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"HISTORY AS A NOVEL, THE NOVEL AS HISTORY": DAVID GALLOWAY'S *TAMSEN*

JAVIER COY

David Galloway has written, to this day, (apart from an important body of critical work), four novels, besides a fifth one that I know only in manuscript.[1] His characters are varied and complex and, excepting those of the second one according to publication dates, they have bonds that unite them, even though sometimes in a subtle and not very obvious manner. His second novel, *A Familiy Album* (1978), also joins the rest of his work with the use by the author of the narrative "voices," a resource that is present in all his novels and that we will see in detail in *Tamsen*. In this second novel the author presents a delicate, tender and maybe nostalgic journey through the lives of the members of a Southern family over a stretch of three generations. The ingenious technical assembly is based on the establishment of a parallelism between the chronology of these lives and that of the invention and development of the camera, from Daguerre's days on. This feature of experimentalism does not interfere at any time with the narrative fluency, so that the reader's attention, even though he might not be an expert in photography, is not blurred by technical details, of a mechanical or scientific nature, alien to the flow of the story itself. Later, in the novel that is the main object of our study, he will also rely on this same resource of using a photograph or daguerreotype as a starting point to begin the physical and psychological description of his characters, briefly but signficantly, as a resource to start the portrait of the protagonist mother and her three daughters. As I have already

1. *Weimar: a non-fiction novel*, that has not been published yet.

indicated, the link between this novel and the others, which apparently are completely different otherwise, takes place through the use of these narrative voices, inserted in the story in the third person, through which the characters are directly and in their own words revealed to the reader, without the intervention of the all-knowing voice: in *Tamsen* they are represented by the diaries and letters written by the main character during her journey, apart from other minor voices that appear occasionally through the employment of similar methods.

His other novels not yet mentioned are *Melody Jones* (published in 1976) and *Lamaar Ransom, Private Eye* (1979). Both share first of all the fact that the main characters are homosexuals; secondly, the world reflected by both stories has also many concomitancies: poor Melody, as well as the private detective Lamaar, live within that socially marginated underworld where "different" people seek shelter, people who are different by their own choice or because society makes them so: bums, criminals, prostitutes, homosexuals, drunks, drug-addicts.

In some sense both are, then, an exploration of the cruel marginalization to which society subjects those who do not conform to the convencionally imposed normality: the members of any minority, be this of an ethnic, sexual or any other kind of nature. In the contemporary American novel abound samples of this kind of literary investigation, and I think it is not necessary to cite examples. Society systematically rejects all that which is different, and that unfair and harsh attitude places those rejected in situations of extreme suffering. Through these circumstances the real hero sometimes emerges, capable of facing courageously a bitter destiny imposed upon him from outside; a destiny that, paradoxically, instead of annulling and reducing him, brings about individual virtues and values in him which affirm the victory of the spirit over the matter, of true reality over mere appearances.

Melody Jones, the first of these two novels, turns into a violent cry of anger and defiance. The homosexual, the different being, which has assumed his condition, spits out this defiant acceptance to the society that tries to repress and annul him and that he now despises as strongly as he feared it before, due precisely to his refusal to submit to the biddings of the conventional and hypocritical majority. Moreover, Melody is a half-handicapped person, so that his physical deformity is added to his first difference: it seems as if the author wanted to reinforce or emphasize still more the fact of his marginality, based on those factors of "difference." He finds his refuge among those other human beings who are similar to him: a young married homosexual with an apparently conventional social life which tortures him, and who struggles to affirm, against those oppressing forces, his true human condition, needing first to achieve acceptance of his real sexual identity; the prostitutes who frequent the night club managed by Melody; the club bullies, the unsuccessful musicians, the habitual drinkers, etc. And his final affirmation turns into a noble and fair fight against the circumstances that intend

to make something hellish out of the life of certain beings and along which Melody reaches his moving greatness and humanity.

Lamaar Ransom, Private Eye, on the contrary, and in a second stage of that fight, seems to cast a half-ironic, half-mocking look at that same society. The anger, the wrath, even the bitterness are already absent from that look. The main character, a woman this time, does not question her difference anymore: she has assumed it and she scornfully ignores the hostile environment. She is a woman at peace with herself. The "thriller" mode is suitable to the global attitude of the story and its metaphorical content: some critics have compared the main character with Chandler's Philip Marlowe: it may be excessive, but I do think it can be inscribed, although somehow more vaguely, in the school of the "tough, wise-cracking private eye," to whose mechanical scheme would also belong Micky Spillane's Mike Hammer or Robert B. Parker's Spenser, among many other examples. However, the differences are sufficiently great as to put Lamaar above this sort of character, which looks as if it were made of papier mache, and turn her into a funny and complex human being, in short, a perfectly individualized person, and indeed real and credible in this individualization. The metaphor, as I have already suggested, follows spontaneously, and convincingly humanizes both the young lesbian and the interesting adventure we see her live.

Finally, the fifth, unpublished as yet novel, *Weimar: a non-fiction novel*, seems to affirm the course initiated by the novelist with *Tamsen* along the roads of fictionalized history.

Tamsen, main character of the story of the same title, is in principle, in her social and habitual environment, a person of a conventional appearance and not at all impressive; but having to pass through extremely hard and violently adverse circumstances, consequence partly of human errors and partly of the cruel violence of an unknown and hostile nature, she is going to draw from her inner self some resources, previously unimaginable, of spiritual and even physical strength, of perseverance and generosity, that turn her into an exceptional woman, a woman capable of reaching the final sacrifice defending her sacred and heroic purposes.

The author summarizes the theme of his novel in a short paragraph of direct nature which appears as epigraph: "In October of 1846 a party of seventy-nine men, women and children under the leadership of George Donner attempted to cross the Sierra Madre Mountains to California. Trapped by early snows, thirty-five of them perished. Those who survived sustained life by consuming the flesh of their dead comrades". And he significantly adds: "This account of their ordeal makes liberal use of the mechanisms of fiction, but at no point does it intentionally depart from the evidence preserved by history." [2]

2. David Galloway, *Tamsen*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York 1983. All quotations from this novel will be indicated in the text by the page number between brackets.

