# "Wanted: straight words" in Percival Everett's novel *Wounded*

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"Basically, all of my books come out of a desire to explore something about language and how language works, even though I write stories that deal with other things, maybe," Percival Everett said in an interview in 2005 (Julien and Tissut 218). *Wounded*, published that same year, is no exception, although it is often said to stand apart from the author's more openly metafictional earlier novels such as *Erasure* and *Glyph*. Indeed, if it opens up the wide spaces of Wyoming to the reader, this novel of the West first and foremost invites us to follow a reflexive trail, that of an exploration of "the ways and means of meaning" (Maniez and Tissut 13). A Western novel written in a realistic mode, *Wounded* offers a convincing, true-to-life portrait of a small Wyoming community confronted to a sudden explosion of violence borne out of homophobia and racism. Its hero and homodiegetic narrator, John Hunt, a widowed middle-aged black rancher well accepted by his white neighbors but who lives at a fair distance from town, is forced through various events to confront this outburst of intolerance. Tension slowly grows and the well-constructed plot keeps the reader's interest alive. However, in the midst of the relational entanglement John is caught into, it is his relationship to language which slowly seems to supersede all others, and the narration of dramatic past events by John, a University-bred cowboy and art collector, turns into a more intellectual and insistent exploration of the relationship between words and the world, on which the present article intends to focus.

Despite the obvious allusions of the title of this article to the story itself (the series of crimes in a western context and the theme of homosexuality ), "Wanted: straight words" is first intended literally to refer to the way straightforward language keeps failing all characters, who are constantly shown at a loss to express themselves. The greater part of the novel is made up of dialogues which stage desperate attempts at communication; we will thus follow the winding ways of linguistic exchanges that move forward through half-statements, euphemisms, ellipses, and forever hover around a receding topic. However, the novel also shows the limits of forthright expression, directness proving inadequate and reductive in the face of a manifold reality, and exposes its delusiveness as language appears fundamentally unstable. The second part of this study will thus lead us to understand the expression "Wanted: straight words" in its most common meaning, that of "wanted notices" whereby what is wanted is precisely what is not wanted, i.e. what is looked for in order to be suppressed, eradicated. *Wounded* can indeed be said to place a ban on linguistic straightness, and to favor the fertile zones of silence and indirection. Finally, we will focus on the programmatic incipit of the novel, which has the reader immediately experience and enjoy the deviousness of words or, to quote Everett in another book, "nouns and names [that] behave badly and play loose with meaning"[1]. In an obviously reversed logic, the "wanted notice" symbolically targets adherence to a code. By making the choice of linguistic misdemeanor, by foregrounding what Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand*

[1] The quote is from *Water Cure*, but it first appeared in "'Other Languages are All We Have' (an excerpt from work in progress)" (Julien and Tissut 205).

*Plateaus* call "lines of flight" (3)[2], Everett efficiently undermines all authoritative "order-words" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 79)[3] and the intolerance they serve.

By playing on the shift from *Wounded* to *Wanted* and by reminding us of the essential ambivalence of words – through the deceitfulness of the word *wanted* in wanted notices – the title of this paper tries to respond to Percival Everett's invitation to play with words on the loose, and acknowledges the fact that they will forever escape capture.

## 1. "Missing: straight words"

The narrator's description of life on the ranch teems with detailed descriptions which make use of a precise, discriminating and sometimes technical vocabulary. Language comes easy and straight when John Hunt evokes the reassuring routine of material life. However, his well-ordered everyday life with his Uncle Gus is put to the test by a series of crises: a female neighbor rancher, Morgan, seduces him out of the emotional withdrawal he has found refuge in since his wife's death; a succession of hate crimes (homophobic and racist) forces him to question his place in American society as a member of a would-be minority; a friend's gay son, David, comes to town and shatters John's certainties about his own sexual identity. John Hunt adopts a scenic mode to recount those unsettling events, his narrative – to the exception of a few discursive fragments – being mostly made up of dialogues which betray the way words can go missing when man is forced out of safe boundaries and familiar territory, as almost all characters are in the course of the book:

> "Where's your…" Gus stopped, "what do you say? Partner? Boyfriend?"
> "Boyfriend's good enough." (76)

The novel appears as an extended exploration of the winding ways of language in the face of challenging situations. Characters stumble on words or even go mute, or find their way out of such relational dead-ends by way of linguistic indirection, which thus proves the only possible – and paradoxical – way of confronting the disturbing facts of life.

