: "I'm the girl no one can find" [early, in Nevers, as she tells the story of giving her lover, the father of her child, the incorrect address]. Other references or echoes gather in relation to this one, more or less obliquely. (1) In Rohmer's film, Elise (the five-year-old daughter) draws pictures of flowers and a princess and a clown, which I take as references to principal motifs of the pastoral Act IV in Bohemia, where Perdita becomes Queen of the annual sheep-shearing festival. (In Shakespeare's play, a five-year-old son, brother to Perdita, perishes in reaction to his father's outbreak of madness against his mother Hermione in Act I, and is unaccounted for in the rest of the play. Rohmer as it were resurrects both children.) (2) In the film, Félicie's pregnancy is emphasized by its association, as she tells her story, with her realization that she had given the incorrect address. Sandra Laugier stresses this point in her remarkable essay on Rohmer's film. Hermione's pregnancy is dwelt on as the opening fact of the play in my essay on Shakespeare's play (after the prologue, the first spoken phrase is "Nine changes of the watery moon"), associated with the theme of separation. (3) In both the film and the play there is a pointed, explicit discussion of the differences between magic and religion, which rather associates Loic (Félicie's intellectual boyfriend) with Paulina, as she is in Act V (the scene Rohmer excerpts within his film). (4) After the reunion, near the end of the film, Félicie prompts the father to recognize that the daughter looks like him (Leontes' question to his young son is "Art thou my calf? [Act 1, sc. 2], as he is trying to stave off madness). Rohmer's film serves as some reparation for this catastrophe by letting the father rejoice in the similarity, which he accepts at once. (5) Félicie works as a hairdresser in her more brutish boyfriend's beauty parlor in Paris. I note an analogy, not more than implicit, but steady, between sheep shearing and hair dressing: both are associated with festivals and with business. Also Félicie is *out of place* when she moves with the boyfriend to his new hair-dressing salon in Nevers, and returns with her daughter hurriedly to Paris.

All but one of this set of references (the exception is [4], the matter of resembling the father) come from the final two acts of Shakespeare's play; that is, not from the melodrama of jealousy and madness contained in or as the first three acts. You might take Félicie's reference to the madness of true love as a reference to that, essentially omitted, beginning—omitted but with a strand of it epitomized in a prologue Rohmer gives to his film (Shakespeare's play also has a prologue), a sequence of summer love, in which Félicie and her child's lost father are shown playing on the beach, eating a meal he has cooked, and explicitly shown having intercourse—a unique occurrence in the films of Rohmer I know—where,

breaking the silence of this opening sequence, the man says, in its closing shot, "You are taking a risk," evidently referring to the possibility of her becoming pregnant, and her response is, oddly, to laugh. If we take this prologue to make explicit the eros and fertility of the sheep-shearing festival, a modern epitome of the idyll of love, this would account for the fact, emphasized by both Rothman and Keane, that Rohmer's film does not seem to concern itself with the skepticism and death-dealing passions of Shakespeare's play, features of it I particularly emphasize in my essay on the play.

Is this informative? It might be, if one could formulate an informative account of Rohmer's interest in, in effect, moving from an epitome of the innocent happiness of Act IV to the mysteries of Act V, which is to say, from the pastoral to the romance of reunion and resurrection, without the skeptical, murderous preparation of Acts I through III.

Take the pastoral setting as an emblem of the everyday, figured as the natural (invoked by Félicie)—life within the turning of the seasons, in its dependence on the earth and the weather, on the powers of mutual amusement and sufficiency, some ancient dream of human happiness and equality—then Rohmer may be understood as posing the following question for his film: Is there some way to take this dream into modern life, as transfigured by a camera?—a way to make credible in what we know as everyday life the quality that the great poets in English articulate in their pastorals?—an immanent transfiguration of human possibility: a way to make it credible that what once required the setting of settled royalty and oracles, is now open to anyone in a populous city of passers-by, mutual now primarily in their being strangers to one another?

That there is such a possibility is glimpsed in Shakespeare's play at the moment when, in Act V, Florizel and the maiden (Perdita) he takes for a shepherdess learn that they have been followed by Florizel's father Polixenes, King of Bohemia, in their escape from Bohemia back to Sicily. It is the moment at which Leontes, King of Sicily, Perdita's father, demands of Florizel, "You are married?" Florizel replies: "We are not, sir, nor are we like to be: / . . . the odds for high and low's alike." That is, the chance for happiness is the same for princes and for poor shepherdesses, and requires the aids of happenstance and good will.

The achievement of this perception of the sameness of odds seems to produce a miracle in the world's responsiveness. As if what has been achieved is an ordinary (on film) that is not in contrast to its denial by skepticism, but is lived with an acceptance not born of resignation and disappointment. Félicie describes such a condition—in the car ride with Loic after their attending the performance of *The Winter's Tale*—as she says, "Not everyone lives with hope." Loic is stunned by her, understanding

(truly) what she says not as a sign of hopelessness but, on the contrary, as a sort of, let's say secular, Pascalian wager: this woman has placed her infinite stake in her life not on the theoretical rationality of God's existence, but on the reality of her own desire. She has, as she almost says, found herself. (This is expressed again in her saying to her mother, "There are no good or bad choices," meaning something like: they are mine, they make the sense my life makes. Try telling that to theorists of social choice.)