This is, briefly stated, the external theme of this narrative, based indeed on historical facts which have passed, as many others relating to the history of the Western settlement of the North-American continent, into the field of legend and folklore of the country. In a recent novel Paul Auster, one of the most significant young writers (born in 1947) of the group we could frame within the "new American realism" (the label of "dirty realism" which some critics, especially journalistic critics, assign to this recent movement, seems to me not only equivocal and ambiguous, but definitely unsuitable and erroneous, besides being absolutely gratuitous) picks this idea up. One of the main characters tells how, during one of his journeys around the country, he faces one of these tough obstacles of the violent nature of the continent, the Great Salt Lake Desert, in the territory of Utah: "You travel along day after day, and you don't see a godamned thing. Not a tree, not a shrub, not a single blade of grass. Nothing but whiteness, cracked earth stretching into the distance on all sides. The ground tastes of salt, and way out at the edge, the horizon is ridged with mountains, a huge ring of mountains oscillating in the light. It makes you think you're nearing water, surrounded by all that shimmer and glare, but it's only an illusion. It's a dead world, and the only thing you ever get closer to is more of the same nothing. God knows how many pioneers bogged down and gave up the ghost in that desert, you'd see their white bones jutting straight out of the ground. That's what did in the Donner party, everyone knows about them. They got stuck in the salt, and by the time they reached the Sierra Mountains in California, the winter snows blocked their way, and they fell to eating each other to stay alive. Everyone knows that, it's American folklore, but a true fact nevertheless, a true and unimpeachable fact."[3]

Excuse me for such a long quotation: I think that it is useful as a revealing illustration of the idea I was trying to express. It is also useful in other ways, for it is an adequate resource to somehow put into context the story by Galloway: he is not creating exclusively from his imagination, but he relies on historical data, verifiable and verified, and well known by the rest of his countrymen as one of the most tragic and terrible episodes of American history. Starting from this skeleton of facts and data, plain and cold, the novelist builds his own universe, a microcosm of the world and society in general, from which his characters emerge, and which in turn, though given the treatment of the realistic novel, he nevertheless respects as regards their historical truth.

Other, more general, data also help to put the novel into context and to integrate it into traditional currents and topics in universal literature. I will only refer in this short foreword to two of them, which I hope to develop later on with express reference to Tamsen and her world. First of all, the topic of cannibalism, as an exceptional practice in cultures which consider it horrible and reject it with

3. Paul Auster, *Moon Palace*, Faber and Faber, London and boston, 1989, pág. 154.

the harshest of condemnations. Perhaps we could find the first of these incidents in the history of the western culture, going back to the classic civilizations, in the god Saturn devouring his own children to prevent his overthrow. In the European Renaissance the most representative incident might be that which has as protagonist Count Ugolino and his children, in the canto on the Inferno in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Painters and sculptors of all times have resorted to these events as subject of their works, among them the "pre-Raphaelites" of nineteenth-century England, not to mention better known works such as Goya's dreadful mural, painted in the Quinta del Sordo and which is at present in the Museo del Prado.

Tamsen will reveal along its pages that this extreme practice was not unique in the so-called "Donner Party." Legends or stories of the same nature abound also in other episodes about the pioneers or about other characters from among those who form the universe which could go under the title of "the Conquest of the West."

A second aspect refers to the external structure of the story: the account of a journey has famous and numerous examples in the history of universal literature, from Epic poetry of classic literary cultures, such as *The Odyssey* or *The Aeneid*, to the medieval stories (suffice to remember Chaucer or Sir John of Mandeville) or the Renaissance (*The Pilgrim's Progress* would make here a worthy illustration). And in more recent times and the American literature itself there are samples as outstanding as *Moby-Dick* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, to more recent novels such as William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, or already in the so-called postmodernist novel the inner and outer journey, almost circular, ironic and mocking of Ebenezer Cooke, grotesque protagonist of John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, which also shares the elements of the historical novel, although with a deforming and demythifying vision of the history of his country. I think that these data document, perhaps unnecessarily, the original affirmation.

And focusing now on our express purpose, it is not necessary to insist on the abundance of narrative material referring to the expeditions of pioneers in their caravans of wagons through prairies and mountains in search of a new Promised Land. The novel of Galloway can be precisely inscribed here, in order to, overcoming the purely mechanical narrative schemes, build a microcosm in movement that turns, by virtue of the literary art, into a metaphor of universal value, far beyond the mere external anecdote: Tamsen will walk along a rough and hard road that will lead to her inner maturity as a mother and a human being.

From 1840 onwards the great migrations of settlers of the United States take place, towards the fertile country and the mild climates of the territories of California and Oregon, migrations which would reach their maximum notoriety with the so-called "Great Migration" in 1843: "one thousand men, women and children . . . gathered in the early spring of 1843 in Western Missouri, having come from Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky and Tennessee. The train comprised

more than a hundred wagons, with a herd of oxen and cattle, estimated as high as five thousand head, bringing up the rear."[4] Even though this might not be the year in which the greatest number of immigrants travelled West, it is likely to be the occasion in which the largest number of people were involved in the expedition.

Along with the political factors already suggested, that make the different governments of the time, especially that of President James K. Polk (1845-1849), favor and encourage these migrations, there are others of an economic character as well as health factors. The late 1830s are hard times for the farmers of those states which made up the Western frontier of the country, that is, those that lay East of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, and even the only one West of the latter river, the state of Missouri. The 1837 economic crisis and subsequent depression ruined many of these small homesteaders. On the other hand, many of these undrained, humid or even marshy lands are the perfect place to develop lung diseases and fevers like malaria or paludism. The use of quinine was already beginning to spread in America, especially thanks to the efforts of a well-known doctor of the time, John Sappington (1776-1856), whom Tamsen will meet during the course of her pilgrimage (78). Doctor Sappington got to know this medicine early on, in the 1820s, that is when the bark of certain trees of the Peru forests was first isolated, and he devoted himself to its usage and distribution in his country. However, besides the fact that it does not cure permanently, it is still hard to find at this time, and its use would not be generalized until much later (in fact, it was not synthesized in a laboratory until 1945).

The Oregon missionaries had been sending accounts to the East for a few years about the mildness of the climate of the coastal territories of the Pacific Ocean, as well as about the plentifulness of game and fish and the fertility of these lands for growing crops. On the South it is John Sutter (a Swiss-german emigrant that settled in California, still part of Mexico in 1839) the one who initiates incursions into these territories, exploiting with the consent of the Mexican authorities the fertile lands of the Sacramento Valley. There, in the territories he gave the name of New Helvetia, he built Fort Sutter, close to where the present city of Sacramento lies. Fort Sutter soon prospered and it became the arrival point of the emigrants from the East before their final settlement on land considered free and later property of the American government. The 1862 Homestead Act made a great deal to encourage the migrations from the end of the Civil War onwards. By virtue of this act any citizen was free to settle, enclosing a maximum area of 160 acres, granted he cultivated and improved them. If he fulfilled such conditions, after five years he would become the legal owner of that land.

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4. Howard R. Lamar, editor, *The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West*, Thomas J. Crowell, New York 1977, p. 885.

But in the 1840s it was probably John Fremont the man who exerted the greatest influence on the publicity campaign that prompted the first migrations on a large scale: "The explorer-hero John C. Fremont provided the greatest contribution to the publicity campaign by a report of his second exploring expedition for the United States Army in 1843. His precise and accurate description of the route to Oregon in his official account of the exploration provided a handbook for immigrants."[5]

The Oregon road, which coincided with that of California up to Fort Hall, from where the caravans went towards the pass through which the Rocky Mountains were crossed, the so-called South Pass, at approximately one thousand miles from the beginning, was initiated in some of the frontier towns: Independence, Westport Landing, "or other Missouri frontier towns."[6] The Illinois River was crossed via the bridge near the hamlet called Beardstown, then the Mississippi River was crossed with the ferryboat established in Mauvoo, Ill., and later still the Missouri River was also crossed by ferry, beside the town of Arrow Rock, Mo. From then on the road through the great prairies was relatively easy, up to Fort Laramie (which lay in the present state of Wyoming). The pioneers could cover those seven hundred miles with their oxen-wagons at an average of fifteen to twenty miles per day.