Everyone in *Wounded* is, at one point or another, at a loss for words, even David of whom we yet learn that he is majoring in English (53). Examples of sentences pointing to conversational blanks are numberless:

> At the table we sat in a painful stew of silence. (143)
>
> We waded through some more silence. (205)
>
> Daniel took a breath [on the other end of the phone] and listened to my silence. (129)
>
> We sat stupidly silent on the phone. (176)

[2] "In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification." / "Dans un livre comme dans toute chose, il y a des lignes d'articulation ou de segmentarité, des strates, des territorialités ; mais aussi des lignes de fuite, des mouvement de déterritorialisation et de déstratification." (*Mille plateaux* 9-10)

[3] "Order-words do not concern commands only, but every act that is linked to statements by a 'social obligation.'" / "Les mots d'ordre ne renvoient donc pas seulement à des commandements, mais à tous les actes qui sont liés à des énoncés par une 'obligation sociale'." (*Mille Plateaux* 100)

And indeed, despite Gus's aphorism ("Who was that on the telling phone?" – 40), most phone calls prove abortive, and John is once left "look[ing] at the dead receiver." (22) More striking yet, in their sterile circularity, are the numerous formulations (whether by the characters themselves or the narrator) of the lack of words, where the very repetition of the word *say* paradoxically comes to underline silence:

> Howard froze. He didn't know what to say. I couldn't imagine what I would have said had I been him." (155)
>
> Howard didn't say anything. What could he say? […]
> "We'll talk soon," I lied. (159)
>
> I said nothing. I didn't know what to say. (194)

… or to give a longer example:

> "I don't know what to do about [David's crush on me]. Should I say something?"
> […]
> "I don't know what you should say, either," she said. (172)
> […]
> We stood there, awkwardly silent.
> […]
> "What am I supposed to say?"
> "You're not supposed to say anything." […]
> "[…] Now, I don't want to talk about this anymore. Is that all right?" (173)

At the climactic end of the novel, the syntactic imbalance of the narrator's sentence as he recalls his going mute in the midst of ultimate confusion comes to mime the way language unravels under the pressure of events: "I didn't know what to do next, what to say it, how to say it." (201) And beyond faulty articulation is sheer inarticulateness: screaming (62, 144), "bark[ing] out a laugh" (138) are the ultimate expressions of the characters' desperate loss of words, the very negation of speech[4]. However, when the narrator explains "I scooted back from the table, my chair making the [reproachful] sound I wanted" (144), inarticulateness proves a more controlled choice, almost a ploy. This points to the characters' main strategy in the face of unsettling events: linguistic avoidance.

Figurative and/or euphemistic language is an everyday reality, and Paul Grice (with his theory of the cooperative principle and the process of implicatures in conversation) or John Austin and John Searle (with their study of speech acts), among others, have shown that indirection is almost the norm of verbal interaction. And indeed, the following extract from the very beginning of the novel reminds us how automatic indirect expression has become:

> A white, late-seventies Ford dually kicked up dust as it approached. […] A skinny cowboy leaned an unshaven face out of the passenger-side window.
> "You John Hunt?" The man asked.
> I nodded.
> "Is Wallace here?"
> "It's five thirty in the morning, son." When the kid didn't say anything, I said "No, he's not here. […]." (8)

[4] Sylvie Bauer, in her article "'Nouns, Names, Verbs' in *The Water Cure* by Percival Everett, or, 'Can a Scream Be Articulate?'" mentions the following definition of the word *speech*: "Speech is articulated air." (Bauer 101)

If, in this scene, the visitor's competence in indirect-speech-act decoding obviously falls short of normal expectations, the characters' systematic use of indirect expression throughout the novel conversely exceeds what would be intuitively felt to be standard linguistic practice. Hardly a page goes by without an example of such linguistic avoidance through indirect expression, straightforward interaction coming to be explicitly marked as the odd situation out[5]. The characters' most natural way of relating to others is either through affectionate bashing (which is characteristic of John's relationship both with his uncle Gus and with his lover Morgan), euphemistic expression (of which a great number of examples, in particular litotes, can be found throughout the novel), or play on polysemy as a form of word displacement:

> "Did you feel anything when we kissed?"
> "What are you talking about?"
> "Did you feel anything" he asked again.
> "You were in bad shape," I said and realized I was repeating myself. "No I didn't feel anything. I felt your lips and I felt you shivering and I felt like you might die. Besides, you were out of it and didn't know what you were doing."
> "Does that make you feel better about it?" he asked.
> "It doesn't make me feel one way or another," I told him. (164)