The Pascalian moment is won for Félicie in her fairly explicitly denying (in all but name) Descartes's call for the cogito, for the proof of one's existence through the force of claiming it, through the implication of thinking it. I am alluding to another moment in the exchange in the car after experiencing *The Winter's Tale*, namely Félicie's response to Loic's rehearsal of the great crux of the play, the one about the narrative of *The Winter's Tale* that everyone is bound at some stage to raise: Did Hermione come back to life, or had she not died? Félicie replies: "You don't get it. Faith brought her back to life." Now this can sound as if it merely begs the question: Loic is asking what that *means*—as if the play has contained no answer for him. Félicie evidently understands the words of the play to provide her with the articulation of an experience which is not only clear but is now a standard of clarity, as it were, for her life.

She describes her experience of prayer the day before, while she was, as it happens, in the church at Nevers, alone with her daughter who was preoccupied with a Nativity scene, a toy of the promise of resurrection. Félicie says it was not praying as she was taught to pray. Loic suggests: "It was a *meditation*"—and she immediately and gratefully agrees. She goes on, among other things, to describe her "excitement in the brain" (an ordinary experience, but this time "a hundred times stronger"), about which she reports: "I didn't think. I saw my thoughts." Now a meditation the mode of which is explicitly a denial of thinking, and the result of which is that a woman comes back to herself, is with herself (I am saying, finds herself), achieving a certainty of her existence that she had, she says, known only once before in her life—this is what I am calling a fair negation of Descartes's cogito. (She describes the experience in terms of "joy." I cannot but assume, working as Rohmer does where and when he does, that in this term, about such matters, Rohmer is here invoking the work of Jacques Lacan.)

You can say she is expressing something like a vision of human existence as an independence from the dictations of the world (of who she is and what it is rational for her to count on happening), expressible also by saying that it does not matter what the calculable odds are against her desire: *finding her desire* is already the answer. This negates Descartes's negation of my dependence on the world: thinking my existence secures

my existence by preserving me in the absence of the world; finding my desire exposes me to the world, but whether the world goes on to provide the satisfaction of my desire is a measure not of my existence but of the world's worth.

Formulation here is everything. But I run over the matter thus hurriedly in order to ask—hardly answering—the question I assume Rohmer's film asks of itself: What is film—or, what is the vision of the fact of film—that Rohmer's mode of narration discovers, the mode that allows such a vision as Félicie's to take its place, or to find itself, in everyday existence? Sometimes Rohmer discovers the possibility in the most classical of sources, in an angle of nature—for example, in a tree swaying and hissing in a sudden wind—something others may pass by but which the woman in Rohmer's film called *Summer* (or *The Green Ray*) is shaken by to the point of sobbing. Of course one might on any given viewing dismiss this, pass it, and her, by. But another one, another time, might not. If you do pass it by, then there is nothing much to speak of about such women, yet.

In *A Tale of Winter*—along with other of Rohmer's sorts of cinematic discovery, such as how to capture the interest in the minimal sense of an event in the world, the fact that in each instant, as Samuel Beckett puts the matter, something is taking its course (or in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: “Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical”)—Rohmer discovers the vision or interest in, let's say, a specialized or stylized sense of the *world* as passing by, namely in crowds of strangers passing, in their individual mortal paths, and oneself as a passer-by among others, each working out a stage of human fate. The vision, as I am calling it, is one in which it comes to us that no one of us need have been in precisely this time and place, coincidentally with the event or advent of precisely each of the others here and now; yet just this scene of concretion is an immortal fact for each of us, each having come from and each going to different concretions (there are no empty places in the Great Chain of Becoming), each some part of the event of each that passes. Emerson's transcendentalism speaks ahead to Rohmer's, from “Self-Reliance”: “Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events.” Some in my hearing have taken Emerson here to be speaking conservatively, as if not, and urging us not, to disturb events (even though he notes a few lines further on that this acceptance is incompatible with our becoming “cowards fleeing before a revolution”). Taking Emerson's words so reads “the place the divine Providence has found for you” as if it said roughly the same as “the place the society of your contemporaries has found for you,” a place of conformity rather than a place from which to turn to what it is yours to find.

Which, no doubt, is only to say that in Rohmer's work film has found one of its own ways, among the arts, of marking the intersection of contingency and necessity, of chance and logic. So an initial question in the case of Rohmer's discoveries of his medium is: How has he—for whom has he—found subjects (meaning persons and places and topics) that, on film, render the exploration of such ordinary questions of metaphysics, or such metaphysical questions of the ordinary, representable and of continuous interest?