From the South Pass the road went on up to Fort Hall, already West of the Continental Divide. From there the Oregon caravans went Northwest, while those people whose destination was California surrounded the Great Salt Lake by the North, in order to avoid having to cross the salty desert of the same name, then going gradually to the Southwest until they reached Sierra Nevada, the last natural obstacle the emigrants had to overcome before going down to the fertile lands of the Sacramento Valley, which lay in the area of California that was now civilized, or at least populated and cultivated.

This is, briefly stated, the historical and geographic context from where the expedition of the Donner brothers narrated in *Tamsen* emerges.

The story reaches the reader through two more important "voices." The first one, and that which appears more often in the first segments, is the voice of the narrator in the third person. Within the first hundred pages, for example, 82 pages are narrative text in the third person and only 18 appear in the first person and correspond to Tamsen's voice. From then on Tamsen acquires a greater direct presence, so that approximately one third of the remaining three hundred pages corresponds to her. There are other minor voices, although also significant, that the author reveals in order to offer new perspectives or to establish contrasts between different characters or between one of these and the narrative in the

5. Howard R. Lamar, op. cit., p. 884.

6. ibidem, p. 884.

third person, so that the same fact reaches often the reader from more than one point of view, enriching thus our perception and allowing us at the same time to have a greater number of elements of judgment. Among these minor voices we can list that of James Reed, who writes a letter to his brother in law, who has remained East, in which he talks in terms that seem to be referring to a hunting recreation party rather than to a journey as important as that in which they are engaged; the voice of his daughter, Virginia Reed, who being thirteen years old expresses herself with the ingenuity and tender unconsciousness that could be expected; but I think the most revealing of these minor voices, paradoxically, is that of an almost illiterate hunter and trapper whom the emigrants meet, and who is an expert on the territory and its risks. His reflections summarize in a peculiar way one of the strongest impulses that motivate the human being, and that is indeed present in these pioneers' spirit. At the same time he expresses with a bizarre, farsighted and precise intuition, one of the richest metaphors that we can observe in this novel: "I observed the grave of Mrs. Sarak Keys agead 70 yares who departed this life in may last at her feet stand the stone that gives us this information. This stone shews us that all ages and all sects are found to undertake this long tedious and even dangerous Journy for some unknown object never to be realized even by those the most fortunate and why because the human mind can never be satisfied never at rest allways on the stretch for something new some strange novelty." (202) A curious reflection unconsciously charged with sense, that describes one of the most defining aspects of the human condition and that could be easily transliterated or extrapolated in order to evoke what other stories of the world literature have metaphorically expressed with identical precision and firmness: from the already mentioned *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Huckleberry Finn* to any of the infinite number that explore the consciouness of the man who seeks, mostly without finding it, the road that may lead him to the inner or outer knowledge, to wealth, to freedom, to love: in short, to that unreachable happiness we are inexorably doomed to pursue in any of the thousand ways man's imagination can think of and that we will never completely find.

A contrast is established between the voice of the narrator, who talks from a distance and objectively, though both warmly and compasionately, and that of Tamsen, shy and conventional at the beginning, but a voice that acquires firmness and warmth and authority while the story moves forward, a kind of narrative counterpoint that keeps the attention of the reader and passes on to him a moving and tragic, human and wild, tender and violent, both nuanced and credible story.

The decision of the protagonists to break with their present life of security and comfort, an even respectable and well-off life, and set out in a dangerous and long pilgrimage towards the West is made known in the first few pages without much of a preamble. Tamsen, whose family origin is to be found in the East, is the daughter of Revolutionary War hero William Eustis, who enrolled in the

rebel forces at the age of sixteen. After the end of the war he settled in Boston where "(he) cultivated a stoically unsentimental public image as the Roman soldier-scholar, but he doted shamelessly on his miraculous daughter Tamesin, lavishing on her the praise and wonder and discipline and instruction and luxury which fathers classically bestow on the eldest and on the youngest of her daughters, and she was, in fact, both. Tamesin was the first and last of his six children, and her very existence was an elaborate negation of death." (14) The first Tamesin, born in 1786, died of cholera when she was ten. In 1801 Colonel Eustis has a sixth daughter to whom he gives the same name as the first one, Tamesin, name that the young lady will later simplify in its spelling until arriving at the final form, Tamsen, passing through several intermediate forms (Thomazin, Tamazin and Tamesin). "This second Tamesin," says the narrator, "ascended the vacant grieving throne of his affections," so that "Before her hand could properly hold the quill, he guided it in forming the alphabet, and he passed over nursery rhymes to read to her from massive, gold-edged volumes of Botany. He taught her Latin and mathematics, the little Greek he knew, and the names of all the first-magnitude stars." (15) This education, superior to what was normal at that time and environment, will prove useful to her when her father dies in 1821. She soon finds a job as a teacher of French and Botany in a ladies' school in Newburyport; but looking for a milder climate she moves to Elizabeth City, N.C., four years later, where she continues with her teaching career. There she marries and gives birth to two children, both of whom, besides her husband, died of cholera in 1831. Alone and left to her own resources once more, she gives in to her grief: "In the months that followed her own clumsy animal survival seemed an act of unspeakable cruelty and she ached to follow her husband and children into death. Her mind struggled against the body's extraordinary will to survive, which seemed to her then a faceless enemy that had forced its way inside her, laying pitiless siege to the sorrow in which she yearned to dissolve." (16)

These features of her personality and her cultural level are already part of that future Tamsen who will fight, with apparently inexhaustible spiritual tenacity and physical strength, against the misfortunes and for her own survival and that of her family during the last months of her life.

She would acquire that physical strength next. Learning of her situation, one of her brothers, who had settled in a farm in Illinois, and who was himself a widower with a numerous progeny, writes his sister inviting her to go and live with him: "She instantly agreed to join him." (16) The hard and endless work of the farm strengthens her muscles at the same time relieving her pain. Also "instructing her nephews and nieces, wandering with them through meadows and fields to clarify lessons in surveying and botany, stirred the old joy she had known as a teacher." (16-17) And she goes back to teaching, until in 1839 she meets George Donner, a middle-aged man (he is 55 years old, 17 years her

senior), twice married and twice widowed, who has five grown-up children from his first marriage and two small daughters, the only survivors of the seven children he had had with his second wife.