Such indirection betrays the extent to which characters, and John Hunt first among them, feel endangered when it comes to human relations in general, and emotional involvement in particular. However, carried to what seems to amount to pathological extremes, such self-protective attitudes fuel misunderstandings and widen the gap between human beings, thus turning counter-productive, even destructive. The reader becomes the lucid external observer of this sometimes risky game of hide and seek. "I didn't know what to make of [Howard's] words," John confesses at one point, voicing something which seems a recurring fact throughout the novel as indirect speech acts run the risk of either remaining undecoded or being over-interpreted. John and his ex-wife, notably, appear to have been unable to break through the vicious circle of misunderstanding[6], and badly-handled communication might have contributed to the tragic end of Susie.

This might be why John, both as character and narrator, has the undying habit of reinterpreting utterances. He is for instance prone to elucidating euphemisms:

> "I called your brother," I said.
> "Thanks."
> "Don't thank me. I didn't make much of an impression on him. That's the fancy way of saying he's not coming to help you." (32-33)

> "I can't believe this [David's disappearing] is happening again," I said. […]
> To say that I couldn't believe the current set of circumstances was an understatement. (174-175)

He is likewise inclined to clarifying the true intent or implicit message behind such or such surface saying, i.e. to unveiling the mechanism of indirect speech acts:

> "Did I mention that [the horse]'s hard to catch?"
> "Not until now," I said. "He trailers okay, though." It was more a question than an observation. (22)

[5] As in "Gus had a way of cutting right to the chase." (71) Other examples may be found on pages 53, 78 or 206.

[6] Examples may be found on pages 82-84, 97 or 183.

> "You must come out here again," Daniel said. He used "must" the way the Arapaho used it; it wasn't a command.
> "What's going on?" I asked. "What's up this time? Another cow shot?" I laughed.
> "Yes."
> […]
> "I'm assuming this one looks a lot like the other one. […]"
> "No, you must see this one." This was a command. (109)

> "Do you want your scarf in the bag or out?" [Pamela] asked Howard.
> "Out," he said.
> I backed away, imagining that Howard's request was not merely a response to Pamela, but a command to me. (157)

> "I'm sorry all this happened," I said. It was an expression of dismay and not an apology. (159)

> "Did it make you feel weird?" It was not so much a question as a lashing out. (164)

Such metalinguistic comments pervade the text, gradually leading the reader to wonder if, under the guise of straightening referential meaning and clarifying verbal interaction, John Hunt's real interest might not be in language in and for itself. John's incessant explanatory interventions, as they lock him into an all-invasive reflexive relationship to words, thus distance him further from spontaneous relating, in both meanings of the word. Straightforwardness forever goes wanting.

And yet, if the risks and shortcomings of excessive verbal indirection come through from many dialogues, the latter also forcefully stage the intense expressivity of indirection. Straight words are definitely not what can be wished for, the novel on the contrary exalting the radiating power of the unsaid. In "For Play", a fake interview of Percival Everett staged by critic Judith Roof, famous journalist Terry Gross desperately tries to keep the conversation with the writer on sensible tracks; but she is irremediably led along nonsensical bypaths. "Let me get this straight," she repeats twice (Maniez et Tissut 174-175); but Percival Everett won't let her do so…

## 2. "Wanted: straight words"

The limits of forthright expression are suggested in the way straight wordings often turn repetitive and get caught in tautological sterility:

> "I'd better get back to my place before it falls down. I find I can't get things done unless I do them." (35)

> "It hasn't been this cold since the last time it was this cold." (107)

> We started up a slope, my horse following his. "Take your downhill foot out of the stirrup on the steep. That way, if something goes bad you'll fall to the closest ground and not under the horse." That made David tense up again.
> "I told you that because it's true and because you should never forget you're on a horse when you are, in fact, on a horse." (133)

Such repetitive formulas often go along with an effort to adopt an objective stance which leaves emotions at a comfortable distance: "'Why does my father hate me? He hates homosexuals. I'm a homosexual. It follows that he hates me. That's logic, right?'"