This is the family Tamsen encounters when she marries George Donner soon afterwards, to which three more daughters from this marriage will be added. Thus, when George tells her, while the whole family is having supper together, of his incipient purpose related to a new migration, to California this time, Tamsen declares herself definitely contrary to it and she states her opposition to the idea with all clearness and firmness. Afterwards she will go through some remorse, not due to her attitude, but because she recognizes that "The children should not have been made witness to her disobedience, even if she had so fiercely resisted his plan on their behalf." (5) Her education and her womanhood should have made her keep silent: "For her to speak first might reveal greater offence, while silence could seem mere stubborness, and tears would signal womanish submission to his wishes. The charge of stubborness she had known since childhood," (5) but life has hardened her and has endowed her with a firm personality that her best judgment and her instinct impel her to manifest. Also, as the narrator will indicate to us much later, when already in the road to the West Tamsen opposes her husband again with all the firmness she can muster, the latter "had never wished her to be docile and subservient." (214)

Now, after supper, in the solitude and privacy of the conjugal bedroom, her husband presents himself naked before her eyes: "The sight struck her like a dull blow . . . for she had never before seen this massive display of his nakedness." (4) And after satisfying his desire with the rudeness of the anxious male, George Donner announces: "We'll be going to California." (6) However, such a categorical, final decision is going to be more delicately nuanced shortly afterwards to establish the more egalitarian relationship that Tamsen demands between them, and that she no doubt obtains thanks to her force of character: "(he) entered her again, but more gently now, and her body opened to receive him . . . (and) she sensed that it was neither her flesh nor her spirit that he sought to master, but that she was only a necessary instrument in that struggle. He had conquered tangled acres in Kentucky and sprawling farmlands in Indiana and Illinois, but the merciless plains of Texas had defeated him. There must be no more defeat. There was no time now for defeat." (6) Tamsen recognizes that male instinct, that inner need of fight, search and victory that impels her husband. And he in his turn gives his wife the tribute to which he considers her entitled: now George, lightly but significantly, changes his previous affirmation: "'Child', he whispered hoarsely . . . 'Daughter', he began, but his voice lifted into a question as he said, 'we'll go to California?'" Now Tamsen's affirmative answer "signaled neither submission to his will nor compromise of her own. It was a solemn and irreversible pledge that they would confront the adversary together." (7)

Once she has taken this decision Tamsen's tone changes to reveal her decided and enthusiastic devotion to the project. This is the first time we can hear her voice, in a letter she writes to one of her sisters in the East, dated February 2, 1846: "we have all been down with fever this winter. Not the ague or the bilious fever, but the California fever!" (7) She tells her that "As you know, I was reading Mr. Emerson's essays to our weekly literary society, but then Mr. Reed acquired from Cincinnati a copy of *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*, and Mr. Emerson could not compete." (7) This is one more of the numerous guides that circulate at the time and it is the most casual of fatalities that makes James Reed, the great friend of the Donner brothers', come across this book.

The author of this work, Lansford Warren Hastings, published it in 1845, pretending to have found, in the route to California, a short-cut, that he would call from then on "Hastings' Cutoff," that he assured would considerably reduce the distance, and therefore, the time needed to make the journey. This is a circumstance that will result in an unfortunate consequence for a group of those engaged in the expedition towards California, that separated in the South Pass from the emigrants whose destination is Oregon, will follow, under George Donner's leadership, the unknown Hastings' route, instead of the known and habitual road via Fort Hall.

A second interesting feature of this letter (that I already mentioned in discussing *A Family Album*) is the enclosing within it of a daguerreotype of herself and her three daughters: "Since you have never seen your pretty nieces . . . I am sending you a daguerrotype of myself with the children. It is the handiwork of Mr. N.H. Sheppherd" (10) that was indeed an "itinerant photographer who, I believe, made one of the earliest daguerrotypes of Lincoln."[7] This is the resource, as I have already advanced, the author uses to give us a first description of Tamsen: "The photograph is an elongated octagon measuring 3 1/4 inches high and 2 3/4 inches wide." (11) He describes the position of the four femenine figures that pose before the camera and the result of which could at first glance be taken "for a photograph of four sisters." (12) But a keener observation will modify this first impression: "That these are not four sisters becomes apparent only when the photograph is studied in more detail. It reveals faint crescents beneath the eyes of the seated figure; these are obscured at first both by the heavy shadow of her brows and by the distracting brightness of the eyes themselves. There is nothing haggard or worn about these dark crescents, but they are nonetheless an unmistakable notation of the flesh, a record of the agonies and toil and separation and loss the woman has survived. Oddly, the lines lend her face

7. David Galloway, in a letter to the author of this work, dated in Maison de Chapitre, France, of September 17, 1991.

both dignity and vulnerability, as though the mischievous glow of confidence and health she radiates is a fragile veil that could easily be torn apart. . . . Thus, despite the diminutive stature, the girlish merriment of her suppressed laughter, the seated figure is clearly a mature woman." (13) All these facts and others that the narrator adds, suggest finally that the woman in question is an intelligent and well-to-do lady.

The next allusion to Tamsen's external appearance will come when the story is well advanced, and it will be offered us from the point of view of one of the expedition members, Mr. Bryant: "Though she was certainly not plain and her features were well formed, Mrs. Donner could never have been called pretty. On the other hand, when her eyes brightened and they brightened now she was suddenly transformed, as though a spell had been lifted, and her beauty then was remarkable." (118) With this piece of information we have completed Tamsen's physical portrait. Her spiritual and moral portrait, her nerve, her inner nature, will gradually emerge when the circumstances of the journey put her to the test over and over again.

The decision, then, has been taken and what initially has been rebelious spirit and firm opposition to the endangering of her daughters in such an adventure, becomes enthusiastic and unreserved collaboration once Tamsen has understood. There remains liquidation of the outstanding matters and the organization of the thousand details necessary to guarantee the safety of the journey and the greatest well-being possible for the travellers.

The pioneers decide to start the journey in mid-April to join the other groups that will form the caravan at Independence. The first stage of a few miles takes the three travelling families to Springfield, capital of the state of Illinois: they are the families of Jacob Donner's, eldest brother, George Donner's and their friend and neighbor's, James Reed, along with the help they have hired not without some difficulties: a group of nine wagons and some thirty people, between children and adults. They have put an advertisement in the local newspaper asking for drivers to help them with the wagons, but "Despite the promise of free land . . . few young men seem to have responded to the advertisement . . . Perhaps others were discouraged by the knowledge that the free land George Donner promised them was still the property of Mexico." (24)

Historical references indeed abound in the story, placing this small group of citizens within the national context. It is in 1846 when the United States Congress, at the proposal of President James Polk, declares war against Mexico. This conflict would finish in 1848 with the annexation by the United States of New Mexico, Texas, setting the border at the Río Grande, and the whole of California (except Lower California, that is a narrow peninsula that lies almost parallel to the Mexican coast southwards) by virtue of the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty. As compensation the United States undertake to withdraw all their troops from

Mexican territory and to indemnify Mexico with fifteen million dollars. But this would come later: at the moment the travellers keep on receiving news of the campaigns that take place during the months their journey takes.

Their brief Springfield sojourn turns into a party for the small town. The camp the emigrants set up in the outskirts of the city attracts the attention and curiosity of the local citizens, some of which "no doubt, thought them foolish and improvident to leave behind this comfortable plenty to risk the tomahawk, to gamble their future on lands, that after all, legally belonged to the Government of Mexico." (26) From among the visitors Tamsen receives the visit of a woman who will be especially significant in the future: Mary Todd Lincoln, the wife of someone who at the moment is nothing more than a local lawyer and politician, who expresses her envy for the undertaking in which they have engaged, for the courage that decision proves, although she instinctively notices that Tamsen could have refused to take part in that risky adventure: "Tamsen hesitates. 'Yes, I could have refused', she admitted, and for the first time she knew that this was true," (46) thus consciously assuming her share of responsability in the enterprise: "Though at first she had opposed the scheme, in the end she had accepted it, made it her own. 'It was my choice as well', she amended." (47)

The day after the caravan starts among speeches of farewell and good wishes. The State Governor himself "addressed the departing emigrants from the broad granite steps of the capitol building, reminding them solemnly of the blood and bravery of the pioneers whose vision had led them into the Illinois territory in the twilight years of the last century, when its mighty forests knew only the tread of wild animals and savage Indians. They had carried with them the tender spark of a young democracy, fanned it with their courage and labor" (51) until they turned those uncivilized territories into a decent human dwelling. And the narrator adds as follows, to round off this touch of subtle irony: "It was a great day for Springfield, a great and historic event in the annals of the sovereign state of Illinois." (51) This tone of grandiloquence and solemnity brings about a contrast with the simple and normal voice Tamsen uses to express herself in the first entry (Sunday, April 19th, 1846) of the diary she has decided to write for her small daughters to know when adults the history they have lived with the unconsciouness of their childhood: "We are camped today on the western banks of the Illinois River, near the little hamlet of Beardstown. Though awash with the swollen river, the bridge was intact and nobly bore the weight of our wagons and teams. Our party set out from the capitol building of Springfield, Illinois, on the morning of April 16th (a Thursday), following official speech-making and prayers for our safe journey." (57)

From then on, and with an almost religious perseverance, Tamsen writes her diary taking advantage of the fact that every Sunday the caravan usually stops to observe the Lord's day as well as to let the people and animals rest and to allow

time for the men to make the repairs that the roughness of the road makes necessary in order to keep the equipment in a fitting condition.

As for the historicity of this diary, it is once more David Galloway himself who explains the question: "Tamsen did keep a journal on her western trek, and several other travellers commented on how conscientious she was about this, but the journal itself disappeared. As 'clues' to her style I had only two surviving letters, but when I recreated the Donner trail I called in at dozens of historical societies (starting in Springfield) and read literally hundreds of diaries and letters by women who crossed the plains at about the same time."[8]

On Saturday, May 9, the group formed by the Donners and the Reeds arrives at Independence, as a first step to join the great caravan to Oregon and California, that will travel together up to the South Pass, the crossing point of the Rocky Mountains. They managed a good average, since initially they counted on completing this first stage of the journey by themselves by the middle of the month: from that point on the real journey starts over territories where the white man is a perfect stranger, and although there are no news about the Indians being on the war path, their memory is always present in everybody's mind. The caravan has already initiated its journey, and those who have remained behind are rushing: on the way they are joined by other latecomers coming from various points of the territory and finally, "Three days after their departure from Independence" (103) the gathering with the biggest part of the transcontinental expedition takes place. "The group had already appointed an official guide, voted for administrative officers, and elected Colonel William H. Russell for captain." (103)

The official census of the caravan was at that point in time 72 wagons, 130 men, 65 women, and 125 children, to whom must be added the some dozen families that make up the group with which the Donners and the Reeds have partially shared their way. Until that meeting, and "Without yet knowing it, the Reeds and Donners had already sketched the pattern that would mark their route to Little Sandy Creek." (101) And not only in relation to the daily routine: getting up at dawn, cooking breakfast and taking the road until a brief rest at noon, and at sundown looking for an adequate place, with water and grass, where they can camp. But, especially, in relation to another important fact: "the pattern of joining and dividing, regrouping, parting, assembling, and finding the essential, sometimes monotonous, sometimes perilous rhythms of their lives intimately twined with those of others." (101) In fact, the caravan does not remain invariable during the second stage of the journey up to Little Sandy Creek, already in the Rockies, which is the preamble to the South Pass, but during the long stretch

8. David Galloway, in the already mentioned letter of September 17, 1991.

of almost one thousand miles little groups join, or separate from, the main body, according to options and preferences.

As for the group more or less bound to the Donners and the Reeds, the situation remains basically static. The question that divides them and that will reach its climax in South Pass is the argument over whether to follow the usual route, from South Pass towards the North until Fort Hall, or to follow the recommendations of the book by Lansford Hastings that would take them to Fort Bridger, first southwards and then to the Southeast until reaching the foot of Sierra Nevada, already in the California threshold.

The story offers a significant view both of the personality of the guide's author and of the new route: "The trail was the product of the fertile imagination of Lansford W. Hastings, a somewhat irresponsible author-adventurer who sought to direct the emigrant traffic away from Oregon and into the Sacramento Valley by means of a short-cut he labelled 'Hastings Cutoff."[9] And as far as the route itself is concerned it adds: "Though the Donner Trail appeared on paper to be just the short-cut that California emigrants were looking for, many pioneers discovered that Hastings had lightly discounted the hardships of 'burning deserts and towering mountains' in his glowing account of the route."[10]

Tamsen's initial attitude is that of distrust, but while the journey advances, the facts make her confirm her first impression. In the pages of her diary for June 21 she comments on the emotion that some of the expeditioneers felt when facing for the first time the great buffalo herds, but she insists on how difficult and dangerous it is to hunt these huge animals, according to her own observation and the hunters' remarks. And she adds: "The difficulties are patent even to the distant observer, but not to Mr. Lansford W. Hastings, whose guidebook is so esteemed by many in our party." (168) After literally citing a paragraph of Hastings' *Guide*, where he pretends to describe how easy and comfortable it is to hunt down one of these animals, Tamsen adds her own bitter comment: "Either Mr. Hastings left his wits behind him in Ohio, for safekeeping, or they strayed out among the sagebrush and lost their direction." (168)

But there is something more important and relevant for the travellers: "I fear that if Mr. Hastings knows no more of geography than he does of the habits of the bison, we may end by doing some of his exploring for him, for his description of the wonderfully straight line running west from the fort contains nothing by way of recognizable points of orientation for the passage of mountains and deserts," (208) which obviously is much more significant and something the emigrants should have weighed up and valued according to its right terms.