(70) Semantic repetition offers the greatest possible directness as it avoids dispersal through lexical variants. However, such wordings are obviously another form of avoidance, a way to reduce a complex and disturbing reality to a simple equation:

> "I don't want to go any farther [in the cave]," Susie said. […] "I'm scared."
> […]
> "I don't mean to be a baby," she said.
> […]
> "If it scares you, it scares you. That's pretty simple. There's absolutely nothing to apologize about." (26)
>
> "I've got cancer."
> […]
> "I'm sorry, Gus."
> "Why sorry? I'm an old man. Old men die." (187)
>
> "My heart was racing [as I walked toward the house where the rednecks were], but all this seemed correct. Sometimes some things were just simple, I thought. The people you expected to do the bad thing did the bad thing." (199)[7]

Assertive, straightforward wordings not only appear to be a negation of the ultimately ungraspable nature of experience, of the unutterable but, in their very process of denial, open up discourse on an abyssal unsaid, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> I told myself, and therefore it was no doubt true, that I was not much impressed by Wallace Castlebury's predicament. By my reckoning, killing another person made someone a bad man. I frankly didn't believe that Wallace was innocent. And the law, though it seldom worked as advertised, was going to do for him what it could […]. That simply was the way it was, I told myself and reminded myself that I simply did not care. (34)

This paragraph is an obvious exercise in self-deceit, as suggested by the manipulative use of the factive verb *I reminded myself* which presupposes the –in fact problematic– truth of the clausal complement, and the unspoken truth of the character has to be read between the lines, in the blanks of the text where it inexorably surfaces while remaining elusive. This passage, like so many others, illustrates what Laurent Jenny writes in *La parole singulière* : " No speech exists but is braided with a silence." (196 *my translation*[8])

Truth being manifold, it pulls speech in diverse directions, opens up breaches in utterances, as several aporetic lines make clear:

> "I was thinking that I'd be a little lost without you here," I said, which was true, but it wasn't what I was thinking.
>
> My words might have been sincere, but they weren't true. (157)
>
> "Can I go with you?" Sylvia asked.
> I shook my head. "You'll slow me down and I'll be worrying about you," I said. "I'm sorry to be so blunt."
> "I understand," she said.
> I was telling the truth, but not how she understood it. (196)

[7] Such simplistic equations systematically come to be contradicted by subsequent events. John's wife's tendency to experience fear, for instance, has a complex impact on the relationship between the two spouses and induces a half-repressed, half-avowed feeling of reticence in John, a situation which in turn probably accounts for Susie's decision to mount a dangerous horse, this episode causing her death.

[8] The French original reads: "Il n'est pas de parole qui ne soit tressée avec un silence."

To quote Dominique Rabaté in *Le Roman et le sens de la vie*: “Life cannot be conceived of in the unity of a predicate which simplifies its accidents.” (46, my translation[9]) Tellingly, the speech mannerism and therefore empty expression “I mean” punctuates dialogues without ever narrowing meaning. Straightforward expression cannot but be a delusion in the face of life’s essential elusiveness: “All my apologies never offered a why. I didn’t have any whys to offer.” (84) Everett writes:

> Any perception or conceit of cause is, anyway, mixed up with something anti-conceptual, something indefinite, however much we might like to put a finger to something, to blame something. There is some locus, some space, some absence between cause and what it affects and that is where all truth lies (and what a telling pair of words) […]. (« Other Languages Are All We Have » 207)

It should therefore come as no surprise that, in *Wounded*, the greatest eloquence is to be found in silence, or that the most successful examples of communication lie in non-verbal language: an *expression* on a face, a body movement, an attitude, something ungraspable and yet intuitively perceptible, which can be shared only beyond, or rather below articulate language[10].

Furthermore, *Wounded* alerts us to the delusion of straightforward discourse by reminding us, again and again, of the fundamentally unstable nature of language, of the arbitrary relationship between signifiers and signifieds, in short of this disconnection between words and the world which forever thwarts the production of transparent meaning. The point is well-documented in other Everett books and a few examples should suffice to illustrate the way the novel insistently draws our attention to the loosened ties between words and the reality they supposedly signify, through sentences that destabilize phrases or nouns we take for granted:

> “I heard the boy was gay,” the waitress said.
> “Well I don’t know anything about that,” Duncan said. “But it’s a damn shame any way you cut it. Bad choice of words.” (14)
>
> I gave the salad another toss. “Shadup and sidown,” I said. “But first, grab some silverware.”
> She opened the drawer. “Don’t listen to him, David,” she said. “This is not silver. I’m not sure what it is.” (125)
>
> “[…] there’s a salad in the icebox.” […]
> “Icebox? Who says icebox anymore?” (7)
>
> I pulled on my jacket, then went into my study and grabbed my rifle. We walked out through the snow to the truck. I took my fly rod from behind the seat and tossed it into the drifted snow in the bed. I then, for the first time in my life, put a rifle in my rifle rack. (186)
>
> The hot shower had cooled me off somewhat. (157)
>
> I cooked a couple of hot dogs, tossing a couple pieces on top of Zoe’s dry food. “I don’t know,” I said to her, “this might make you a cannibal, a dog eating a hot dog.” (40)

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[9] The French original reads: “La vie n’est pas pensable dans l’unité d’un prédicat simplifiant ses accidents.”