9. Howard R. Lamar, editor, op. cit., p. 317.
10. *ibidem*, p. 318.

Among the expeditioneers only Jessy Thorton identifies himself with Tamsen's opinion. Jessy Thorton is another one of the occasional voices, and he keeps a record of his observations in his own diary. Having decided to follow the known road and to thus separate from the Donner group, he expresses himself this way on July 20: "The Californians (that is, those who intend to go to this region) were much elated, and in fine spirits, with the prospect of a better and nearer road to the country of their destination. Mrs. George Donner was, however, an exception. She was gloomy, sad and dispirited, in view of the fact that her husband and others could think for a moment of leaving the old road, and confide in the statement of a man of whom they knew nothing, but was probably some selfish adventurer." (206) But these opposite opinions have no weight within the general debate, in the end. Old trappers and hunters are given no credit either, veterans of these lands mostly unexplored, that meeting the expedition that has decided to follow the road to Fort Bridger try to convince the leaders of the group of their mistake. One of these visitors, writes Tamsen on July 25, "answers to the name of Joe Walker, and informs us proudly that he acted as guide to Frémont's mission, leading the main expeditionary force into California. . . . He speaks very ill of the Hastings route, but with such a rush and splutter of violent profanity, like some ceaseless waterfall of filth, that his opinions on all matters are dismissed as those of a 'croaker' and a 'puke', to use the western terms for a man of unredeemably vile character." (218)

Another explorer and trapper, more civilized than the former, Jim Clyman, expresses an identically adverse opinion. This route, he frankly assures, "takes you through the meanest country I've ever had the misery of seein'. You'll lose half your wagons and stock tryin' to get through the desert. Go by way of Soda Springs and Fort Hall, or you'll likely find yourselves shovelin' snow in the mountains all winter." (174) The pioneers cannot help but consider these words, but they wonder, "why would Hastings be so anxious to promote a trail nobody can get across?" (174) When they expressly raise this question to Clyman, his answer lets see some inkling of what those reasons of Hastings might be. "Precisely what has Lansford Hastings got to win for himself by telling us that the shortest distance between two points just happens to be a straight line?" Clyman is blunt: "'A hell of a lot. . . . For a start, he's chargin' dear for takin' wagons across that godforsaken route, and his buddy Gabe Bridger is buildin' himself a nice trade on the Bear River. Maybe Hastings has got a deal or two goin' in California, too. The man's got so many irons in the fire you can't see the fire anymore." And here he is going to add something that, without realizing it, is going to ruin all the force of his arguments. "'Why, when he wrote that good-for-nothin' book he hadn't even laid eyes on the Wahsatch or the Great Salt Lake. You can't trust a fool just because he's learned his alphabet.'" (176) And those two geographical barriers, the Wahsatch Mountains and the Great Salt Lake Desert will indeed be

the two great obstacles that will constitute the main surprises for the expeditioneers and the most important cause of their tragic delay in reaching Sierra Nevada.

Maybe without fully realizing it Jim Clyman has expressed the basic reason that leads the pioneers not to accept these opinions and to stand their initial ones, dismissing at the same time Tamsen's reluctancies, Tamsen being the only one who declares herself in favor of the Fort Hall route and that dares contradict her husband's opinion, though "she felt no disloyalty in opposing his judgement." (214) While they are resting in the Little Sandy Creek camp, she writes down in her diary on Sunday July 19: "These reservations I repeatedly communicated to Mr. Donner and Mr. Reed, but they were unanimous in dismissing them as womanish fears unworthy of deliberation in the councils of the wise." (208-209) Resigned to the unavoidable Tamsen comes to making an inner concession: "Perhaps I am only feeling out of spirits, yet I fear that in following the recommendations of this adventurer, we shall find ourselves sheared, shaven, polled, scraped and pared." (209)

As far as Jim Clyman is concerned, maybe the key of the dismissal of his arguments is given by himself, involuntarily and unconsciously, when he adds to his warnings the final sentence of "'You can't trust a fool just because he's learned his alphabet.'" In the light of these words of scorn towards the written word "Those who had grown weary with the quarrel stirred to attention. . . . They were, for the most part, men who had been taught all their lives to honor the sanctity of the written word, to regard it as the irreplaceable and invaluable key that could open to them the treasure troves of the republic, and here was a crude mountain man with a beard liberally streaked with tobacco juice, trying to tell them that the very institutions that made a protective barrier between civilization and savagery were not to be trusted." (176)

Bearing in all these considerations the majority will feel inclined to follow the decision taken by Reed: "'I can only speak for myself, and perhaps for the Donners', Reed insisted, and the two brothers nodded their consent. 'In our judgement Hastings has the best answer.'" (176) And as simply as this the expedition members seal the decision that will lead them to hell, where the remaining qualities of Tamsen, especially her generosity, her tenacity and her strength, will finally emerge in all their tragic magnificence.

The final summary of the reasons that determine this decision, expressed with absolute faith and formulated with expressive and ingenuous clearness, is offered by the voice of James Reed, who the day before the beginning of the last part from Fort Bridger up to the last mountainous barrier that separates them from California writes a letter to his family in the East and provides a lyrical description of what he expects for the next few days: "The new road, or Hastings' Cut-off, leaves the Fort Hall road here, and is said to be saving of 350 or 400 miles in going to California, and a better route. There is, however, or thought to

be one stretch of 40 miles without water; but Hastings and his party are out ahead, examining for water, or a route to avoid this stretch." (227) And in the peak of optimism and gullibility, he concludes like this: "Mr. Bridger informs me that the route we design to take is a fine, level road, with plenty of water and grass, with the exception before stated." (228)

Reality is going to be very different from what these hopeful words promised. The Donner group rests for a few days in Fort Bridger to gather strength and repair the equipment. These are the days in which the war with Mexico starts to spread along several fronts. Against this war recognized personalities in the East would complain, such as Henry David Thoreau who, as we all know, would end up in jail after refusing to pay his taxes, considering that this campaign was being financed with this money. "While the Donner Party lingered at Fort Bridger . . . Major Charles Frémont seized San Diego . . . Brigadier General Stephen Kearny arrived at Bent's Fort, and Major General Zachary Taylor conquered the unresisting town of Camargo in northern Mexico." (226)

On July 31 the Donner expedition, that elected George Donner for captain, resumes the journey at dawn, expecting to find the comfortable and easy road they have been told about and with which they hope to recover the time they have lost in relation to the foreseen plans and to be able to reach the mountains before the winter and the snow storms come.

The first serious obstacle appears soon. Tamsen keeps record of it in her diary entry of Sunday, August 9, at the camp in Weber River Canyon: "Since the nooning on Wednesday we have been encamped in this mountain fastness. . . . With each passing hour we more anxiously await the return of Mssrs. Reed, Stanton and McCutcheon, who departed on Wednesday to fetch Lansford Hastings." (232) Apparently this gentleman had promised to personally guide them. Instead, the members of this exploring party come back on August 11: they have to go on by themselves and according to James Reed, the road through this canyon is purely and simply "impassable." (236) The only resource left is to climb the Wahsatch mountain, and the result is a long ordeal of suffering and superhuman efforts that could have been avoided had they made an adequate exploration of the terrain. Indeed, as the narrator remarks, "The following summer Brigham Young would pause at the same spot, scrutinize the terrain and set his men to chopping brush. Within hours the end of the seemingly impassable canyon had opened to reveal a gentle gateway to the lush green valley of the promised land. The Donner Party had spent nearly a month in travelling a distance of less than forty miles." (242)

The plain and dry summary offered by the narrator's voice finds its counterpart in another voice, that of Tamsen, warmer, charged with emotion and at the same time realistic and understanding, a voice that never, now nor later, is going to let the faintest insinuation be heard that could be interpreted as something like

a recrimination against the people who took the blind decision of following the Hastings road, in spite of the pains and endless suffering she is forced to undergo. Her voice is a direct and simple description of the harsh pains that stretch of the road has meant: "the sufferings of those who carved this passage were most pitiable," (243) she writes after recognizing that two weeks have passed since she last put something down on paper, "despite a firm resolve to admit no break in my chronicle. The previous Sunday came and went unnoticed, for all hands were engaged in the wearying and seemingly endless task of road-building through the Wahsatch. I had not the heart to pen so grim an account of this desperate venture, and even now mere words seem feeble when compared with the reality." (243) Despite all this, she points out that fortune has not completely turned its back on them, since the caravan has suffered no loss yet.