[10] Examples may be found on pages 46, 49, 89, 112, 129, 173… This capacity to understand others without a need for words is particularly characteristic of John Hunt and his uncle Gus. It somehow finds a parallel in the way the horse Felony, when ridden by John, seems to read his silent emotions, reacting – as though with a sixth sense – to any disturbing thought that crosses his mind.

The process of naming is constantly questioned, as is apparent in the following chain of remarks: "'We just made a tripod,' Gus said [after we amputated the baby female coyote]" (74), followed by "'Her name is Isosceles. Maybe Tripod. Maybe Nubby'" (82) and "'Her name is Emily'" (103). This final name choice, because it is made after Morgan's deceased mother, proves complicated for the narrator who will henceforth need to specify "Emily, the little coyote" (106), a clarifying apposition which is itself blurred by the fact that the coyote is more often than not referred to through a generic "the dogs" (which applies to the coyote and Zoe, John and Gus's "real" dog[11]). More casual allusions to problematic naming also occur: "[…] beyond that was the Red Desert, red in the middaylight, just like its name implied […]" (134 – the justification for the name appears shaky as the latter is only partially adequate, and therefore proves self-deflating), or "'I'm not going to mention how tacky it is that you ride a Morgan horse'" (35), where John, unable to resist the pun, teases his girlfriend Morgan, but in the process probably has us think further about the name's ambivalence as regards gender. As for John's friend Daniel *White* Buffalo, he is an Indian, i.e. a Redskin; but of course, where is the validity of the adjective *red* in this expression?

The novel also insistently calls into question the relationship between the fairly transparent word *son* and the relationship it supposedly signifies. *Son* is naturally used by the narrator as a friendly address for both Wallace and David for instance (two characters to whom he however relates very differently, which problematizes the figurative use of the name), but the name is questioned in its legitimacy when Howard uses it for his son David, from whom he has become alienated. David opposes an abrupt "'Don't *son* me'" to his father on page 143, a belated answer to Howard's purely exclamatory interrogative when he first rejoins David a few pages before: "'And is that my son?'" (137) A sentence as apparently innocuous as "'My friend's son is staying with me for a while'" (166 – John Hunt is talking about David) proves arresting: indeed, beyond the fact that the link that binds John and David has forever been blurred by the kiss they exchanged in the cave, each noun invites questioning: John Hunt does no longer recognize a friend in Howard, and as we have seen, David does not consider himself the son of his father, the filial bond having partly been transferred onto John himself, who elsewhere remarks: "I was called the godfather of his son, though there was never any official church business" (142), a remark that in itself prolongs the reflection on the instability of language. Indeed, this dense network around the word *son*, while justified by the diegetic centrality of the issue of filiation, is also an index of the novel's obsessive metalinguistic concern. The process climaxes towards the end of the novel when the narrator comments: "[Howard] had stumbled on a way to understand it all and a way to blame someone other than himself, *namely* his son." (195) As the sentence ironically reminds us through the play on words, "son" is indeed nothing but a name, an empty shell, a signifier disconnected from the complex reality it is supposed to be able to signify[12].

Words prove but floating signs, something that the presence of acronyms in the novel seems intended to underline. Such names rest on a double disconnection: not only is each component of the acronym, as a linguistic sign, in itself heterogeneous to the referent it designates, but the name behind each letter is often lost to the user of the

[11] As for instance in: "Gus made up small plates of moose meat for Zoe and the puppy [coyote]. The dogs finished their treat in a matter of seconds and looked up for more" (116), or "'The puppy's really gotten bigger,' David said. He kneeled down and stroked both dogs. The coyote was not nippy […]." (123)

[12] The use of "my friend's kid" on p.173 further complexifies the issue as John and Morgan have previously exchanged on the relative value of the word *kid* (129).

acronym. While the referent of an acronym is supposedly familiar to everyone, the acronym itself has grown into a doubly abstract sign. In the following extract, "[Clara Monday] was sitting in front of a little black and white television. The picture was very clear. She was watching CSPAN" (191), the juxtaposition of the last two sentences efficiently reminds us of the total opacity of the acronym. The BMW of the rednecks that wreak havoc in town no doubt has diegetic consistency; but in parallel, the name BMW seems to become a free-floating sign on the page. Is it a coincidence if two other acronyms are close versions: BLM (Bureau of Land Management) and BLT (Bacon Lettuce and Tomato Sandwich) which, it must be noted, lends Everett another occasion to remind us of the discontinuity between signs and their referents when John places an order at the diner as follows: "I'll have the BLT without the T" (53). Is it a coincidence if these acronyms often appear only a few pages apart (BLT (53) / BMW (61); BLM (126) / BMW (128)), one conjuring up the other and seemingly inviting the reader to bring together signs which have nothing in common – all the more so as they come from two different languages, i.e. two heterogeneous linguistic systems – , inviting him as well to pay more attention to the letters as such, mere letters indeed, disembodied signs? But to return to the BMW, granted of course that no one is really aware that BMW stands for *Bayern Motorische Werke*, could it be that Everett chose this make of car for the final *W* which recalls the inaugurating W of *Wounded*, the owners of the car inflicting some of the most severe wounds in the novel? Or is it simply because it is a German car, and thus works towards another network of associations as it is owned by neo-Nazis? Or could it be yet that this was the best make of car for a story of the *W*est? Especially a story that questions the American myth of the West? The other car owned by the rednecks is a Ford, but not just any Ford, a "Dually", a name which in the novel does not so much designate the two rear wheels on each side of the car as it seems to actualize the two-sidedness – or more – of names…

The sheer equivocal nature of signs, the gaps in language, the flaws in the system are obviously what opens up space for interpretation. It is because words escape the rigid corset of the linguistic functioning code that meaning expands. Denotation pales before rhizomatic connotation. The insult and threat "Red Nigger" which Daniel White Buffalo finds "[w]ritten in the snow, in red, in cow's blood," (111) is terribly efficient not only because of the macabre staging and the violently tangible dimension given to the words through their being written in blood, but also because of the use it makes of the implicit, because of the endless streak of associations it unleashes, the threat looming ever larger in the process[13]. In the present example, the power of the words is also inversely proportional to their material insubstantiality, the letters being bound to disappear as the snow will melt, yet another symbolic expression of the volatility of meaning. Meaning is all the more potent as it cannot be frozen.

Another passage which has to do with snow, signs on snow, confirms that the fascination that words can exert breeds on blanks and evanescence:

[13] Not only does the absence of a clear formulation of the threat intended against Daniel White Buffalo leave the exact nature of this threat open and thus sets imagination on the loose, but the phrase "Red Nigger", from an insult which manages to redouble the minority status of Indians (assimilated to the status of debased African Americans), also turns into a threat. In the context of the episode, the word Nigger may conjure up the image of individual lynchings (whereas the word Indian tends to conjure up the idea of the collective massacre of a population). Red, written in blood, inevitably invokes the insult "Bloody Nigger", the figurative adjective being however paradoxically reactivated in its literal meaning because the words are written in cow's blood.

> I walked through the quiet of the snow […]. The dogs stayed close. […] Zoe made two continuous tracks, punctuated by deep impressions of her feet. The [amputated] coyote left a similar pattern, but wherever she stopped, there was a place of undisturbed or barely disturbed snow under her left forepaw. I couldn't stop thinking about it. […] [T]hat gap, that space, that break in her track fascinated me because it was only there briefly and only while she was still there. Once she moved on, her rear foot stamped its impressions where her front one had been. (185)

The irregular, discontinuous line traced by the coyote seems to cast a spell on the narrator, who can project his own fantasies onto the gaps.

"Simply speaking, words are just words, sentences are just sentences, meaning is nearly everything and nothing is as it seems": quoting this passage from *Glyph,* Brigitte Félix comments: "After the first concession contained in 'nearly', the end of the sentence invalidates the pronouncements of the beginning. How can we trust words, then, if nothing – including words – is 'as it seems'?" (Felix 29) We cannot trust them indeed, except to carry us along uncertain, and therefore exciting paths: those of sign hunts bound nowhere known. The narrator, aptly named John Hunt, loves scrutinizing the sky, each cloud, each streak of light being both an expression of itself and a sign of something else: "The snowflakes were swirling, the cold front getting confused by the wall of heat offered by the Red Desert. I took this as a sign that the storm wouldn't amount to much." (65) But even natural signs can be misleading; the narrator continues: "Unfortunately, my taking it as a sign meant that we were in for a dumping, my guesses about weather were almost always misguided. […] I realized my life jacket was becoming inadequate for the weather, another indication that my perceived sign had been characteristically wrong." (65) However, despite the risk of faulty interpretations, how much more entrancing it is to try and read tomorrow's weather in the varied nuances of today's flippant sky, than to hear the flat, hackneyed announcements of the weather report: "Weather Wally had actually predicted heavy snow" (175) or "The weather had turned unseasonably warm, as Weather Wally liked to say" (160).