The second great trial (if this first one has had to do with the difficulties imposed by "towering mountains") will be that which the same above mentioned historian referred to as to "burning deserts". Once this mountainous barrier is overcome, the Salt Lake Valley gives them a brief break of scarcely one week, until they reach the border of the salty plain called the Great Salt Lake Desert. There they find a message from Hastings, nailed on a stick, that warns them that the crossing of the desert will take them not one day and one night, as he had repeatedly assured them, but "'Two days and two nights' . . . Given Hastings' brand of arithmetic that could mean as much as three, if they had any problems." (255)

On the night of Sunday, August 30, Tamsen remarks: "We intend to depart this place before it again shows its fiery face, in order to avail ourselves of the cooler hours to begin the crossing of the desert," and she adds that Hastings' warning "provoked a great and general sinking of the heart. We have been at pains to load every available vessel with water, as well as laying in sufficient grass for the animals." (255) The reality will be even harder. The next entry of her diary was made on September 9: "The crossing of the Great Desert consumed not the advertised 2 days and 2 nights, but six days and nights of dreadful agony. The suffering and loss were so immense that only now do I find the steady hand to set them down. Human life was spared, but 36 heads of cattle either died on the crossing or stampeded at the smell of water and have not been found." (267) The caravan divides, those stronger or less loaded going ahead trying to get to the end and come back with water and other things for those who lag behind. When James Reed, one of the richest men from among the expeditioneers, arrives for the second time at the first water well they have found at the other side of the desert, "he learned that his total stock now consisted of one horse, one ox and a half-lame milch cow." (267) Tamsen provides once more the counterpoint to this short observation by the narrator: "none of our party have suffered so acutely as the Reeds, who have descended in one week from plenty to pauperage. The salt

marshes claimed the noble palace wagon, and the two supply wagons were left behind by Mr. Reed's employees (at his instructions) in order to drive the teams ahead to water. While the men were seeking to raise a fallen horse, the oxen stampeded and spread to the four winds. No trace of them has been found, and Mr. Reed is reduced to his fine racing mare, an ox and a single footsore cow." (268) This is the toll that the inexorable nature will take upon these daring travellers. As Donald C. Stewart states: "The wilderness's final triumph is that the pioneers, who begin with wagon loads of possessions, gradually give them up as the trail takes its toll. . . . The mountain man and the Indians, by contrast, always travelled light, taking their living from the land."[11]

This is exactly what the group finds out with their own suffering, as Tamsen remarked: in her voice there is only sympathy for these sufferings that the mistaken decision has caused to everybody and a final remark that reveals the change of attitude that they at last undergo in relation to Hastings: "The men of our company vow that if ever they encounter Lansford Hastings, they will roast him alive." (269) But her words do not suggest in the least any reproaches, insinuations of the kind of "I warned you," condemnation for the mistake made. It seems as if her solidarity with the decisions of the majority had made her forget her expressions of distrust and her previous warnings and as if in her were only left, as in the rest of her companions, the bitter feeling of having been cruelly deceived: "Hastings had explicitly and repeatedly told them the dry drive was no more than thirty or forty miles, that they could make it in, at most, a day and a night." (252)

The crude reality finally opened their eyes, but Tamsen never takes the attitude of someone that has seen her warnings vindicated by the facts at last.

This capacity of sympathetic understanding that does not make, nevertheless, concessions to sentimentality, reveals her independence of judgment, her faculty of personal independent reflection, that allows her to raise by means of her opinions over the majority of her companions and that is made evident by her conduct and her remarks regarding the most different matters. With regard to the Indians, she comments on her diary that "Despite certain unfortunate tendencies, many of which they have borrowed from the whites, the western Indians are provident in their use of nature's available resources, and we could learn much from their ingenious practices." (193) The first time she sees the Indian villages is in Fort Laramie and the above stated opinion is partially based on these first observations: "They are for the most part a handsome, graceful people when seen close up, and surprisingly fair for Indians, but far too many are drunk on whiskey traded from the American Fur Company in exchange for buffalo and beaver and antelope skins. . . . Even the women, some of them quite delicately beautiful,

11. William T. Pilkington, editor, *Critical Essays on the Western American Novel*, G.K. Hall, Boston, 1980, p. 140.

with elegantly rounded limbs, are not immune to the effects of 'fire water.'" (171) Once she has a brief encounter with one of these young squaws and she tries a difficult conversation almost exclusively by signs, "Tamsen thought her in that moment the loveliest, most graceful creature she had ever seen." (180)

However, she is also capable of understanding other points of view. In a talk she has with her friend Margaret Reed, the latter asks her whether she believes the stories that circulate about a cannibalism act committed by this "mountain man" whom they meet in one of their camps: "'You've seen the man with your own eyes, Margaret Reed, and you know he's a savage. . . . I don't mean that I blame him', she added quickly. 'Maybe he couldn't help it. It's the terrible life he's led - the things he had to do to survive. Things we can't imagine'. 'But his own wife?' 'His own squaw', Tamsen corrected. 'That's not the same as a wife. You've seen the loads they carry. They're more like mules, and I guess most men would kill and eat their mules if they were starving to death. If it was the only way.'" (223) What reduces man to a primitive state, where the savage emerges as a solution in order to survive, are thus the extreme circumstances.

A last fact worth mentioning as confirmation of that unselfish and understanding spirit and of that open-mindedness that determine her independence with regards to the prevailing prejudices, belongs to a different category. While they are camping one night on the solitude of the prairie, Tamsen leaves the circle brightened by the camp fires and goes into the shadows, more and more intense as she advances, until at a given moment she feels as if there were other eyes close by that are observing her. Scared out of her wits and trembling as a leaf, she remains still: "There was neither sound nor movement to divert her attention yet something drew her, and as she slowly turned her head, she knew there would be other eyes waiting to greet hers, and she met them without flinching, though she trembled as if struck by a gale." (187) She keeps still, tightening her clutch on the stick she has taken for protection before leaving, until she starts to feel her muscles are going numb and she feels forced to make a slight movement: "When this slight movement brought no response, provoked no lunging attack, she allowed her eyes to shift as well." Thus she keeps, with her eyes fastened on those other eyes that shine isolated in the blackness, until she loses notion of the time elapsed: "How long she remained there Tamsen could not have said - perhaps not more that a minute or two, but it seemed much longer before John Denton's sunburned face separated from the shadows, before the figure stretched beside him became, distinctly, Milt Elliott, with his head of great tousled curls cradled on Denton's shoulder, apparently asleep." Only then recovers Tamsen her faculty of moving, already calmer, and she starts to leave, understanding "the pleading look in his eyes. . . . Hoping he would know how to measure her response, she nodded once, briefly, before she turned and moved

back down the slope." (188) And loyal to that answer, Tamsen does not only keep her word not giving away the two young lovers before the others, but she does not even make the faintest allusion to the incident in the pages of her diary and she goes on treating the two wagon drivers as if nothing had happened.