Pleasure is in the tentative interpretation of indirect signs. With language as with nature: pleasure is indeed in *scrabbling* (162) with signs, i.e. in groping with them. Straight words are certainly not what is wanted; or if so only, tellingly, in the twisted, distorted – yet paradoxically most common – meaning of the expression: that meaning whereby what is wanted is precisely what is sought in order better to be banned. This "wanted notice", a devious one since it targets the official linguistic system, is issued from the very outset of the novel, a programmatic beginning.

### 3. "Bad" words on the loose…

The novel opens as follows:

> By definition a cave must have an opening large enough to allow a human to enter. The cavity can be wind- or water-eroded. It can be miles and miles deep. But it must let a person enter. And that is what is scary about caves, that one can enter.

Although on a generic mode (<u>a</u> cave), the incipit points to what will become a central element of the diegesis: a nearby cave to which the narrator seems irresistibly drawn, from which his ex-wife once shied away in fearful panick (triggering off increasing distance between the spouses), in which he and Morgan made love for the first time, where he and David exchanged a kiss (and what more?), a cave which saved

David's life… The "meaning" of this cave keeps expanding for the narrator, and in his wake for the reader, who is further encouraged to add symbolical interpretations: the cave as a representation of the unknown or of the unconscious, the cave as an allusion to the female sexual organ. The ideal (intellectual?) reader will probably not forget either the numerous intertextual links conjured up by the word: Plato's cave, the Marabar caves in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, perhaps even Virginia Woolf and her "tunneling process"… Interpretation indeed proves exponential. Yet, as he opens his narrative, the narrator chooses to narrow down what makes the meaningful specificity of a cave. These lines are actually not unlike a definition, as intimated by the presence of this very word on the page.

However, under the guise of tightening up the meaning of the word, these lines clearly open a breach in signification: no dictionary definition of a cave foregrounds the idea here put forward by the narrator, who thus reminds us that the truest – but therefore shifty – meaning of a word lies in what it connotes for a specific person, or even what this person projects onto the signifier. The use of the adjective "scary", but also the multiplication of modals (with *can* used half-way between dynamic and deontic modality[14]) underline this subjective dimension, at odds with the very possibility of definition. Just like the cave itself, with its "twist[s] of passage" (26) and its maze-like "branches" (86), the meaning of the word is by essence meandering and multiple, and cannot be sounded to its furthermost recesses; twenty pages later, the narrator's remark "The cave was deep enough that I didn't know how deep it was" (26) echoes metatextually. It is no surprise that, on the occasion of one of his visits to the cave (pp. 41-42), John will try to apprehend the unknown space through a scientific perspective ("the drips that came from the mountain above and left infinitesimal amounts of calcium carbonate to make and lengthen the stalactites") and technical terms ("I was a trogloxene, a creature that lives outside the cave, but returns frequently"), and will scatter light sticks "every thirty yards or so and at every bend", a fairly regular and reassuring punctuation. But the place keeps eluding him, and us, and when Morgan exclaims upon her first visit there: "Wow, […] this really is a cave" (86), the exclamation hides an assertive naming act which paradoxically reminds us that the noun "cave" itself is but an unstable sign. Furthermore, it is one sign among others, as the shift from *cave* to *cavity* in the opening paragraph suggests. Significantly, at the end of the novel, the man who tells John where he will find David's body mentions "a hole in a big rock" (202) which, in the narrator's words, becomes "a depression in a big rock" (203). The place "opens <u>like</u> a cave, <u>but</u> [is] obviously the result of blasting." (203 *my emphasis*) So is this a cave? Who could tell?