Thus forges the woman that a little later, when they find themselves blocked in the snow almost at the doors of their destination, will slowly start taking control of the situation and resorting to the most desperate measures dictated by her imagination and the circumstances, to fulfill the solemn promise she has made to herself: "Whatever her own fate, or George's, their five daughters would survive." (349)

The road goes on full of difficulties, maybe not as overwhelming as those already described, but irritating and annoying enough as to make them lose time, more and more scarce and, therefore, more precious: a wagon axle breaks and must be replaced improvising a new one with a fitting tree trunk; a canyon that after a tough road that takes them a few days, having to advance after the axes that open up the way between forests and bushes, happens to be a cul-de-sac that makes them retrace their own steps over that dreadful stretch; or that, pointing to the West, turns then South, forcing them to turn once more to the North to take again the right route. As a result, by mid-October they have not even reached the foot of the mountains that they will have to finally cross, and the travellers start to worry deeply in the light of the ugly clouds that threaten them with the dreaded snow: but there is still place for a little hope, since "Sutter had assured Stanton the bad storms rarely came before the end of November, and that was still a full month away." (297)

On October 25 they finally glimpse the Truckee River, whose ascending valley will lead them to the pass through which to cross the Sierra. In her diary of that day Tamsen writes: "We have reached our final waystation on the great road to California, and rest now in the broad meadows bounding the Truckee." (298) A few restless people go ahead, so that the caravan finds itself divided in two. Thus, when the first snow storms reach them already in the Sierra during the first days of November (almost a month ahead of the dates the knowledgeable people of that country had indicated to them) the immobilized travellers settle into two camps a few miles apart. To their greater misfortune George Donner hurts his hand with an ax, as a result of an unfortunate accident. The infection will end up being gangrene, the disease that will finally take his life. Tamsen is going to be all by herself to tend to her daughters and to her own husband who, sick and feverish, is yet another person for whom she will have to be responsible.

In the second camp, at Prosser Creek, Tamsen writes on November 3: "While the snow fells so thickly it blots out the horizon, we huddle like a family of Esquimaux around our cheery fire. A sudden storm obliged us to make camp here yesterday, and we must wait until it passes before seeking to catch up to the

main party." (305) The travellers still feel some optimism, that can be seen in Tamsen's words: the fire is "cheery", and there is still place for the humorous tone, when she describes her own appearance and that of her daughters as "a family of Esquimaux." But the snow storms do not abate and that camp, as the other one established in Truckee Lake by the main group, is going to be their forced place of residence until the spring comes, and the tomb of almost half the members of the expedition.

Two days later there appears another more sober remark in her diary: "The snow gives no sign of ceasing, and the thermometer continues to fall. . . the remainder of our party is encamped approximately six miles ahead, on the shore of Truckee Lake." (307) There is no place for good-humoured words anymore.

This last part of the journey, for many of them the end of their lives, is the trial that will reveal with remarkable clearness the nerve, perseverance and leadership capacity of this woman. In the first moments "it was Tamsen who supervised the butchering of half their remaining stock, with Jean Baptiste and John Denton to assist her." (308) She is, with the help provided by her daughters, in charge of the hunting down of little mice: "Tamsen and the girls snared them with a sieve, dropped them squeaking and convulsed with fright into an empty flour sack, leaving them to Jean Baptiste to butcher and prepare them for the cauldron." (339)

On December 2 Tamsen writes down the last calamity: "More snow. The remaining cattle have wandered off in search of shelter, and have certainly perished of the cold. We will look for them as soon as the storm abates. Their absolute loss to us would be an unimaginable calamity." (332) Therefore, when a week later she is asked to lend her pocket compass she refuses and says, somewhat enigmatically: "I cannot let him have it, for the future and safety of the children may well depend on its slender store of geographical wisdom." (335) A puzzle that the reader will fully understand when, after finishing up the food supplies, doing away with the dogs and even "the stiffened hides that had been piled onto the roof of the shelter," (342) Tamsen remarks to herself: "We have scarcely more than a single hide remaining, and will soon be pressed to the direst extremes unless relief arrives." (360) And she renews her promise to herself with regard to her daughters, adding a reflection that explains her thoughts: "They are not starving and they would not starve so long as a scrap remained to be boiled up in the big cast-iron kettle. . . . If the missing stock was not found in time, there was other meat frozen in the snow, its place of burial exactingly measured off, stride for stride, with the aid of her pocket compass." (349)

And although they receive some aid from the other side of the Sierra, the toughness of the road makes the transportation of enough rations impossible: these rescue parties help the strongest escape, those that can look after themselves, but they cannot take charge of children or sick people. Tamsen refuses to be

saved, abandoning her daughters and her dying husband. When the time comes, she will be obliged to take the extreme decision: "'We shall have to begin on those who have died,' she said, without pity or desperation or apology, but as calmly and casually as she might have noted the supply of firewood was growing low." (375)

This fighting spirit and this sense of responsibility will become apparent once more in the last moments. Already at the end of February, a new aid expedition sets out to go back to the valley with those survivors that can make the way by their own means. Tamsen asks for her daughters to be taken, but they would only be accepted if their mother accompanies them to help them during the tough march. To insist and oblige the party to take them without her, Tamsen understands, "would be unfair to James Reed, and it would be far too dangerous for the children. Here they would all be safe together. She could keep them warm and dry, and with the supplies left by the second relief, paltry as they were, she could vary their diet a little from time to time." (388) James Reed recognizes her strength when he prompts her to accompany him with her daughters, even abandoning her husband. Tamsen refuses even to admit that the latter is dying: "George is a fighter!' she announced emphatically. . . . 'So are you.' 'Just mule-stubborn,' she responded." (389)

The last and final trial comes when, her daughters now safe, she refuses to follow them abandoning George: when one of the men that have come in a new rescue party tells her that her husband is in no condition to know whether he is being abandoned or not, since he is absolutely unconscious, Tamsen gives a new measure of her quality: "'I can't leave my husband and my nephew with strangers.' . . . 'But Captain Donner wouldn't know....', Eddy began. 'No, he would not. But I would know, Mr. Eddy, and that would be far, far worse.'" (409)

Thus, Tamsen keeps faithful to herself, to her unselfishness and courage, until the last effort. Her death, a finally stupid unnecessary death, the result of a mistake caused by fright, is nothing but a confirmation of her sacrifice, constituting at the same time a kind of liberation, for it will prevent her from going on living with the permanent awareness of the horrible things to which she has had to resort given the extreme circumstances they all have undergone.