Despite appearances, the explanation of a cave provided in the incipit is not a definition; and indeed, the phrase "by definition" creates a gap through the preposition "by", one of the meanings of which is related to the notion of distance. It is a disguised invitation for the reader, who at this moment stands at the threshold of the book, ready to enter it, to accept to get lost in it as he/she will have to branch along endless interpretative paths. In other words, it is an invitation to be on the side of "nouns and names [that] behave badly and play loose with meaning", to play truant with them…

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[14] The two instances of *must* express the enunciator's point of view. But more interestingly, in the two sentences "The cavity can be wind- or water-eroded. It can be miles and miles deep", *can*, which initially seems to refer to the properties of the grammatical subject of the verb (the cave), is also felt to express a form of permission granted by the enunciator, a tolerance granted. In this case, it is closer to a deontic *may*, and thus underlines intersubjectivity. Unless the enunciator is here concerned with probabilities, can then turning *epistemic*.

And this, he/she can do right away. The next paragraph indeed opens with these words. "My heeler's ears cocked. I was holding the left hind foot of my antsy mare. […]" (3) The title *Wounded* still ringing in their own ears, the reader is likely to make an association with the homonym *healer*[15], all the more so as the juxtaposition of *ears* prompts the necessary vocalic shift from *heeler* to *healer*. The paragraph ends with a similar sentence, "My dog's ears perked again", where the two changes in formulation not only contribute to a sense of linguistic fluctuation (already to be felt in the use of three different words in the span of two lines to refer to the same animal: mare/bay/horse), but draw our attention to the words themselves, and more particularly to the name *heeler*, the word *heel* having appeared half-way through the paragraph ("I was rasping smooth a notch near her heel"), as if to keep us on the alert.

Such displacement, from *heeler* to *healer*, would seem to intimate that consolation and cure are to be looked for at the very core of language[16]. To be more exact, in this narrative of physical and psychological violence that causes multiple wounds, and even death, the vital energy of words is here to act, symbolically, as a curative force. The title *Wounded*, which may be applied to various diegetic situations within the novel, calls for various interpretations at once, a point underlined by Anne-Laure Tissut's choice of a plural (*Blessés*) for the title of her French translation of the novel. As such, the very word *wounded* literally vibrates with plural meaning, seems to be endowed with a life of its own, which is already a way combat the negative, potentially lethal meaning that it conveys. As Deleuze and Guattari write at the end of *A Thousand Plateaus*:

> [The nomadic line, t]his streaming, spiraling, zigzagging, snaking, feverish line of variation liberates a power of life that human beings had rectified and organisms had confined, and which matter now expresses as the trait, flow, or impulse traversing it. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 499)[17]

## Conclusion

It is linguistic misde*mean*or, so to speak, words' erring ways which are valued in the novel. "Bad" words can be let on the run, while a symbolic ban is placed on would-be linguistic straightness. In any case, as Laurent Jenny writes: "I can never appropriate 'my' signs. […] They hollow out an unbridgeable distance between me and them. They are always 'ahead of me'." (20 *my translation*[18]) However, this choice of linguistic misdemeanor[19] is certainly no admission of powerlessness in the face of a crumbling system or model, but a positive act. In a context where those who do not fit in the

[15] See Claude Julien, Introduction to *Reading Percival Everett: European Perspectives*, Claude Julien et Anne-Laure Tissut (eds.), Presses Universitaires François Rabelais – Tours, 2007, p.20.

[16] And yet, within the novel, language also contributes to violence, and even in one case, probably causes death: Wallace kills himself after having been jailed on the sole performative evidence of utterances ("'They say I killed a guy'" – 17) and after the narrator's failing to voice his support of the man more clearly.

[17] The French original reads: "[La ligne nomade…, cette] ligne frénétique de variation, en ruban, en spirale, en zigzag, en S, libère une puissance de vie que l'homme rectifiait, que les organismes enfermaient, et que la matière exprime maintenant comme le trait, le flux ou l'élan qui la traverse." (*Mille plateaux* 623)

[18] The French original reads : "'Mes' signes me demeurent toujours largement inappropriables. […] Ils creusent une distance incomblable entre moi et eux. [Ils sont] 'en avance sur moi'."

[19] "Linguistic misdemeanor" echoes Anne-Laure Tissut's use of the French notion of "écart" in her article "L'écart dans l'oeuvre de Percival Everett", the French term including both the idea of distance, of a gap/discrepancy and that of a deviation/breach of conduct.

dominant pattern are threatened and even killed, such an aesthetic stance also clearly has an ethical and political dimension. It is a form of militant empowerment, which opens the reflexiveness of the novel onto the world. *Wounded* does indeed deal with language, and “with other things, maybe”…

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